

Review: Inside the mind of sculptor Ursula Von Rydingsvard

G. Allen Johnson | June 2, 2020 Updated: June 4, 2020, 11:13 am



In this scene from the documentary "Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own," the sculptor draws cut lines on 4-by-4-inch cedar beams, which will later be cut with a chain saw by her assistants.

Photo: Icarus Films 2015

Ursula Von Rydingsvard never made it a secret that her sculptures grew out of the intense anger she felt over the damage her abusive father inflicted upon their family, and the difficult years they spent in a relocation camp in post-World War II Germany.

"There is nothing like putting a circular saw in your hand when you're angry," Von Rydingsvard told [The Chronicle's Charles Desmarais in 2018](#). "It is such a healer — it so does the trick."

That such personal ugliness can be turned into such beauty is mesmerizing, although, as Von Rydingsvard says in "Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own," a documentary directed by Daniel Traub, "I hate the word 'beauty' because nobody knows what that is. There is no criteria for beauty; there's no criteria for art, for that matter."



Ursula Von Rydingsvard standing in front of "Dumna" in her studio in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn in 2015.

Photo: Icarus Films 2015

The outstanding 57-minute film begins streaming on Friday, June 5, through the virtual cinemas of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (www.bampfa.org), the Roxie Theater (www.roxie.com), and the Smith Rafael Film Center (www.cafilm.org).

Von Rydingsvard's magnificent works, mainly in cedar wood and bronze, can be seen in the Bay Area (including at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and San Francisco International Airport). Traub's film goes behind the scenes to show the complex logistics involved in creating these works. A team of assistants – skilled artists themselves – help realize the unifying vision behind each work of art.

The documentary also examines her childhood, her disastrous first marriage and her quest to become an artist while being a single mother on food stamps. Her daughter, Anne, fondly recalls, "chain saws and cursing were my lullabies."



Ursula Von Rydingsvard walking beside her work "Saint Martin's Dream" in Battery Park, N.Y., in 1980.
Photo: Icarus Films 1980

Traub packs a lot into his short running time, including a brief survey of Von Rydingsvard's evolving style, from works such as "Saint Martin's Dream" in Battery Park, N.Y., (1980) to a commission from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Scientia."

Interestingly, Von Rydingsvard, now 77, says she loves it when people touch her outdoor works, which are mostly bronze. The acid from curious fingers will make their own mark and enrich the work "like touching the Buddha's belly."

And her biggest influence? Mother Nature.

"She's my major teacher," she says.



"Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own": Documentary. Directed by Daniel Traub. (Not rated. 57 minutes.) At the virtual cinemas of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

(www.bampfa.org), the Roxie Theater (www.roxie.com) and the Smith Rafael Film Center (www.cafilm.org).

Virtual Q&A: Von Rydingsvard and Traub plan to conduct a live Q&A through BAMPFA at 5 p.m. June 14, and through the Roxie at 2 p.m. June 16. For details and updates, check each organization's website as the date approaches.