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Review: 'Ursula von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own' is a movie you want to reach out and touch



Ursula von Rydingsvard in her Williamsburg studio in 2002 with cedar casts of "Katul Katul." (Daniel Traub)

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In just under an hour, "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own" manages to cover nearly 80 years in the life of the vibrant sculptor whose work-intensive art draws directly from nature and is then forged into almost mythological creations. While director Daniel Traub has little time to dive too deeply, the documentary serves as a fascinating glimpse into an artist's work, inspirations and process.

Born in Germany in 1942, the daughter of an abusive Ukrainian father and a loving Polish mother, Von Rydingsvard spent five years in camps for displaced persons before the large family immigrated to working-class Plainville, Conn. As a young woman, she worked as a teacher but eventually found herself as a single mother in 1970s New York City, an especially fertile place and time to be an artist.

This background proves intrinsic to Von Rydingsvard's work. The nearly all-wood environment of the camps informed her use of timber as a primary material (cedar is a favorite). A later in life visit to Poland and its forests suggest an even deeper connection. Her father's cruelty fueled her ambition and a shared work ethic (he often held down two factory jobs), as she overcame a hardscrabble start, earned an MFA from Columbia and established herself in the art world.

Much of Von Rydingsvard's work is on a massive, primal scale, requiring collaboration with her team of assistants who appear devoted to their craft, even sharing family-style meals with their boss. (In a quirk of timing, the fact that Von Rydingsvard and her team often wear masks while working makes even the archival footage feel eerily contemporary.)

While we hear from a variety of people, including Von Rydingsvard's brother Stas Karoliszyn, her daughter Ursie, her second husband, Nobel Prize-winning biochemist [Paul Greengard](#) (who died in 2019), fellow artists Judy Pfaff and Elka Krajewska, curators and arts patrons, the film's real strength is that so much of it is in the artist's own voice.

Traub (director of the 2014 documentary ["The Barefoot Artist"](#) on Lily Yeh) also serves as cinematographer and was previously commissioned by Von Rydingsvard for a short film. Here, he allows his camera to carefully survey the work, especially in sequences documenting a large-scale commission from Princeton that witness the artist working with a new medium — hand-pounded copper — with the help of metals fabricator Richard Webber.

Whether distressing materials, wielding a tool or caressing a finished work (she invariably uses female pronouns when referring to her pieces), Von Rydingsvard reveals its intimacy and tactility regardless of the scale. This is work you want to touch, and despite that being one of the less cinematic senses, “Ursula Von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own” evokes that quality to a surprising degree.

‘Ursula von Rydingsvard: Into Her Own’

Not rated

Running time: 57 minutes

Playing: Available Friday via Laemmle virtual cinema

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