

Where Do Vision and Execution Diverge?

Ursula von Rydingsvard constructs a concept piece by piece



Ursula von Rydingsvard in her Brooklyn studio, February 2020. Photo: Melissa Saenz Gordon.

I have an image of something that I really want. It has to be something that I really want, in order to spend so much time with it. I do a drawing just for the bottom of the sculpture; the bottom is so consequential in what happens as I go. I build it piece by piece and then the pieces start to grow together.

Very often, my work never comes out the way I originally thought. If you draw exactly what you're going to make, you're putting yourself in jail. It's so boring. It's not like that. Whatever is churning in the deepest part of me, that comes out. How could I ever expect to know what's going to come? It's impossible. I grope around and listen to what's already there; it's almost tentative. The more I do that, the more real it looks, the more interesting. I know when I have something going that has a potency, and I know how to aggrandize it.

Somehow people think that, because I was in refugee camps in my childhood, that is what I think about when I do my work. But I never have it on my mind while I'm working. I definitely do not. If I started doing that, it would really be a block. I have to go to another place that has more freedom than being married to the camps. While I'm working, there's a whole other system, a whole other way of thinking. There is no right, there is no wrong. I don't make work and say "This is going to be frightening," or "this is going to be happy." Nothing has to be logical. You don't have to explain what you do and why you do it. It's a whole other arena that you have to put yourself in, and you have to feel safety in that arena. That's what will give you your courage. That's what will give you the right to do what things deep in you are yearning for.

—Ursula von Rydingsvard



Original interview conducted by Melissa Saenz Gordon in Ursula von Rydingsvard's Brooklyn studio, February 2020. All photographs by the author. Edited by Danielle Brock.