URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD **SCULPTURE**

JERRY L. THOMPSON

ALLEN ROKACH

Ursula von Rydingsvard
1990

Ursula von Rydingsvard

Sculpture

May 18 – October 31, 1992

Storm King Art Center

Mountainville, New York

Cover illustration: ENE DUE RABE (detail)
Photo: Sixth Street Studio

JENNIFER REISS

1
Song of a Saint (St. Eulalia)
Detail, 1979

Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure that Storm King Art Center's Board of Trustees and staff present *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture*, the first full-scale museum exhibition of the artist's work. The works included date from the mid-1970s to the present. Von Rydingsvard is known for her large-scale sculptures in cedar. Starting with 4 x 4 inch cedar beams, von Rydingsvard uses saws and tools to mark, hack, and score the wood. She laminates the beams together and often applies a powdered graphite to the surfaces, creating massive, intricately-faceted, and richly colored sculptures of great emotional force and physical presence. Of particular interest to visitors will be the four large-scale sculptures installed out-of-doors, including new works made expressly for the Art Center's landscape.

Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture was made possible, in part, with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. Major contributions to the exhibition were made by James H. Ottaway, Jr., and the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation. Additional support was provided by Vera List, Steven and Nancy Oliver, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor, and Harry and Nancy Koenigsberg. Education programs held in conjunction with the exhibition are supported, in part, by a generous grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

Storm King Art Center is indebted to a number of individuals for their generosity and efforts in support of this exhibition. Their cooperation and assistance with all aspects of planning and implementation are greatly appreciated. We especially express warm thanks to all the lenders: Ursula von Rydingsvard, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Ekstract, Linda and Ronald F. Daitz, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Ganek, Jack A. Grebb and George Merema, Vera List, Martin Sklar, and a private collector.

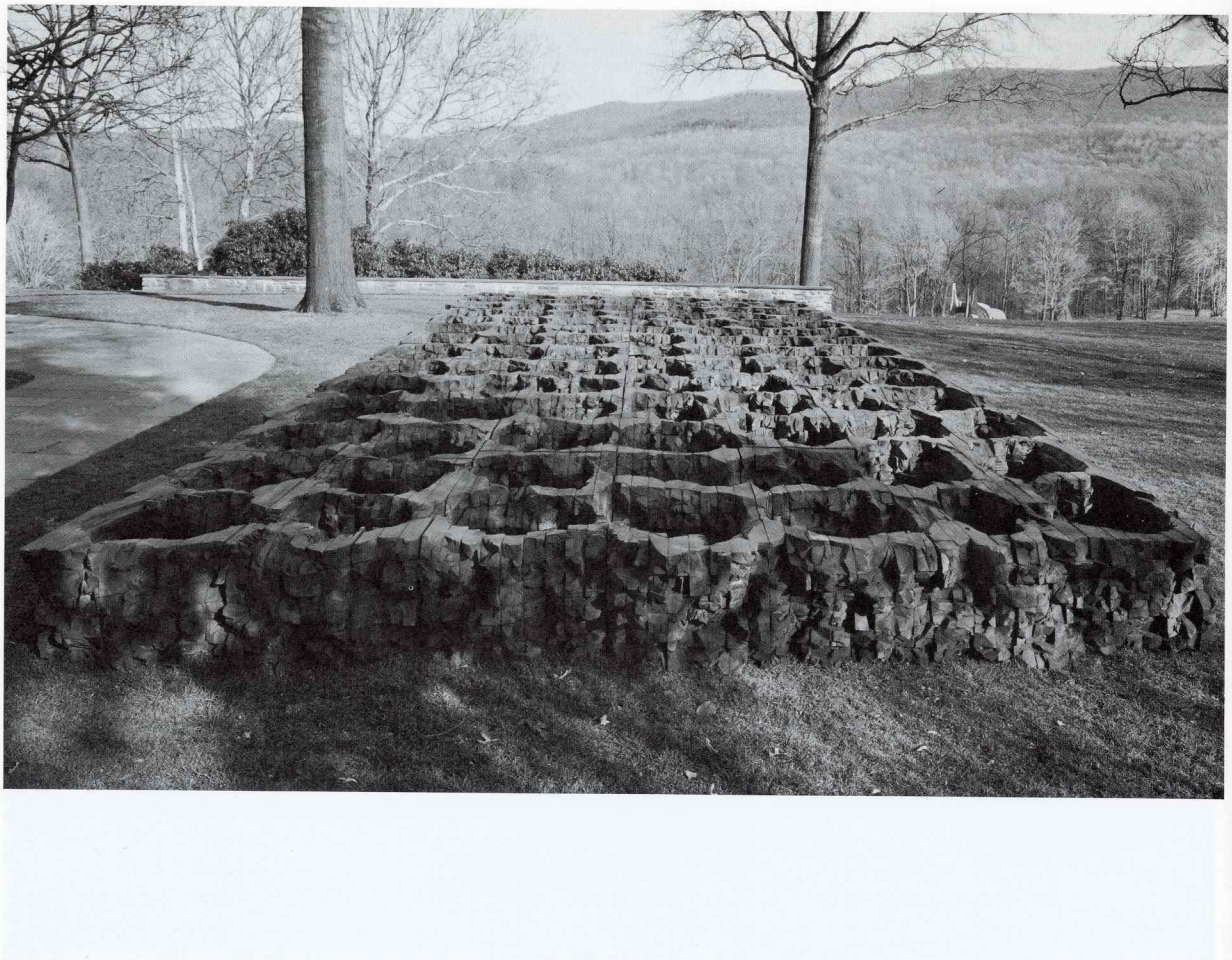
We are especially grateful to Ursula von Rydingsvard herself for her efforts in mounting this show. She wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity to work at the Art Center and her dedication and enthusiasm infected everyone involved with the exhibition. Ms. von Rydingsvard wishes to express her deep appreciation to her assistants, Bill Seeley, head assistant, Bart Karski, Steve Weiss, Jack Posposil. For their work on the original construction of *ENE DUE RABE*, the artist wishes to thank Charles Juhasz, head assistant, Vincent Mazeau, Robert Catalusci, Den Fandrich, and Ross Drake-Brockman. Her thanks for funding and sponsorship of the original construction of *ENE DUE RABE* are extended to Capp Street Project / AVT, Steven and Nancy Oliver, the Flintridge Foundation, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. She is grateful to Susan Lorence and Robert Monk of the former Lorence Monk Gallery, who mounted solo exhibitions of her work in 1990 and 1991. Ideas developed during these shows are reflected in many of the sculptures at Storm King Art Center.

Special appreciation is extended to other individuals whose involvement has been critical to the development of the project. David R. Collens, director, and Maureen Megerian, associate curator, conceived and installed the exhibition. Ms. Megerian's introduction to this exhibition catalogue discusses von Rydingsvard's work in outdoor settings. Michael Brenson's essay is a probing and sensitive consideration of the artist and her work. Wise counsel and support came from our Trustee and Vice-Chairman, Cynthia Hazen Polsky. I recognize and thank the entire staff at Storm King Art Center for their dedication to all aspects of *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture*.

H. Peter Stern
Chairman

DAVID ALLISON

2
Iggy's Pride
1990–91



JERRY L. THOMPSON

3
ENE DUE RABE
1990

Ursula von Rydingsvard:
Sculpture Outdoors
By Maureen Megerian

Ursula von Rydingsvard's sculptures of stacked, laminated, and carved cedar have a heightened presence in the outdoors. Whether she is working on an open hillside, in a garden, or on the tended lawns of Storm King Art Center's sculpture park, von Rydingsvard is sensitive to surrounding spaces, so that her works never overwhelm, nor are they dwarfed by, their settings. She has an uncanny ability to make sculptures that seem appropriate to their location, even as structure, motif, and formal concerns are resolutely her own. The outdoor works in *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture* replicate the visual and emotional impact of her oeuvre as a whole, yet in the open environment their impact is even more resonant, as sun, sky, earth, and atmosphere are brought into play.

