Ursula von Rydingsvard

Starting a Sculpture

There are a number of ways in which I start building a piece, and one of them is that there might be some segment of some sculpture that I built in the past that just didn’t work. And sometimes this segment, or series of segments, hang around my studio for many years, until at some point they start making sense in terms of possibilities. I then try it out, in other words I start building around them, building underneath them, or somehow incorporating them into a sculpture to see if indeed it can work. Other ways of my starting is that I have an image, and often this image is connected to a piece that I did, maybe a previous piece, maybe two or three pieces ago, and that there is some yearning that started to ferment while I was building that piece, in the sense that that piece almost asked for the birth of something else or for something to follow. And I knew that it wasn’t possible to add this something to the existing piece because it would make it too complicated and it would make it go on a tangent that would actually take away from what it was that I was trying to say. So that image, I hold onto, and if it’s compelling enough, I then start building the sculpture toward that image.

Ursula von Rydingsvard

Using a Circular Saw

The circular saw is a pretty rugged tool, and it’s meant to be used only to cut straight lines because the blade that we use is a seven and a half inch circular blade that
has tungsten steel tips on the end of the protruding incisors that enable it to do the cutting. But we do not hold it flat against a surface and make a straight cut going across the board, which is the way one is supposed to. Instead, I put my foot on the board to keep it stable, which is a necessary prerequisite for the cutting. And I then literally do something which is akin to a dance with the saw in the sense that the saw keeps going up and down and cutting, almost like nibbling away at the surface of the wood, eating away at it so that each curve takes many, many cuts. You can only cut a straight cut with a circular saw, but you can cut that straight cut at many different angles, and you can make that straight cut small, but again it takes a lot of chipping away with that circular saw. And it’s not really chipping, it’s cutting away, so a lot of straight cuts can make an organic circular form.

**Ursula von Rydingsvard**

**References in Her Work**

My struggle is constantly to make it visually as interesting, or as touching something... that feels as though it’s consequential to me, as though it feels earnest, and as though I really want this that I’m going after. But I don’t really care for it to reference any particular object... a house or a tree or... you know in fact, I get very nervous when something that I do looks too much like there are shoulders, or when there’s, in my collar pieces that I’ve done, I get very nervous if there is some implication of a head there, because then it feels too explained. It feels too obvious and it feels like it’s the obtuse, mysterious part of the needing the process of weeding through and trying to find out some ground work for every viewer, in order to take this piece in, for me is taken away if I get too specific with my references. And it bores me, too, because it feel like I’m being painted into a corner and that feels claustrophobic.

**Helaine Posner, curator**

**Von Rydingsvard’s Biography**

Ursula’s work is very much an extension of who Ursula is. She lives and breathes her work. She’s very hard-working, very dedicated, and the work is profound and humanistic, which is I would also say, the way Ursula is, and the way she approaches her life, her art, her relationships to others. It’s one of her great strengths, and one of the strengths of the work. She also draws on her personal history, which is something that I think we can talk about, but shouldn’t be dwelt on too much. She is of an age where her life is very much affected by WWII. She was originally from Poland, and moved with her family to a series of refugee camps when she was a child and a young woman. And so, she has experienced great difficulty, trauma, and survival, and has drawn from that history in making her work. She talks about coming from a long line of Polish peasant farmers, and of course she’s obviously a very educated and sophisticated person, but she really draws on that peasant ethic of economy and resourcefulness. She has a respect for organic materials, and I think the use of wood is something that comes from her early experiences of living in simple structures made of wood, barns and so forth. So she respects both the materials and the dignity of labor, and you see that in her work as well.
Helaine Posner, Neuberger Museum curator
Von Rydingsvard’s Sculptures
I followed Ursula’s work for many years—I would say about twenty years at this point, so I have a long-term commitment to her and her art. I see Ursula’s work as a bridge between the abstract and the real. Her signature shapes are abstract, but they always have references to things in the real world. So I think it’s a very powerful form of organic abstraction where she’s blending the monumental and the powerful with the intimate and the detailed in the way she constructs her work. I think too, speaking in more general terms, Ursula’s work has a real presence or aura about it. When you’re standing in front of one of her works, you can get a sense of concentrated or contained energy and emotion, and that I think makes a very powerful impact. But in addition to that feeling of energy or emotion, there’s also a somber or stoic, or I would even say introspective quality to what she does. Ursula and her work has a real sense of dignity and gravity that evokes both emotion and restraint.

Mystery Family Tour
You are looking at a sculpture by Ursula von Rydingsvard, titled ence pence. Listen and look carefully to solve the mystery of what this sculpture is. When you look at this sculpture, what shapes do you see? How does this piece make you feel? I’m not sure how I feel about this piece, it seems so mysterious. The artist cuts, scratches, and carves into wooden beams. She then stacks and glues the wood together. When she has finished, she stains the wood a dark color by rubbing graphite into the surface. What do you probably use every day that has graphite in it? Hint: You would write a letter with it. Did you say pencil? Great answer! How would this piece be different if the surface were smooth and a brighter color? Ursula’s work takes a great deal of time to make. She does not make a sketch before she starts to build her sculptures; instead she makes decisions about each piece as she is working. What she originally thinks a piece will look like is often not what it ends up looking like. Why do you think an artist might work this way? The more I look at this piece the more I see. I see bears or maybe they are chimneys.... I’m not sure. What do you think?