

The Brooklyn Rail

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by William Corwin

URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD: *Torn*

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Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Oziksien*, 2016. Cedar, 145 × 123 × 30 inches.
Photo: Michael Bodycomb. © Ursula von Rydingsvard. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Initially, the title of this exhibition, *Torn*, is hard to pin on the work of Ursula von Rydingsvard; if anything, her sculpture is stoic, monolithic, and at times intimidating. There never seems an opportunity to rip anything apart. Still, the works in this exhibition seem to have been chosen for their distinctness from one another rather than adherence to a single theme or formalistic pattern. As one compares forms as diverse as her classic grounded stalactite *Z BOKU* (2017) and the wood and linen book *Book with no words* (2018), *Torn* is perhaps not meant to be taken literally as a physical action but as a violent and painful divergence of ideas. Von Rydingsvard steps back from the stolidity of her more typical public works and gauges the tempo of two streams of time: geologic and organic. She is a master of the serene and eternal, but she rarely allows her pieces to dissolve, deform, or to breathe, rather, in this exhibition she opens those avenues in her sculpture.

Typically, Von Rydingsvard's rough-hewn excavations into mega-trunks of cedar wood, fabricated by laminating smaller beams, often mimic the undulations and outcroppings of wind-eroded canyon walls or grounded stalactites. Her wall pieces use a similar technique to replicate patches of lace fabric and basic tool forms such as shovels, cooking pans, and bowls in high-relief. *Torn* presents an alternate approach to her craggy style. Usually the roughness of her cuts, combined with the clear care and precision with which the works are created, lends an outsize and mythic quality to the work, as if it is the

work of giants. There is an obvious hand at work, but it does not seem to be that of a mere human. Throughout the show we see objects and gestures expanded or amended to add softness to the work.

The vertical, almost looming works that Von Rydingsvard is known for and which represent the geologic and the sense of deep-time, are represented by *Z BOKU*, a tall bronze work which maintains the texture of both the wood grain and the bite of the saw in the cast metal, but subverts its own mass by dissolving into a filigree of lace-like perforations at its crown. *Oziksien* (2016) recalls earlier wall-based sculptures that featured arrangements of carved niches. But while those seemed inorganic, in this new work, the cubby-hole penetrations have lost their passivity, insofar as they were simply textural patterns, or holes in a surface. There is now an added aggression, they have become alive, resembling mouths or the open shells of barnacles. Where they were given adequate space in the older compositions, in *Oziksien* they now slide, overlap and even crush each other. Von Rydingsvard is exchanging a solid silicon-based matrix for a flexible, vulnerable carbon-based one—transforming her model from mineral to organic. The openings in *Oziksien* and *Floating Shy* (2016) are hungry and possibly foreboding, much like the maws of Bonticou. Similarly, the life force that has imbued *Nester* (2016) and *DWA* (2017) is that of a writhing and rearing cobra that has unwound from the tight potential energy of the monumental vertical works. The forms are of the same ilk as *Z BOKU*, but they no longer seem the patient recipients of the artist’s chiseling and cutting, they grow, envelope and twist.



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *DWA*, 2017.
Cedar, 104 × 70 × 51 inches. Photo:
Etienne Frossard. © Ursula von
Rydingsvard. Courtesy Galerie Lelong &
Co

The only exception is the clearly representative object of the book. Unlike the clippings of fabric, the bowls or other tools that Von Rydingsvard has fabricated in cedar, *Book with no words II* (2018) is a work which implies a hidden or missing knowledge that is unattainable. Viewed in comparison to the massive blank lead tomes of Anselm Kiefer currently on view at Rockefeller center, Von Rydingsvard’s book is delicate with its thin sheets of wood floating on gossamer strips linen—it’s a fragile knowledge that she conveys or holds back. The artist’s transition from geologic features and mountainous formations into living breathing forms is largely predictable based on our experience with the older majestic and spatially intimidating works. Is this a conceptual abyss torn between the old and the new though? The *Book with no words* is definitely a radical departure, while the other sculptures in *Torn* present a repositioning of the artist with respect to her creations, she appears to yield some momentum from her hand to the medium itself. As those pieces rub their eyes and begin to wake from what must have been a very long sleep, we tremble and question the rationale behind waking them up.

“Ursula Von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling” is on display at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, in Philadelphia, through August 26th and “Now, She: Two Sculptures by Ursula Von Rydingsvard” is also on view April 26 to April 28, 2019 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.