Two striking aspects of von Rydingsvard's work are the tension between an often Minimalist-inspired structure and an infinitely detailed, "hands-on" working method and final form; and the wide interpretations engendered by her abstract objects that recall things in the real world. These aspects are evident in her work on the most intimate and the most grandiose of scales, whether inside a gallery or in the open air. They are there in the artist's intricately faceted sculptures, often fashioned as vessels, that look like geological formations, mountains, and craggy landscapes; in the architectural spaces; in the hollowed boxes; and in the wall-hung tools and implements, which suggest an agricultural milieu. Often the moods established by her sculptures are contradictory, comforting and unsettling at the same time: her vessels suggest containment and confinement, her enclosures can seem like barriers, and her boxes and tubs suggest wombs and graves.

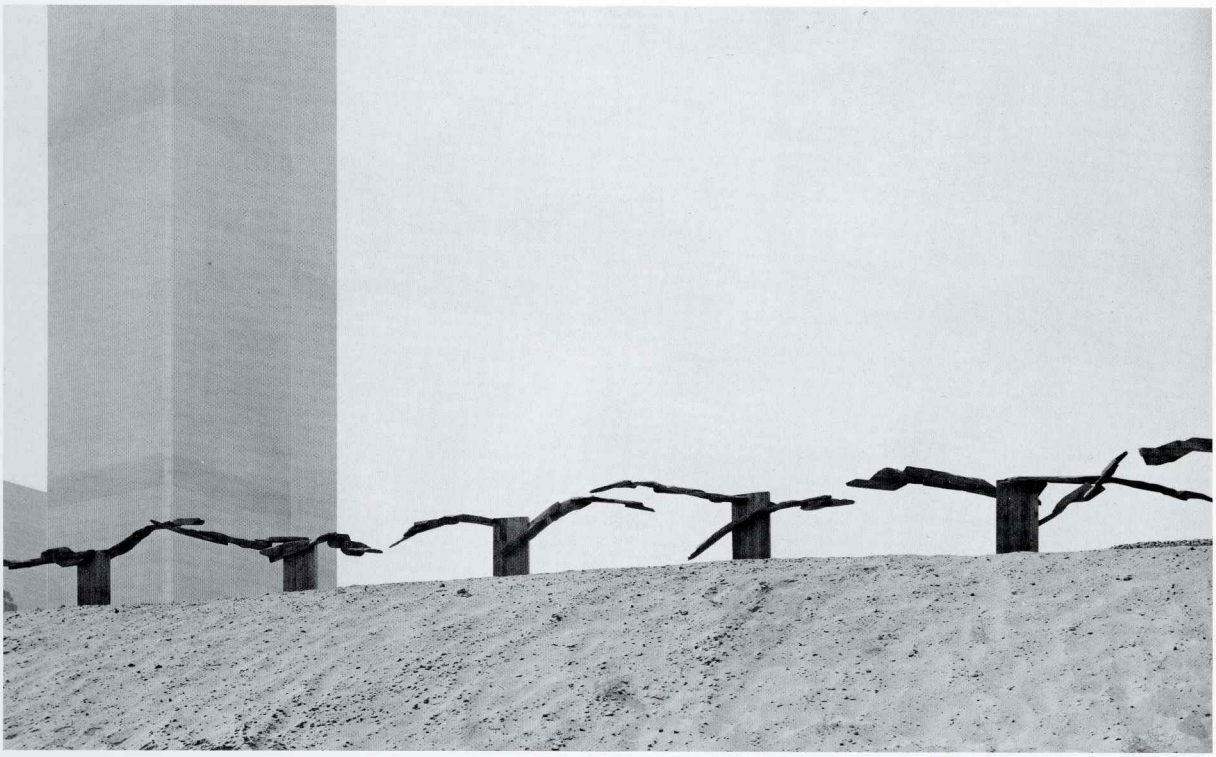
These features of von Rydingsvard's work animate and charge their settings, and this is particularly the case in the outdoors. Insofar as her pieces do have a strong physical presence and establish often disconcerting moods, they are never tamed by the outdoor environment, no matter how wild, majestic, or exquisitely manicured. The sculptures always retain their fascinating, sometimes disturbing, edge. If, in a gallery space, the physical density and contained emotional suggestiveness of her work can seem ready to burst through walls, outdoors von Rydingsvard's sculptures seem almost to pulsate within their more open surroundings.

In his essay for this catalogue, Michael Brenson discusses von Rydingsvard's attribution of a human quality to her sculptures in the form of their having a *need*—a need to take a particular shape that is attended by a certain amount of artistic anxiety. One can imagine this anxiety increasing significantly when the artist works outdoors. Von Rydingsvard's organic, evolutionary working method suggests a struggle of self-realization for both the artist and her material. When the monumental volatility of the outdoors is factored in—its sometimes violent weather, dramatic lighting effects, and variable terrain—the struggle must be even more dramatic. The willfulness the artist perceives in her materials is matched by the willfulness of nature, which in effect becomes a third party to the creative event. In this scenario, resolution of sculpture and site is that much more of an achievement. Relishing the situation as an exciting creative challenge, von Rydingsvard has described her enthusiasm for working in the outdoors: "I love working with the land, making relationships between my piece and the ground or the earth and the curves of that earth."[1]

Von Rydingsvard takes equal delight in both man-made objects and forms of nature. She appreciates their formal correlations as well as their differences, the fact that, in their own ways, each can be structurally regular and formally complex. This is evident in her sculptural method, in which she begins with pre-cut cedar beams and manipulates them in a highly tactile and labor-intensive fashion so that, once

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

4
St. Martin's Dream
1980



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

incorporated into the final sculpture, they seem a part of some earthly hybrid. Scored, hacked, faceted, richly colored with graphite, material and sculpture appear to return to an irregular, imperfect state such as can be found in nature. This is not to say that von Rydingsvard's sculptures imitate objects in nature. The artist herself has stated that "wood as it comes from the trees totally overwhelms me, because it's much too beautiful, much too seductive, much too complete. It's capable of doing much more than anything I could do with it."[2] Her aim in working with a pre-cut beam is to "get it to echo things that nature might say but [doesn't]. Get it to look a little as though nature might have brushed through it . . . manipulate [it] to bring it closer to nature but not to repeat nature . . . to make my own kind of relationship with nature."[3]

Since creating her earliest works for the outdoors in the mid-1970s, von Rydingsvard's interest in "brushing" with nature has been clear. One of her first outdoor works, *Song of a Saint (St. Eulalia),* 1979, [Fig. 1] made at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, consisted of 180 eighteen-foot cedar posts which were fashioned with irregularly-shaped protrusions of laminated wood. The posts occupied a hillside space of 330 x 160 feet, and the proliferation of similar yet unidentical forms assimilated themselves into the site, creating their own forest of totemic sculptural forms. *St. Martin's Dream,* 1980, [Fig. 4] made for Battery Park City Landfill for *Art on the Beach,* was sited on a man-made ridge of sand. Its vertical cedar forms fanned out gracefully from the top and appeared from a distance as a flock of gulls on the wing. *Untitled,* 1988–89, [Fig. 5] a later work at Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, consists of forty-five hollowed boxes situated in rows in a clearing in a forest. Trails lead to the piece from three sides, one of which provides a viewpoint elevated above the work. Appearing purely geometrical from a distance, upon closer inspection the boxes are revealed to be intricately gouged out and lined with rubber. Resembling a collection of wells or tombs, this proliferation of somewhat disturbingly ambiguous objects looks both a part of and alien to the confined location. *Three Bowls,* 1990, installed in the Walker Art Center's Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is a grouping of mountainous urns at once imposingly large and stunning in their intricately textured detail.

