

ART

Going against the grain

Hugh Pearman is moved by Ursula von Rydingsvard's intense sculptures

Some sculptors assemble their work, gradually building up the finished object. Others, more traditionally, start with a big lump of material and then carve into it, reducing and shaping it. The American sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard does both.

Hers is an especially labour-intensive art. She makes her rough forms, usually, from 4in square pieces of seasoned cedar, clamping and glueing the bits together. Then she starts to saw and gouge and patinate, usually with graphite that is brushed on, then scoured with wire wool. The effort shows. One glance at a Rydingsvard sculpture reveals all the marks of extreme hard labour.

It's in her background: she was born in 1942 on a German farm, her parents Polish and Ukrainian farm workers forced to slave for the Nazi regime. There followed a succession of

displaced-person camps and — eventually, when she was eight — family emigration to America. Many of her works refer to this background: not just the plank walls of the camp huts, but a time when any possession or work implement was precious and had to be cherished. At the more literal end of things, she gives us giant spades, a broom, receptacles, plates. Plates that weep. But other works — the large-scale pieces, especially the outdoor ones — are much more abstract.

They suggest all kinds of creatures, plants and things, but for their creator, they mostly seem to be female. Talking about this or that piece, she doesn't say "it", but rather "she". They are mothers, perhaps; they nurture and shelter. There's one piece in particular in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's new show, hollowed out in a vaguely horseshoe shape, that you can choose to stand inside, as if it/she is closing its/her craggy arms around you. "She has a very strong back," observes her tall, wiry creator.

Von Rydingsvard's

material rejects her. She has developed an allergy to the natural chemicals in the timber that give it that evocative pencil-box smell. "It's killing me," she says with a laugh, and you wonder how serious she is.

Oh, she's serious all right, although surprisingly funny and self-deprecating in conversation. Photos of her at work show her wearing all-over protective gear like a beekeeper. Yet, while she works with other natural materials — including dried animal intestines (as used for sausage casings) and fibrous banana paper (as used in banknotes and tea bags) — she stays true to her disloyal cedar. It's the workability and durability of it, she says. Even her cast pieces — there's one here in resin and another in bronze — start out as cedar constructions at full scale, cast in sections.

"We squeeze things out of the cedar that the cedar never thought it could be," von Rydingsvard says of the way she works with her team of assistants. They treat



the process with reverence, working in silence. They have to. "I hire people who don't talk," is her way of putting it. But the boss makes up for it. She talks a lot, trying to explain — you feel, to herself as much as to you — why her works are the way they are.


Hence the thicket-like piece in one of the big indoor galleries. Flooded with natural light, these are some of the best sculpture spaces in the country. The piece took its ground plan from a scribbled text by an old Polish woman who had trouble writing. "The meaning of the letters was not important, but the person was important," von Rydingsvard says.

As ever, the environs of the YSP, which you'll find between Leeds and Wakefield, influence the feel of the work. Placed in an arcadian 18th-century landscape, as some of these pieces are, there's bound to be an extra layer of meaning — though probably not the pastoral kind, as evinced by the families of young lambs bouncing around the park the day I visited. Shepherdessing is not quite von Rydingsvard's agricultural ancestry; digging and chopping are. Even so, in this setting they start to seem like natural growths — fungal, maybe, or geological. Typically they fan out, rising from a narrow base. They are beautiful, but also at times sinister. More than once, I found myself thinking: "Triffid."

Since her favoured material weathers pretty well outdoors, you wonder why she bothers to try castings at all. The large bronze piece, made specially for this show and standing on

a knoll commanding the landscape near the entrance, explains why: it starts at the base, like many other of these rugged, knobbly works, then turns into something else. Its top section dissolves into a delicate, lace-like thinness, lit for maximum impact at night. You just can't achieve that effect in lumps of wood. For all that, it's not wholly successful. It feels like a hybrid, something at a remove, a more intellectual, less instinctive and emotional exercise than much of her other work.

In all, this is sculpture of high seriousness, intensely personal and richly allusive. There was a moment when von Rydingsvard, in the most intimate of the rooms with a lot of her collected source material, turned to look at a large, rough, knitted blanket-like piece, made from leftover scraps of material. "This is my mother," she said. I'm not sure now if it was made by her or her mother.

Irrelevant: it is her mother, and in this charged atmosphere, you can believe that. Look elsewhere for easy, larky one-liner conceptualism. Here you'll find considerable, disquieting power at work. 

*Ursula von Rydingsvard,
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, near
Wakefield, until Jan 4, 2015*



