

IN THE  
STUDIO*Ursula Von Rydingsvard Sculptor***‘Vulnerability is one of the most important elements in a work of art’**

By KAREN WRIGHT

Portrait by NEVILLE ELDER

Ursula von Rydingsvard works in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in a factory that previously made pine coffins. It is an area increasingly inhabited by artists and almost entirely free of amenities. She moved here 12 years ago, long before the artistic gentrification. Walking into her studio visitors are confronted by piles of wood and the sweet scent of cut cedar.

Born in Poland in 1942, the sculptor grew up in a work camp in Germany, where her father was conscripted for forced labour. She still recalls with wonder their displacement to Connecticut, where they were treated to their first family meal “at a table with a tablecloth and their own glass for water”.

She ended up in New York in 1973 with a small daughter, having married “the wrong man”. At the time she had

no idea that she would be an artist. “I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as an artist,” she says. The energy of New York City at the time was such that “you could learn all you want to learn” and she survived on very little money and food stamps, doing odd jobs and part-time teaching at five universities.

In 1981, she landed a full-time job at Yale University, where she met her second husband, Paul Greengard, winner of a Nobel Prize in neuroscience. While teaching there, she continued to make her own work

and stage exhibitions.

Von Rydingsvard’s sculptures reflect her love of wood, and especially cedar, as a material: its properties are ideal for her system. “I’d happily follow the psychological feeling of the wood,” she says. She draws on the ends of two by fours and then of her three assistants translates her pencil lines into shapes

with a circular saw. These are then glued together into a quasi-beehive-shaped jigsaw puzzle to form the impressive, often mound-like forms of her final works.

Although imposing in scale, she is clear that “vulnerability is one of the most important elements in a work of art. This contributes somehow to that fight with elegance. Elegance is too confident. It is too sure of itself.”

Experimentation continues upstairs in a more domestic space. Propped against a wall a wooden broom structure is crowned by a material she discloses to be cows’ intestines, their transparency and seeming fragility colliding with wood. Woven gloves, also made of cows’ intestines, part of a costume she wore to a party, are hung on the wall near a large spoon-shaped relief – loosely based on the cooking utensils she grew up in Poland.

They all hark back to her childhood in the camps: “There was a brick building that was demolished by bombs right before,” she recalls. “It was a playing ground that would give



me an almost sensual charge. I could move all these bricks around and pile one on top of the other.”

*Ursula von Rydingsvard, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (01924 832631) 5 April to 4 January*



*Wooden art: Ursula von Rydingsvard with assistant Sean Weeks-Earp in her New York City studio*