Von Rydingsvard has recently completed the most ambitious, large-scale outdoor sculptural project of her career, *Iggy's Pride,* 1990–91, [Fig. 2] at Oliver Ranch in the Sonoma Valley, California. Measuring 7 x 70 x 17 feet, the piece consists of nine large fin-like, cedar forms which emerge from a ridge and face a view of distant hills. The highly textured, jagged appearance of this sculpture, which is carefully faceted and darkened with graphite, draws the viewer into its complex structure. At the same time, the form and vast encompassing space of the piece become a part of the terrain itself, as the beauty of the surrounding landscape is brought into play.

Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture offers the artist her most extensive opportunity to date to create a number of works for a specific outdoor site. The particular location at the Art Center for which she has created new sculptures is one of the most formal sites on the 400-acre sculpture park grounds. Situated near the museum building, the patio spaces and the adjacent lawns are the most carefully tended in the park, in contrast to the wooded areas and relatively untamed fields located at some remove from this central hilltop area. Nearby Schunnemunk and Storm King Mountains form the site's captivating backdrop. Characteristically, von Rydingsvard does not seek to compete with this landscape, nor does she respond solely to its particularities. Instead, with these outdoor sculptures she achieves a balance between the integrity of her cherished forms and imagery and their framing by the Hudson Valley landscape. The various outdoor pieces ally themselves with the qualities of the terrain—they, like the landscape, are variously sweeping and horizontal, imposing and mountainous, minutely and organically detailed. At the same time, these sculptures utterly preserve their characteristic edge as they plumb their own suggestive formal and emotional turf.

ENE DUE RABE, 1990, [Fig. 3] for example, was

ROBERT LA ROUCHE

5
Untitled
1988–89

6
Five Cones
1990–92

JERRY L. THOMPSON

7
For Paul
1990–92

8
Land Rollers
1992

initially conceived for an indoor space but with its eventual placement at the Art Center in mind. The room in which it was built—at Capp Street Project / AVT in San Francisco, California—was so large, however, as not to hinder her vision for the outdoors. "ENE DUE RABE", in a way that cannot be directly translated from the Polish, refers to a type of "one-two-three" chant preceding a children's game. This work exemplifies von Rydingsvard's use of repetition and infinite variation in a large work that both demands and inspires close observation. The sculpture lies low to the ground in a rectangular form measuring roughly 43 x 17 1/2 feet. Seemingly countless, aggressively-hollowed concave forms perforate the sculpture's surface, creating a highly irregular grid-like scheme. The sculpture's lateral expanse and the sheer number of similar yet unique shapes can lock onto a viewer's sight and, as one looks, the regularized grid reveals itself to be infinitely detailed and variegated. At home in the outdoors, the work's hollows suggest the artist's familiar groupings of tubs or urns or troughs or graves, while it also forms its own sort of pitted landscape. Viewed from above from the Art Center's second floor galleries—an important, intended vantage point—the sculpture's great horizontal area is apparent all at once, its myriad voids stretching before the eye like distant canyons. In a wonderful visual analogy, this sculpture recalls the artist's observation of the Art Center landscape as "controlled yet complex," since in both cases organized structure underlies seemingly endless, organic, difference.[4]

Five Cones, 1990–92, [Fig. 6] on the Art Center patio, presents a familiar von Rydingsvard motif—the grouping of cone-like vessels—writ especially large. Taller and more attenuated than many of her container forms, the piece is among her most stately and graceful of this type. The packed, dense qualities of this work accord it a sense of strength and self-containment.

For Paul, 1990–92, [Fig. 7] stands majestically against the surrounding mountains forming its own sort of mountainous presence. The most monumental work in the exhibition, the piece seems to change and grow in its immensity as one moves around its girth. Its collection of densely textured forms are stacked toward the sky in a squared configuration, the parts merged tightly like a closely banded- or huddled-together group.

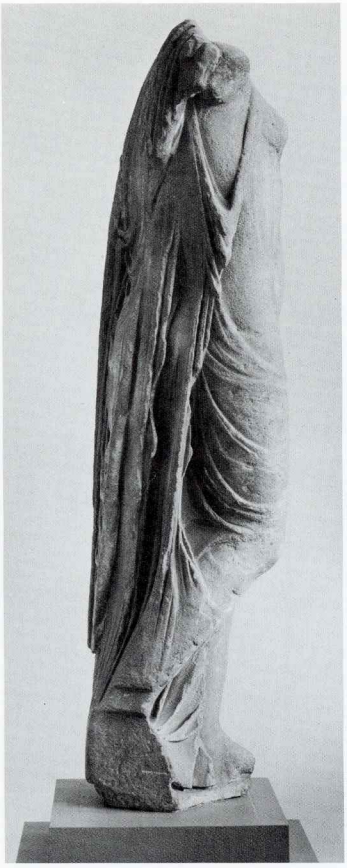
With *Land Rollers,* 1992, [Fig. 8] von Rydingsvard attempts to visually unite the allée of maple trees in the south fields of the sculpture park with the central hilltop area. This allée is a hard-to-miss focal point of the landscape that leads the eye into the park's significantly further reaches. Following a gentle rise in the ground at the far end of the lawn, von Rydingsvard's sculpture is low and long, made up of numerous parts resembling rollers. As this piece subtly bridges the near and far reaches of the park, it visually and psychologically unifies the grounds within which the exhibition takes place. For the viewers who place themselves at the center of von Rydingsvard's presentation, the experience is rich and engrossing.

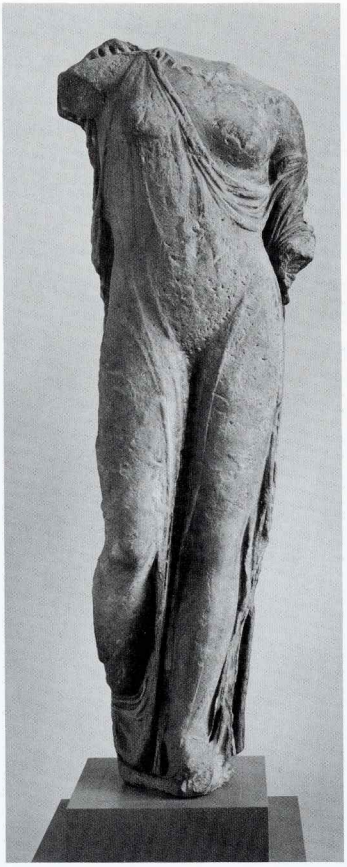
1 Judy Collischan Van Wagner, "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Interview," in *Judith Murray: Painting, Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture* (Greenvale, New York: Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, 1985), 47.

2 Ibid, 46.

3 Ibid.

4 The artist in conversation with the author, December 10, 1991.





COURTESY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

9

Aphrodite 1st–2nd century A.D.

Copy of Greek bronze of late 5th century B.C.

Ursula von Rydingsvard's
Sculptural Theater
By Michael Brenson

For the last fifteen years, Ursula von Rydingsvard has been building a sculptural theater of wonder and loss. It is constructed with cedar beams, sometimes wall-long, sometimes carved and broken into a multitude of irregular pieces and then assembled into a cast of worshipers, witnesses and trolls. Her stories of togetherness and dispersal, emptiness and exaltation, grow out of years of displacement in Germany during and immediately after World War II. She has become the chronicler and bard of an inexhaustible saga.

Von Rydingsvard's dramas have the inevitability of enduring classical art. Her walls and roofs are heavy. Her wings and oars hold the earth. Even her prop-like utensils and tools have a psychological and physical gravity. Her rustic and oversize spoons and shovels hanging on the wall ask less to be observed than to be worshiped, like crosses. Her stories seem to have the ability, and the will, to recur again and again.

Like the work of other artistic searchers von Rydingsvard admires, however, such as Paul Cezanne, Alberto Giacometti and Willem de Kooning, her sculptures seem not only inevitable but also unfinished. Their hollowed-out thrones, stretchers, and coffins seem just-abandoned or not-yet-filled. The psychological and historical events they trace appear to have just, and yet not quite, taken place. The past may rule this work, but readiness is its condition.

