



URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD PORTLAND, OR

Ursula von Rydingsvard finds inspiration in a traditional material: wood. Her sculptures are made of multiple carved and chopped cedar beams, often covered in powdered graphite, amassed into dramatically textured assemblages. They remain abstractly biomorphic, while echoing everyday vessels and architecture. While the sculptures are rooted in nature, human touch adds manmade unpredictability. Their rhythmic shapes and rough edges yield lyricism. Each sculpted facet holds the beginning of a larger tale.

Growing up in Germany during World War II, von Rydingsvard's early years were filled with hardship. Born into a Ukrainian-Polish farming family in 1942 in Deensen, she spent part of her childhood in a Nazi work camp. After the war, her family lived in several refugee camps before finally settling in Plainville, CT, in 1950. It seems plausible that, in the aftermath of such turmoil, von Rydingsvard would search for constants. In fact, she ascribes her interest in wood to her Eastern European peasant roots, favoring a material that is both familiar and timeless.

In addition, her works feel testimonial. Size has much to do with this. Von Rydingsvard's sculptures are always large. At times, they can even be massive. Mysterious constructs, their hollow volumes dominate their environment.

Her first exhibition in the Pacific Northwest features a sculpture that incorporates motion [Portland Art Museum; September 1, 2007—January 13, 2008]. Standing on fifteen legs, *Pod Pacha* is a huge, hollowed container, whose stature brings ancient sarcophagi to mind. The work is invisibly mechanized: its heavy lid repeatedly attempts to open, then closes too early for the task to be completed. The weight of the wood and the tight fit between top and bottom initiate an eerie, yet metrical grinding sound—the heavy breathing of an otherworldly creature. The press release relates *Pod Pacha* to a human back, but a chest filled with ghosts



seems a more suitable description. Like past memories, the ominous life inside might be frightening, but luckily it is contained—albeit barely. Meanwhile, the doomed, incessant motion creates a sense of foreboding and emotional tension. As we watch, anticipating the release of the work's inner secrets each time the lid begins to open, our unfulfilled desire increases the sense of anxiety.

A selection of charcoal drawings occupies two walls. This is the first time that von Rydingsvard exhibits her works on paper. Completed during her residency at the Rome Academy after receiving the distinguished Prix de Rome in 2007, the drawings reflect the dynamism that defines the sculptures. Their palette relates to the earthiness of the cedar wood, which she often treats with powdered graphite. Expressively rendered, the gestural drawings evoke the fierce vitality of flames spreading like wildfire. Life can eat away at the living and yet, it is life's translation into poetry that makes it bearable. It's this operation that draws sense from the senseless. This exhibition is more proof that von Rydingsvard is one of today's strongest poets.

—Stephanie Buhmann