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Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling
National Museum of Women in the Arts | March 22–July 28, 2019

Most ambitious U.S. exhibition of von Rydingsvard's influential recent work

WASHINGTON—The National Museum of Women in the Arts ([NMWA](http://nmwa.org)) presents *Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling*, a major exhibition celebrating one of the most influential sculptors working today. On view March 22–July 28, 2019, *The Contour of Feeling* marks the most ambitious von Rydingsvard exhibition to date in the United States and her first solo exhibition in Washington, D.C. Featuring approximately 30 sculptures and 10 works on paper, the exhibition focuses on the artist's signature works—monumental, organic-shaped sculptures made from carved cedar wood—as well as other pieces that are on view in this project for the first time. This exhibition is guest-curated by Mark Rosenthal, formerly curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and organized by the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, where it was on view from April 27 to August 26, 2018.

“Ursula von Rydingsvard has made an enormous contribution to contemporary sculpture,” said NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling, “We are honored to bring this exhibition to Washington, where a new audience will discover the physicality of her works, from modest to monumental, and discover how she imbues common materials with evocative and powerful meanings.”

The daughter of a woodcutter from a long line of peasant farmers, von Rydingsvard (b. 1942, Deensen, Germany) spent her early years, from the age of 2 to 6, in the wooden barracks of refugee camps at the end of World War II. While the artist resists straightforward biographical readings of her works, she speaks of those critical years of her youth as woven into her



subconscious or instinct, which in turn leaves an imprint on her art. She often uses variations of Polish words for titles, which she prefers to leave untranslated to preserve the enigmatic nature of her work.

While von Rydingsvard's art is often presented in the context of large-scale public art, this exhibition illuminates the "interior Ursula," as evidenced by the exhibition's title, which was inspired by a line from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Fourth Duino Elegy": "We don't know the contour of our feeling; only the thing that molds it from without."

Like Rilke's poem, von Rydingsvard's art expresses a persistent search for deeper truths. In their shallow and cavernous grooves and curvilinear forms, von Rydingsvard's sculptures are poetic and expressive, revealing the process by which she gives outward visual form to her thoughts, feelings and emotions. In her relentless quest to visually render her emotions and feelings, von Rydingsvard states that she makes art to "get answers to questions for which I know there are no answers" and "mostly, to survive."

The Contour of Feeling centers on the creative flourishing of the artist's recent career, anchored by a number of her early masterpieces. Among these highlights is *Untitled (Nine Cones)* (1976), comprising nine hollowed conical forms. It is von Rydingsvard's first major work in cedar and the earliest work on view in this exhibition. Subtle references to her family history are seen in *Zakopane* (1987), a wall installation of 22 fused vertical units with hollow vessels at the base. The sculpture commands the viewer's attention with an altar-like presence that simultaneously recalls the tools used for labor by Polish peasants.



As her sculpture practice evolved, von Rydingsvard continually experimented with the possibilities of cedar. *Druga* (2009), a horizontal floor-based work, conjures an image of a heavy, slumped creature collapsed on the ground and bound by earth's gravity. In the vertical *Krypta I* (2014), she used shallow, staccato relief-like cuts on four-by-four planks to create overlapping sections around the entire sculpture that, for the first time in her cedar works, produced diagonal wing-like appendages. The sprawling wall work *thread terror* (2016) features a succession of varied-sized cavities and burrows that evoke rolled thread or reams of fabric through deep perforated cuts made on cedar beams. Von Rydingsvard has also worked on a smaller scale, as seen in her *Plates* (2008–11), multiple rough-hewn wooden disks painted with plaster or pigment, each displaying its own distinct character.

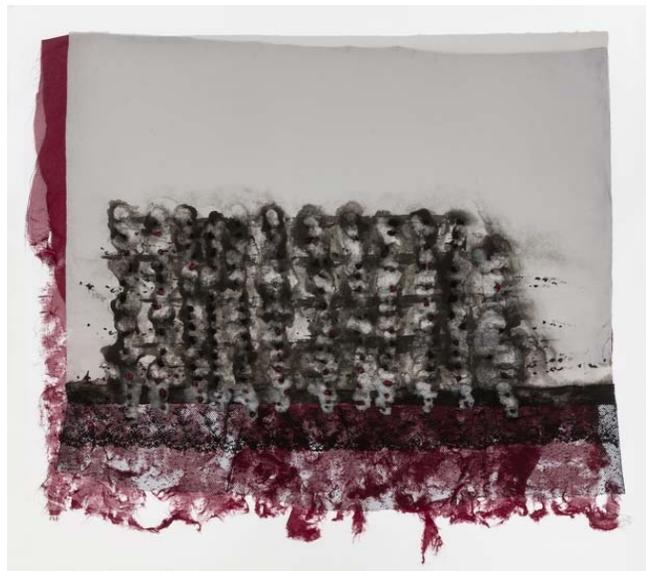
NMWA's presentation of the exhibition includes the addition of two works from the museum's collection. As with her wooden bowls, vessels and plates, *Apron* (1997) expands on the artist's preoccupation with utilitarian forms such as common household objects and clothing. While the references are largely suggestive and metaphorical, the artist grounds her work in the realm of

human experience. *Tak* (2015) is approximately five feet tall and has a powerful and direct connection with the viewer through its human-sized scale. As von Rydingsvard says, her art “embraces your entire body.”