Between the immanence of the past on the one hand and the anticipation of the future on the other, this forty-nine-year-old Polish-American artist's work stretches into being a wide open and yet amazingly inhabited present. Each architectural fragment, each shovel, fence and spoon, has a distinct personality, and each has the capacity for metamorphosis. If von Rydingsvard's sculptures have an air of finality about them, they also have the capacity for change. In one work, victims lined up before or after a firing squad are shaped like rifles, and they seem to be on the verge of lowering themselves into a horizontal position to fire back.

In another, three five-foot-tall bowls waiting expectantly on the ground, each one with the flickering facetting of an Analytic Cubist painting, also sit officiously like judges, or the Three Fates. These same magical bowls are also like ancient tubs and urns, and at the same time like guardians protecting the ceremonial burial or bathing: This is hieratic art that seems capable of transformation.

As a result, these sculptures are also psychological and historical events. Her props and settings may be stern, forbidding, implacable, and occasionally punitive; they also may be vulnerable, hospitable, attentive and protective. They menace and grieve. Their interiors are as prominent as their exteriors, and often the more physically imposing the exterior, the more psychologically dominant the interior seems. The physical assertiveness of von Rydingsvard's work is commensurate with the psychological weight of the intimacy it conceals. The voids are enchanted.

Von Rydingsvard's saga IS mythlike. It chronicles her large family's migration from one displaced-person camp to another during her childhood years. During that droningly routine yet epic journey, the family (mother, father, four brothers and three sisters) prayed and labored and remained so close-knit that it could seem, despite its conflicts and irresolutions, like one organism. When it finally reached the United States in 1950, the family, von Rydingsvard says, "pulverized."[1]

The effectiveness of her sculptural narrative depends upon a remarkably intelligent response to nature. On the one hand, von Rydingsvard keeps her distance from it. Believing that any attempt to compete with its grandeur is hopeless, she rarely echoes nature

in an unambiguous way. Her imagery is largely architectural and functional. She works primarily with milled four-by-four inch cedar beams in which the grain, juice and personality of nature have vanished.

"The wood as it comes from the trees totally overwhelms me," von Rydingsvard told the curator Judy Collischan, "because it's *much* too beautiful, much too seductive, much too complete . . . A four by four sits there neutrally—like an empty room. I can manipulate it. I'm not afraid of it . . . I'm not in pain when I take those edges off a four by four, because it doesn't matter. In fact, I don't think of it as a tree. I think of it as a beam that I can manipulate through carving and gluing."[2]

Using this neutralized, anonymous wood, von Rydingsvard feels free to appeal to and echo nature. Two expansive outdoor sculptures, *Koszarawa,* 1979, and *St. Martin's Dream,* 1980, [Fig. 4] are arranged in the shape of a crescent, which for Miro, Giacometti, Pollock and so many other modernists was a symbol of the moon.

Von Rydingsvard is intensely, almost ecstatically responsive to the sun. *Tunnels on the Levee,* 1983, with its crowd of stake-like shapes huddled in a tunnel inside the earth, and *Song of a Saint (St. Eulalia),* 1979, [Fig. 1] with its sloping field of vigilant wood columns that seem to be waiting for some flower or plant to arise and wrap itself around them, were conceived to face north so that they would glow when sun set.

Most important, working with a material from which nature seems lost or absent, von Rydingsvard sets out to make sculpture that in some way is nature. Her wood is energetic and alive, and it can seem to be in the process of shifting and growing. Her rough and undulating walls and floors can be as animated and craggy as skins. Her bulbous masses can seem as layered as onions. Even the tools and spoons she hangs on walls seem as eager as a sunflower at dawn. Her geometry is organic. Her images become fantasies, narratives, events—theaters—as they unfold in time and breathe. But a break with nature—and an experience of rupture—is the soil in which these exuberant and indomitable images begin.

□

Ursula Karoliszyn arrived in the United States in 1950 at the age of eight. She grew up in Plainville, Connecticut, near New Britain, attended the University of New Hampshire and graduated from the University of Miami in Florida, where she also received a master's degree in art education. In 1963 she married Milton von Rydingsvard, a physician. Their daughter Ursula Ann was born in 1969.

She and her husband were divorced in 1973, the year she stopped teaching art in junior high school in New Britain. This was also the year she moved to New York ("That was the time when I was really born," she says) and enrolled at Columbia University, where she worked with steel and studied with the abstract sculptor-painter Ronald Bladen. ("There was something about his presence that felt so holy," she says. "His person was everything that I felt an artist should be.")

Shortly before receiving her master of fine arts degree in 1975, she was given cedar beams by Michael Mulhern, a monk. "I could make an impact on them so much more readily or in ways that were much more dramatic than anything that I thought I could do to steel," she says. In 1985, she married Paul Greengard, a biochemist at Manhattan's Rockefeller University.

She is 5 foot 10 inches tall with spiky dark hair and athletically lean. Her work with the circular saw and grinder (which she calls her paintbrush) demands agility and endurance. She rises early and swims several times a week. Each morning she drives from her Upper East Side apartment to her 4,300-square-foot studio in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, in a neighborhood she feels is not "contrived, or consciously put together . . . I like its honesty much more than SoHo, where I was before."

Her appearance has a matter-of-fact plainness. Her black and gray clothes reflect the psychological tone and uniform of the camps. "That's

DAVID ALLISON

10
Dreadful Sorry
1987–88

all I ever wear," she told Judy Collischan, "because there's something institutional - color-no-color about it—it feels very stable."[3] Since the mid-1980s, gray—in the form of felt, graphite and whitewash—has increasingly colored her work.

She sees many exhibitions, but she does not like to talk about which ones, or about which contemporary artists she follows and reveres. Her inspiration can come from almost anywhere - silverware, peasant houses, stables, ancestral figures, a kneeling chair by a king's bed in the Loire Valley. Her humor (which takes the form of a sly and consistent whimsy in her work) usually comes at odd angles and on the edges rather than in the heart of conversations. When she smiles, she beams.

Her way of talking is unapologetic but humble and uninsistent. It is extremely important to her to be fearless without being indiscreet. She can be pointed without being abrupt. She hates literalness in art and has refused to discuss her early paintings and muslin sculptures because they seem to her too obviously a response to a particular emotion or situation. When she does not like a question, or does not feel like answering, she remains silent. She is as comfortable with silence as she is with her ear-splitting tools.

Her speech is musical. She can talk very rapidly until she arrives at something that matters to her, then her words slow down and begin to roll in big arcs through space. Her patience is eager, her responses precise. At Yale University from 1982 to 1987, she taught the sculptors Meg Webster, Ann Hamilton, Kristin Jones, and Steve Currie, and it is easy to imagine her as a pedagogical force. Whatever she says about art is entirely her own. She radiates an independence that is so hard-won she will never take it for granted.

□

Von Rydingsvard's modern classicism can be defined by comparing her work with the late-Medieval artist and the classical Greek sculpture that keep recurring in her conversations. Just as she comes back time and again in her sculpture to the same period of her life, she comes back in her interviews to this same artist, this same sculpture, the same epiphanic events.

The late-Medieval artist is Giotto. In his slow-moving, emotionally taut frescoes, feeling and thought are expressed with what von Rydingsvard described to *ARTnews* critic Avis Berman as "packed pride."[4] Giotto's bodies and clothing are like boulders and buildings in their solidity and bulk. His boulders and buildings seem made for his people and they actively participate in their religious dramas.

Von Rydingsvard admires Giotto's gravity. She likes "the ingenious way" he "was able to contain emotions, emotions that were so complex." He was able, she says, to share these emotions "in powerful ways, but again not overwhelm you. They weren't sloppy."

She believes in restraint. "For me," she says, "one of the things I would dread is becoming pathetic, or lacking in dignity, that's so important to me . . . that no matter what kind of an epic you're talking about, what kind of sadness you're describing, that you do it in a way that's dignified, that's contained . . . where you keep your pride."

