

# GALERIE LELONG

528 West 26th Street New York, NY 10001

T 212.315.0470 F 212.262.0624

www.galerielelong.com

13 rue de Téhéran 75008 Paris

Rämistrasse 7 8024 Zürich

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**by Caroline Roux**

## **Sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard prepares for her first British show**



Ursula von Rydingsvard at work last year on her sculpture 'Ona.' © Redux/Eyevine

Ursula von Rydingsvard is almost as little-known in Britain as she is celebrated in the US. There, her enormous art works, created out of hundreds of glued and sculpted cedar planks, are dotted throughout the country – in the collections of the Met and MoMA in New York; in the generous grounds of Microsoft's original HQ in Redmond, Washington; and in such private hands as those of collector Steve Oliver in Sonoma.

Since last August, her work has also livened up the entrance to Brooklyn's new Atlantic Avenue Subway stop. This unmissable abstract form in silicon bronze called "Ona" ("She" in Polish), weighs 12,000lb and stands 19ft high. "Bronze is more lyrical and smooth than wood. I want people to touch it as they pass by, so it needs a silky surface," says Von Rydingsvard, and gently rubs her fingertips across her stomach as she talks.

Next month, however, a major show of her work comes to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, a rolling estate of 500 landscaped acres in northern England that already houses an array of important outdoor works. Among them is Tom Price's bad boy bronze with his Puffa jacket and iPhone, Nikki de St Phalle's sparkly squat figure, a Sol LeWitt wall in cinder block and a dazzling David Nash installation of charred black mitred stumps.

"There's a global quality to sculpture that we want to reflect," says Peter Murray, YSP's director, "and Ursula fits in with that wonderfully." He already has two pieces by her, including "Bonnet", a frilled little cave cast in translucent grey resin (from a cedar form) that sits in these surroundings like a 21st-century folly. When it was installed for several months in Manhattan's Madison Square Park in 2007, 12 couples chose to get married in it.

Von Rydingsvard's studio is on one of those uneventful, post-industrial streets that make up much of Bushwick, Brooklyn. She answers the door with a smile followed by an enormous hug (even though we've never met), and is tall, slim and more athletic-looking than many woman half her age (she is 71). She is dressed in black – denim, fleece, quilting, anything that is durable and warm. The studio is huge, cold, and filled with wood: piles of cedar planks that arrive by the truckload, as well as the floor, the endless shelving, the soaring doors.



'Ona', which now stands at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York

Von Rydingsvard is consumed by wood – even though close contact over the years has made her extremely allergic to the plicatic acid that cedar releases. But it's too much her friend to give up. "It gives me so much comfort," she says. She wears gloves, a huge beekeeper-type head-cover and a nose and mouth mask to defend herself as she makes the hundreds of gnawing little cuts in the surfaces of her pieces that characterise her work. "I use a circular saw," she says. "They're only meant to cut straight so we get through a fair number."

Considering Von Rydingsvard's extraordinary life story, her refusal to be put off by a bit of plicatic acid is not surprising. She was born in Germany to a Polish mother and Ukrainian father in 1942, and from 1945 to 1951 lived a grim early childhood in eight different camps for displaced persons with her parents and six siblings. In 1951 the entire family left for the US. "My father idealised everything American," she says. "When the American soldiers came to our camps after the war, they told jokes, their teeth were good, they had nice clothing and threw gum to us. We were in awe."

The family settled in Plainville, Connecticut – which, she says, "was just how it sounds. But my first impression was of the way the earth was all covered with black tar, and homes were placed on squared-off lawns." She still rails against the straight lines of New York. "The hard edges, the sidewalks, the way it's so psychologically uninviting. It's what keeps me going, because it makes me want to create something human and touchable," she says. "I'm crazy about New York, and it's where my friends are, all of whom are as deviant as me." (Among them are the artist Kiki Smith and Judy Pfaff.)

Von Rydingsvard didn't get to the city until 1973. By then she had lived in New Hampshire, Miami and Berkeley, been married, had a child and got divorced. She named her daughter Ursula too. "My life was so hard I thought that if there was another Ursula, I'd make sure her life was better," she says. "She has three beautiful children and a great husband." The sculptor herself has been remarried, since 1985, to Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Greengard.

At Columbia, Von Rydingsvard was studying in the backwash of minimalism. Her work is in part a reaction to its sterility and rigidity of form. She begins with straight pieces of cedar,

an industrial component, that are clamped together. When I visit, Ruben, her assistant of 15 years, is making perfectly balanced blocks, aligning each plank before compressing them in a massive machine. Then she carves them into huge forms, starting from a chalk outline drawn on the floor. Some are bowl- or vessel-like, others resemble fluid rocky outcrops eroded for centuries by wind and sea. She has a predilection for spoons and shovels, too.

"Ah, spoooooons – they're a lot of things," she says. "They feel feminine, nurturing, like they can hold a lot of wisdom. They feel generous." Von Rydingsvard leads me to a massive handle, mottled with graphite and plaster of Paris. "I started the handle 10 years ago. It had two arms on it and I couldn't stand it, then I realised they had to go and then I stuffed the gaps with plaster of Paris."

Combined with its bowl, the piece, which will be more than 13ft long, will soon hang on a wall in the sculpture park's airy indoor gallery. "She sees scale differently from you and me," says Mary Sabattini, the director of her New York gallery Lelong, which sells the artist's work at prices ranging from \$4,000 for works on paper, to hundreds of thousands for the huge outdoor works. "She'll say, 'Come and see it, it's a small piece.' And it'll be at least six feet tall."

Much has been written about the connection of Von Rydingsvard's work with her past: about how her peasant parents worked with wood; how she slept on wooden planks in the camps. As the sculptor herself says, "I want connections to be made, metaphors. But I don't want to feed you something so specific that you 'get it'. It might be something else as well. It's not a single explanation because that bores me and I imagine that it bores others too."

Indeed, there isn't much point looking for answers in Von Rydingsvard's work. But there is no better place to look for emotion, or form or the fascinating prospect that you are seeing something both in a state of growth and decay. More important, perhaps, is the restlessness and compulsion and perhaps residual fury that underpins it all. The pieces, after all, are extraordinary portraits, of a life hard won and most determinedly lived.

*Ursula von Rydingsvard, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK, from April 5*