BEYOND CEDAR

While von Rydingsvard's signature medium is cedar wood, her oeuvre includes continued exploration and experimentation with unusual materials. Her works often suggest corporeal or beast-like forms and even incorporate animal entrails and other organic materials. In *Ocean Floor* (1996), the perimeter of the large wooden vessel-like structure is encircled by pouches made of sewn cow intestines and filled with peat moss. Large sheets of intestinal membrane in *Untitled (stacked blankets)* (2014) reveal veins branching across the translucent, fragile surface, eliciting a visceral response from the viewer.

In contrast, von Rydingsvard's abstract works on handmade linen paper invite more contemplative inspection. In these wall-mounted works, she incorporates surprising materials—such as knotted silk from a red scarf, tangles of thread, paper pulp, hair, lace, graphite and pigment—into the paper medium itself, yielding graceful, whimsical compositions. The collaged materials extend the boundaries of the paper, giving the delicate two-dimensional works a sculptural presence.



The more intimate side of von Rydingsvard's art is also evident in a wall installation that features small objects collected and created by the artist, including strands of her brother's hair, fragments of cedar, knitting and linen, and personal photographs. *These little nothings* (2000–15), which she refers to as “experiments,” help to establish her visual vocabulary and serve as sources of inspiration.

Ursula von Rydingsvard: The Contour of Feeling is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts; Heidi and Tom McWilliams; Agnes Gund; Harvey S. Shipley Miller, the Shipley Miller Foundation; the Arcadia Foundation; Barbara B. and Theodore R. Aronson; the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation; Katie Adams Schaeffer and Tony Schaeffer; Maja Paumgarten and John Parker; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; ForGood Fund; Henry S. McNeil; Constance H. Williams; Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz; Tony and Lynn Hitschler; and Anonymous Donors. Presentation of the exhibition at NMWA is made possible by funding provided by the Sue J. Henry and Carter G. Phillips Exhibition Fund.

ABOUT URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD

Ursula von Rydingsvard was born in 1942 in Deensen, Germany, a farm village in which her father was conscripted as a forced laborer. When the war ended in 1944, Ursula and her family went through eight refugee camps for displaced Polish people. In 1950, they immigrated to the United

States and settled in Plainville, Conn. The artist earned a master's degree in studio art from Columbia University in 1975 and taught sculpture at Yale University from 1982 to 1986.

Von Rydingsvard's work is represented in the collections of more than 30 museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.; Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y.; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minn.; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, St. Louis, Mo.; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pa.; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Commissioned sculptures by von Rydingsvard are on view in many institutions and public locations, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, Calif.; Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Mich.; Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, N.Y.; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, N.C., Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.; Bloomberg Corporation, New York, N.Y.; and Barclays Center, Brooklyn, N.Y.; among others. She has received honors including the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture, the Guggenheim Fellowship, three awards from the American section of the International Association of Art Critics and the International Sculpture Center Lifetime Achievement Award; she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in New York City and works in Brooklyn.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

Founded in 1977, the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) invites artists to experiment with fabric as well as a wide range of innovative materials and media, providing creators with studio facilities, equipment and expert technicians. Serving as an education center with studios that are open to the public, FWM offers visitors the opportunity to see artwork from conception to completion. Von Rydingsvard's participation in the Artist-in-Residence program, which led to her introduction to leather as a medium, is the second collaboration between the sculptor and the museum. The first took place in 1989 when von Rydingsvard created new works from felt.

Mark Rosenthal is an independent curator based in New York. He served as head of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pa. In addition, he has held curatorial positions at the University Art Museum at Berkeley, Berkeley, Calif.; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, N.Y.; the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas; and the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich. In the past, he has also organized exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y.; and Fabric Workshop Museum, Philadelphia, Pa.

PUBLICATION

Published by the Fabric Workshop and Museum and Hirmer Publishers, the exhibition catalog illuminates von Rydingsvard's artistic development since 2000, featuring approximately 30 sculptures that highlight the artist's evolution. Content includes an extensive interview between Rosenthal and the artist, as well as an introductory poem by von Rydingsvard, "Why Do I Make Art?"

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS

The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) is the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts. With its collections, exhibitions, programs and

online content, the museum inspires dynamic exchanges about art and ideas. NMWA advocates for better representation of women artists and serves as a vital center for thought leadership, community engagement and social change. NMWA addresses the gender imbalance in the presentation of art by bringing to light important women artists of the past while promoting great women artists working today. The collections highlight painting, sculpture, photography, and video by artists including Louise Bourgeois, Mary Cassatt, Judy Chicago, Frida Kahlo, Shirin Neshat, Faith Ringgold, Pipilotti Rist, Amy Sherald and Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun.

NMWA is located at 1250 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. It is open Mon.–Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sun., noon–5 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for visitors 65 and over and students, and free for NMWA members and youths 18 and under. Admission is free the first Sunday of each month. For information, call 202-783-5000, visit nmwa.org, [Broad Strokes Blog](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#).

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IMAGES

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *SCRATCH II*, 2015; Cedar and graphite, 10 ft. 1 in. x 6 ft. 3 in. x 4 ft. 11 in.; © Ursula von Rydingsvard, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co.; Photo by Carlos Avendaño

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Zakopane*, 1987; Cedar and paint, 11 ft. 6 in. x 22 ft. x 3 ft.; © Ursula von Rydingsvard, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co.; Photo by Carlos Avendaño

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Untitled*, 2017; Fabric, string, lace, and pigment on linen handmade paper, 31 x 32 in.; Produced at Dieu Donn , New York; © Ursula von Rydingsvard, Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co.; Photo by Etienne Frossard