"Rodin," she says, "I can't stand. I think he just spits out with emotion and power in a way I don't have much use for."

While Giotto is a model for von Rydingsvard, her sculptures are, of course, very different. His pictorial theater is so compelling in part because it feels so unified, so finished. Von Rydingsvard's sculptural theater is less a perfectly realized moment than an ark sailing backward and forward through time. Giotto's frescoes do not doubt that life has a destination. Von Rydingsvard's sculptures argue for the wonder and doubt of the moment.

The classical work of art that von Rydingsvard comes back to time and again is a statue of Aphrodite [Fig. 9], also known as the Venus Genetrix, in the Greek and Roman galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is a Roman marble copy of a Greek bronze made

DAVID ALLISON

11
Paul's Shovel
1987

in the 5th century B.C. The head and right arm have been broken off. The sculpture is believed to have been found in the Tiber River.

One leg of this standing figure is straight, the other bent. Her diaphanous chiton covers her right breast and falls off her left shoulder, leaving her left breast exposed. The figure seems to be both in place and moving slightly forward. She appears to be offering herself and yet held back.

From the side the figure changes. Her garment resembles the fluting of a column so that she becomes architectural. She appears to be a column in the process of becoming a human being who is about to step into our space. The back is nearly flat, with the drapery now falling in loopy sensual folds.

Von Rydingsvard's art suggests the psychological classicism of Giotto and the metamorphosizing classicism of Greek architectural statuary. The classical qualities of dignity, decorum and restraint are fundamental to her sculpture, to the Greek sculpture, and to Giotto's painting. So is the sense of the human body and its clothing as architecture and psychological and spiritual home.

But von Rydingsvard's work is also very northern. Many of her sculptural surfaces and spaces have been scarred by claustrophobia and darkness. Her repetitions and accumulations of wood, often jagged and jutting, promise not harmony and order but anxiety and awe.

Her feeling for enchantment, superstition, and ritual owes far more to the spells and fables of northern European forests than to Mediterranean mysteries and light. In the presence of her bowls, altars, coffins, and thrones it is almost possible to hear northern myths and fairy tales being chanted and sung.

□

Ignacy Karoliszyn, a peasant farmer born in the Ukraine, and his Polish wife Kunegunda were living near the Polish border in 1938 when they were faced with being captured by the Russians or the Germans. "Somehow it seemed more benign to go to the German side since our neighbors were taken to Siberia," von Rydingsvard says. Her mother and father left Poland in 1938 and never returned. Ursula, the fifth of their seven children, was born July 26, 1942, on a collective farm in Deensen, in north central Germany.

After the war, the family lived in eleven displaced-person camps in five years, finally sailing from Bremerhaven and arriving in New York in December 1950.

Von Rydingsvard is still trying to understand that migration. "I can't figure out whether it was because my parents had no money, because they were illiterate," she says. "We sort of did it with the herd. That's what it almost felt like, that you got herded mysteriously from one place to another. Presumably that was supposed to get you closer to the place you wanted to go. We could have gone to Brazil sooner, we could have gone to France sooner; Australia we could have gone to sooner."

The necessity of the interminable journey remains for her an unanswered question. "I'm not sure in the end my father made such a correct decision," von Rydingsvard says of choosing to come to America, whose immigration laws were tougher than those of other countries and particularly ungenerous to families with seven children. "If it was me, I'm not sure I would have put my family through eleven camps."

Almost everything in the camps had both a positive and negative side. Daily life seemed monotonous and enclosed, but the camps were not guarded, and the daily rhythm and closeness to the earth also offered reassurance. The family was almost forced to bond together: it was in effect a small domestic army that marched on from day to day, year to year, camp to camp. The number of children (seven) and the total number of family members (nine) recur throughout a body of work in which the presence of a block-like family is pervasive.

DAVID ALLISON

12
Urszulka
1986

DAVID ALLISON

13
Lace Mountains
1989

DAVID ALLISON

14
Three Bowls
1989

The large family was one of the main reasons the departure from Germany was endless; but it was also a source of strength. Her parents had clear, stabilizing roles. Her mother, von Rydingsvard says, "rose with the regularity of the sun." The good treatment the family received owed a lot to her father's skill (he was "an incredible worker," she says).

"My father," she says, "was a pretty brilliant survivor. He would always start small farms in whatever camp we were in, with rabbits and chickens. It felt as though we survived relatively well in the camps, in good part, because he was so enterprising." But he could barely read or write, and neither he nor anyone else in the family had any sense of control over the family's fate.

The sense of exile gave the vernacular architecture in which the family lived and prayed as much if not more importance than people. "I like architecture without architects, structures that are not figured out abstractly before they are built," von Rydingsvard told Jill Viney of *Sculpture* magazine.[5]

Wood was the primary material of the barracks the family lived in and of the churches. As a young man, her father had been a forester. "He owned 18 to 20 hatchets that always looked very beautiful," von Rydingsvard says. "When he died it was my idea to bury his favorite one with him." Wood became the primary material of her sculpture.

Her axes, combs, tubs, and spoons have an almost sacramental importance. "I have a tremendous affection for domestic things like spoons and forks," von Rydingsvard says, "particularly when they are kind of rural . . . I find those things more holy than the Eucharist."

The family was devoutly Catholic. "Depending upon the camp, there were times when we went to Mass every day." The "theater" of the church "was pretty awesome to me," von Rydingsvard says, "and almost terrifying it was so serious."

One of the most powerful images in her repertory comes from Mass and involves prayers for forgiveness in Latin. "In these churches," she says, "there were always women with kerchiefs that would chant, and they'd line themselves up in the front rows and they'd keep bowing their heads as they chanted, and I think that was something wonderful to me." It was "something between putting yourself on automatic and yet being very intense. It wasn't a wailing but it was a . . . I liked that sound enormously."

In von Rydingsvard's work there is a constant link between an almost militaristic regimentation and religious utterance. *Zakopane* [Fig. 15] was constructed in 1987, two years after von Rydingsvard, who was brought up speaking Polish, visited Poland for the first time. The sculpture was named after a mountain-range town in southeast Poland. The name also means "to bury something forever."

The work is 11 1/2 feet high and 22 feet long. At the top of a wall-sized row of almost 70 thin, vertical, two-inch boards, 22 horizontal beams hover over the viewer like a gallows. At knee level is a row of 22 rounded skin-like protuberances as rapt as the faces of those kerchiefed women at prayer.

Those forms also suggest purses, or sacks of oats in a stable. They remind the artist of udders and containers for holy water in rural churches. The sculpture is almost sinister in its starkness and regimentation. But it is also maternal and prayerful. As much as any of her works, *Zakopane* suggests a way of life that was trusting, reverential, fearful, and savage.

When the family arrived in the United States, it settled in Plainville. "It was the only place my parents could buy a house," von Rydingsvard says. "No one would rent to seven children."

In America, her father took jobs in two factories and worked as a gardener on weekends; eventually he got involved in real estate, renting out cold-water flats to Polish workers in New Britain. Her mother took a job cleaning in a restaurant and then took another working as a baker.

"What was a shock was not having my mother

MARBETH

15
Zakopane
1987

in the home," von Rydingsvard says. "Whatever weld there was between mother and child was now a hole, and you had to figure out how to fill it. She just went away. It was chaos."

Her mother still lives in Plainville. "She still doesn't know English very well," von Rydingsvard said.

Her father died in November 1989 at the age of seventy-six. "He never really learned the American language," von Rydingsvard says. "By the time he died he knew perhaps 50 words." The following spring, she and her daughter "went to visit the land that he cultivated" near Deensen. "His fields are still there," the artist says, "and they're still magnificent."

Her work retains aspects of both parents. Her objects can suggest washing, cooking and laboring. To Avis Berman, von Rydingsvard made an analogy between some of her ways of working wood and stroking and soothing a child.[6] She describes her sculpture as "labor intensive" and she, like her father, has a passionate devotion to work. Her wood seems not only carved but also ploughed. "My work rubs shoulders with the work of a peasant farmer," she says.

The words von Rydingsvard uses to describe her process of working reveal her highly personal and active relationship to her materials. As she cuts and scars her four-by-four cedar beams with a circular saw, she talks about being able "to choke in on it" and "to rip out with it." At another point, she talks about "pushing out more."

She is guided by an "image" she is trying to find and create. "The pleasure is really cutting in and letting go," she says. She wants to "keep it moving in an organic way." The method is largely improvisational. "I'm not that consciously aware of what I'm doing while I'm doing it," she says. "I don't want to self-consciously analyze what effects these pieces are having." When speaking about her work she repeats a word few artists use. "There's this *need* that it has, and that's what I react to. The piece has this tremendous need, and actually as long as it has that kind of a need there's an anxiety on my part that really connects me to that piece until that need is removed, on the part of the piece and on my anxiety." That anxiety, as well as the faith in art and revelatory pleasure in working, are essential to the experience and performance of her work.

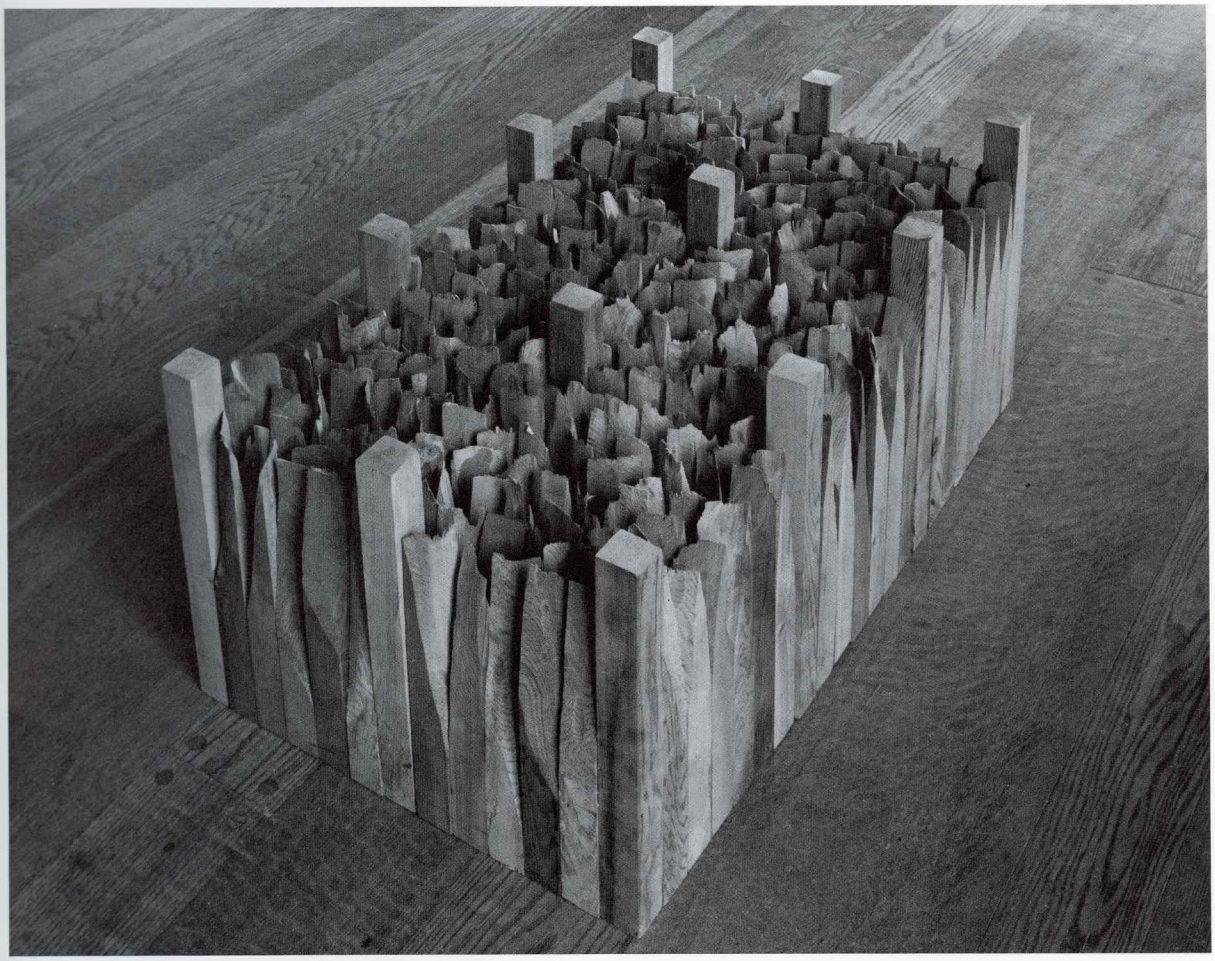
□

From the time von Rydingsvard became a sculptor in 1975, her work has maintained a formative dialogue between Abstract Expressionism, which was part of what lured her to New York from New Britain, and Minimalism, which by the late 1960s had, with Pop Art, replaced Abstract Expressionism in the public eye. Minimalism retained Abstract Expressionism's scale and feeling for primary form and structure while discarding its personal touch and its immersion in psychology and myth. Von Rydingsvard kept the architectural vocabulary and repetition of Minimalism and put introspection, psychology and myth back.

Minimalism wanted to cleanse sculpture of its associative possibilities and make a box a box, a cube a cube, a thing a thing. Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are so rich in associations that it is impossible to know for sure what the real identity of any one of them is. With Minimalism it is often hard to tell who is at home inside the work. So many people and so many kinds of art are at home in von Rydingsvard's work that it seems beyond census.

Von Rydingsvard talks about Abstract Expressionism with affection. She loves de Kooning. "I seem to recall 1975 as the year when I had a crush on his work," she says. "It's able to tear psychologically in such dramatic ways. It can whomp you in the head . . . and he can do it not only so directly but in ways that count, especially things that have to do with women . . . I then also had a crush on the more gentle Gorky."

Her response to Minimalism is conflicted. "Their sense of repetition and rhythm I liked a lot," she says. "I even envied their confidence with which they executed their work, the confidence of their philosophy, that indeed a kind

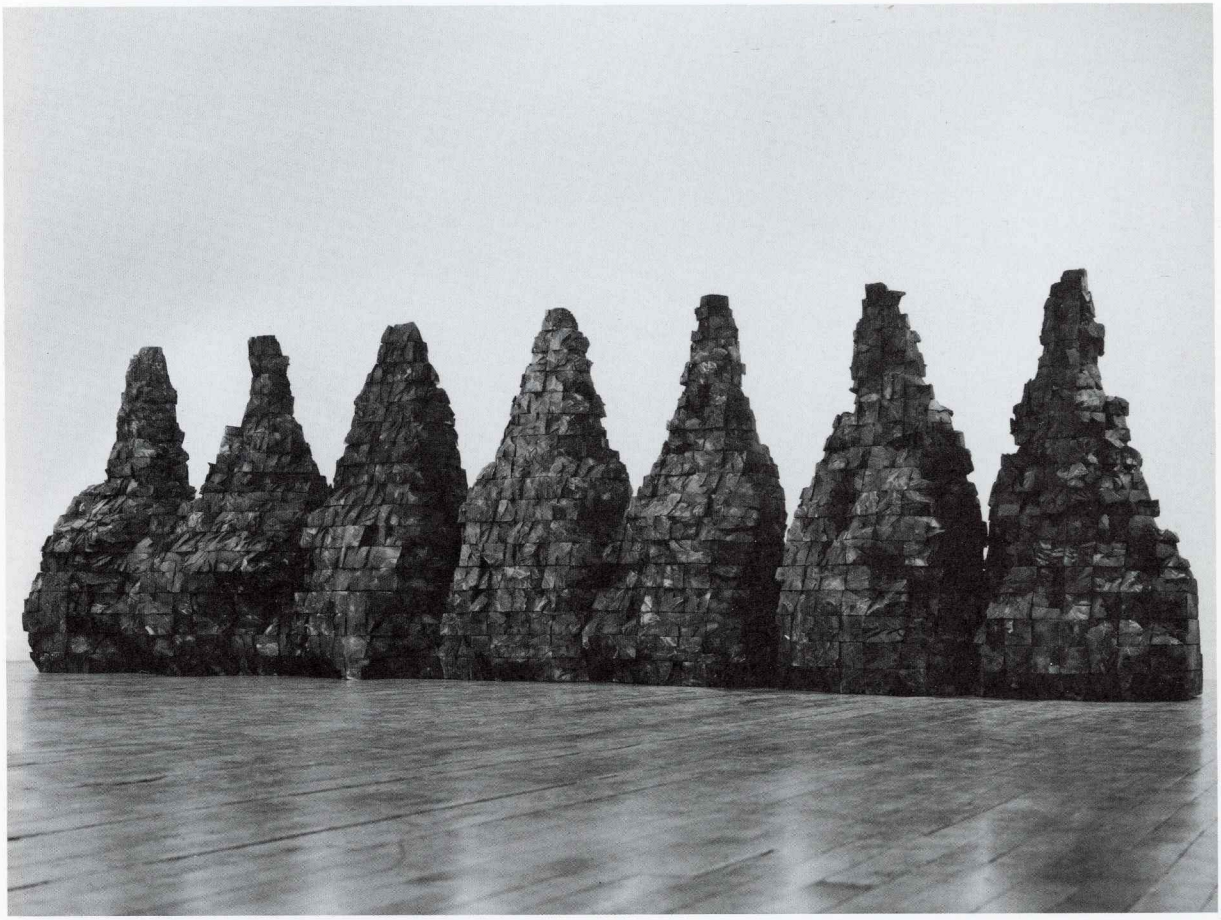


DAVID ALLISON

16
Song of a Saint
1979

DAVID ALLISON

17
For Weston
1978



DAVID ALLISON COURTESY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

18
Untitled (Seven Mountains)
1986–88

of perfection could be achieved. I envied it but I didn't buy it for me. It was nothing that I really would have wanted for myself."

"The parts that felt to me negative were things like the tremendous elegance with which they did their work. There was a kind of superiority, almost an elitism, about their imagery and almost a kind of sterility, almost a kind of cleanliness and antiseptic feel in their ideology that I really disliked. Antiseptic even to feelings . . . how contained it was, how sure of itself it was, and life feels very different. For me the most critical thing is that psychologically they feel hollow, emotionally they feel hollow. There's a feeling I get that they're so in control, and I don't believe it."

Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism are not the only postwar artistic factors in the von Rydingsvard sculptural equation. The grandiose yet secretive wood walls and palaces of Louise Nevelson were part of sculptural lore by 1975. New Image painting had by then begun to bring psychology and autobiography back into mainstream art.

There is also the crucial example of Louise Bourgeois, the eighty-year-old European-born artist who came to America and made sculpture out of domestic intrigue and trauma. Bourgeois modeled sculptural objects and eventually composed environments that dramatized her love-hate relationship with her father. Von Rydingsvard rarely speaks in specifics about her family relationships, but she did say to Judy Collischan that "there were things in my life, the kind of drama between my father and myself, that are difficult to speak about."[7]

Von Rydingsvard admires Bourgeois. "I like the fact that Louise Bourgeois still doesn't forgive her governess for having an affair with her father," she says, "and that she's honestly still preoccupied with that, and it still bugs her, and that she still wants to be the pretty little girl to her father, she still wants to be the 'number one' to her daddy, just because it feels real in connection to Louise."

Von Rydingsvard, like Bourgeois, keeps tilling the same psychological soil. "I just think as torturous as some of those motivating forces are, that drive us to do the kind of work we do, that I look at them as being pretty dynamite. They're just there . . . in a very real way . . . you can keep re-experiencing them in some way over and over and over and if you need to re-experience it again you can."

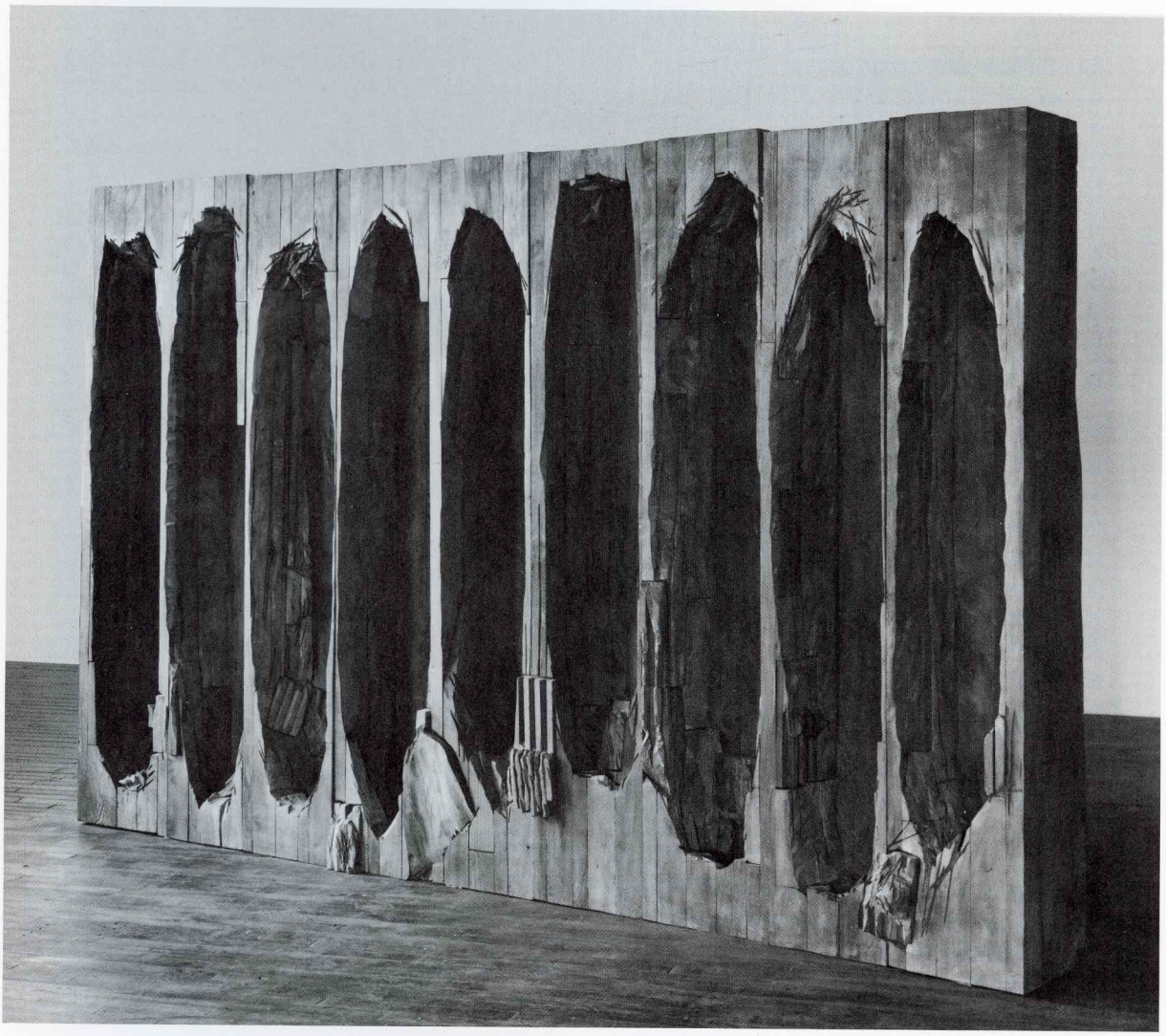
In the 1970s, von Rydingsvard made a number of works suggesting farms, landscapes and herded people. *In Song of a Saint*, 1979, [Fig. 16] cleanly cut columns keep order over a smaller and irregularly cut crowd of verticals that seem to have been corralled like cows.

For Weston, 1978, [Fig. 17] is a crowd of four-foot-tall cone-like cedar cloaks that seems to have willed itself together. All seven are feathery light as they hover slightly off the ground, but they are also like boulders. Each has a distinct personality and size. Each is both revealed and concealed by its cloak-like skin. This hushed and ghostly family is a world unto itself.

In the 1980s, the work becomes increasingly psychological and architectural. *Ignatz Comes Home*, 1986, the first piece in which von Rydingsvard uses whitewash and lead, suggests the roof of a simple house—perhaps a barracks, or a slaughterhouse—placed flat on the ground. The inclined ribs, or beams, also suggest people. On one side of the roof, the seven beams are lined up like victims awaiting execution. On the other side, seven flatter and less exposed beams hold up the more rounded ones, like caryatids. This family seems both martyred and preserved.

Another sculpture von Rydingsvard calls "a turning point piece" is *Untitled (Seven Mountains)*, 1986–88, [Fig. 18] in the permanent collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This was the first piece she painted with graphite, "which was very key," she says, "because the raw wood always has this cute, nostalgic, craftsy thing associated with it that is more limited than what I want."

The seven upright bulb-like cones—like wasp's nests or pastry tubes—were built with myriad



DAVID ALLISON COURTESY THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

19

Umarles (You Went and Died)

1987–88

four-by-four inch cedar beams cut, ripped, stacked, and laminated together. Each cone is maternal, with a low heavy belly that almost touches the floor. Each is also like a child. Each is also like a tool, or tank. Each member of this family resembles all the others but each is also distinct. Lined up in a row, this army of seven is proud, druidic, toy-like, and militaristic–like women and soldiers waiting for orders, or like lost children waiting for their parents to return.

Von Rydingsvard made *Umarles (you went & died)*, 1987–88, [Fig. 19] in the permanent collection of The Brooklyn Museum, in anticipation of her father's death. She has tried with this work to arouse the same degree of identification with the negative spaces within the wood that she aroused with the free-standing forms in *Untitled (Seven Mountains)*. Here, nine aligned upright coffins seem to have been torn open and the bodies within them escaped. But the residue of their presences still haunts the wood. A Minimalist container is and feels empty; these empty spaces seem packed with absence.

From the back, the work changes into an irregular wall of wood with ridges that erupt like faults. The ridges seem to have been caused by the life that inhabited the wood on the other side. The more than twelve-foot-long wall is raised slightly off the ground so that its patterned surface has the feeling of a very low skirt. If it is seen as a skirt, then the wall becomes a body that the seven figures have abandoned. This work is about loss and freedom; and about the weight of absence and an unending hope for return. Within its wall you can almost hear the rejoicing and the wail. In this sculptural theater, liberation and mourning are wed.

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from interviews with the artist on January 25, February 3, 4, and 8, 1992.

2 Judy Collischan Van Wagner, "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Interview," in *Judith Murray: Painting, Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture* (Greenvale, New York: Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, 1985), 46.

3 Ibid, 44.

4 Avis Berman, "Studio: Ursula von Rydingsvard, Life Under Siege," *ARTnews* (December 1988): 97.

5 Jill Viney, "Ursula von Rydingsvard: A Rich, Redemptive Journey," *Sculpture* (November / December 1989): 34.

6 Berman, Ibid, 98.

7 Van Wagner, Ibid, 44

Checklist of the Exhibition

For Weston, 1978
Cedar
48 x 66 x 18 in.
Lent by Vera List
(Fig. 17)

Song of a Saint, 1979
Cedar
17 x 38 x 23 in.
Lent by Martin Sklar
(Fig. 16)

Urszulka, 1986
Cedar, paint
18 x 120 x 84 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 12)

Untitled, 1987
Cedar, stain
74 1/2 x 14 x 11 1/2 in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Howard Ganek

Paul's Shovel, 1987
Cedar
83 x 13 x 5 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 11)

Zakopane, 1987
Cedar, paint
138 x 264 x 36 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 15)

Dreadful Sorry, 1987-88
Cedar, paint
96 x 105 x 17 in.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Ekstract
(Fig. 10)

Untitled, 1988
Cedar, whitewash
83 x 10 x 9 in.
Lent by the artist

Confessor's Chair, 1989
Cedar, stain
66 x 18 x 42 in.
Lent by the artist

Lace Mountains, 1989
Cedar, graphite
96 x 36 x 96 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 13)

Three Bowls, 1989
Cedar, stain, graphite
60 x 114 x 54 in.
Private collection
(Fig. 14)

ENE DUE RABE, 1990
Cedar, graphite
22 x 523 1/2 x 209 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 3)

Mother's Bonnet, 1990
Cedar, stain, graphite
31 x 24 x 17 in.
Lent by Linda and Ronald F. Daitz

Girlie Girl, 1991
Cedar, graphite
116 x 116 x 44 in.
Lent by the artist

Five Cones, 1990–92
Cedar, graphite
98 x 108 x 60 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 6)

For Paul, 1990–92
Cedar, graphite
172 x 108 x 164 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 7)

Land Rollers, 1992
Cedar
45 x 171 1/2 x 670 in.
Lent by the artist
(Fig. 8)

Undo, 1992
Cedar, graphite
92 x 99 x 32 in.
Lent by Jack A. Grebb and George Merema

Biography

Born in 1942 in Deensen, Germany, to parents of Polish descent, Ursula von Rydingsvard came to the United States in 1950 and settled in Plainfield, Connecticut. She holds a M.F.A. from Columbia University, New York, and a M.A. and a B.A. from the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. She also attended the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of New Hampshire, Durham.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1992
Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York

1991
Lorence Monk Gallery, New York
Capp Street Project / AVT, San Francisco, California

1990
Lorence Monk Gallery, New York

1988
Exit Art, New York
Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri

1985
Studio Bassanese, Trieste, Italy

1984
Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

1982, 1981
Rosa Esman Gallery, New York

1980, 1979
55 Mercer, New York

1978
Robert Freidus Gallery, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

1991
Sowers of Myth, Chicago Cultural Center, Illinois

1990
Out of Wood, Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch, New York
Survey of Women's Art Since 1945, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1989
Encore: Celebrating Fifty Years, The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio
New Acquisitions, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1988
New Acquisitions, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York

1987
Sculpture of the Eighties, The Queens Museum, New York
Standing Ground, The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

1985
Selections from the Collection, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut
In Three Dimensions: Recent Sculptures by Women, Pratt Institute Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

1984
Transformations of the Minimal Style, Sculpture Center, New York
Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

1983
Group Sculpture Exhibition, Bette Stoler Gallery
55 Mercer / 12 Years, 55 Mercer, New York

1980
XI International Sculpture Conference, The Maryland Institute, College Art Gallery, Baltimore

1978
Indoor-Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition, P.S. 1 (Institute for Art and Urban Resources), Long Island City, New York

1975
Bronx Museum of Art, New York
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Selected Sculpture Installations

1992
Life After Postmodernism: Judy Pfaff / Ursula von Rydingsvard, The Cultural Space, New York

1990–91
Iggy's Pride, Oliver Ranch, Northern California

1990
Three Bowls, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center, Minnesota

1988
Ursie A's Dream in *Home Show*, Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, California

Untitled, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri

1984
Sixteen Hand Rests in *Contemporary Art at One Penn Plaza*, New York

1983
Tunnels on the Levee, Deweese Park, Dayton, Ohio

1980
St. Martin's Dream in *Art on the Beach*, Battery Park City Landfill, New York

1979
Song of a Saint (St. Eulalia), Artpark, Lewiston, New York

Koszarawa, Wave Hill, Bronx, New York

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