

On how your career evolves over time



An interview with visual artist Ursula von Rydingsvard on her creative process, sculptures that misbehave, and the validation that comes from having a long career doing the thing you were meant to be doing.

July 5, 2018 -

As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1484 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Production](#).

Your sculptures are massive and otherworldly. How did you start working in this way?

I never make models or sketches before I make my sculptures, no matter how big the piece is. Even the large piece currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I didn't draw before making it. If I did draw them first, they would be much less alive than they are. What happens is, I always start at the bottom. It's impossible to start at the top because gravity alone would kill me. I build with cedar planks (4 x 4's). I make an outline of a form on the floor for scale, and for whatever indentations I want to subtract from the wood. These marks transform the shape all the way throughout the diameter of the sculpture. I always have a specific vision of what I want in my head, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to start.

Other than that, I rely on instinct. I honestly don't understand it, but I also know something else so clearly. Earlier today, I was working on a required legal document and I felt like a child. I felt so stupid in regard to my lack of understanding and the fact that I don't want to understand them, but I have to because I'm grown-up, or whatever. I feel completely different in the world where I make my art... it's so clear to me that this is what I was born to do. And it's not as though anything is absolute, or definite, or defined.





Bronze Bowl with Lace, 2013-2014 (cast 2017-2018), 19.6 x 9.4 x 10 feet, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co.

Are titles or written cues important to you, allowing the viewer to know what you are thinking about?

Titles do have a meaning for me, but I don't want them to have that meaning for anybody else. For this reason, many of the titles I give my works are in Polish and are often not translated. I refer to my sculptures as "bowls" but hate it because they are not bowls. They are an excuse to do all these things that can conceptually feel like fabric, or like the ocean waves. I cannot compete with actual waves, but I can make forms in an entirely new way. Trying my hand at these wave-like structures, I like when there is unexpected movement, or where it does something that it shouldn't or is not supposed to. It's as if they misbehave.

When would you say was the first time that you felt truly validated as an artist?

I taught at Yale in the '80s, and then I quit because I needed to do art full-time. In 1988, I had an exhibition at [the now defunct] [Exit Art](#) where I worked with curator and Exit Art founder Jeanette Ingberman. The Brooklyn Museum bought something from that show and former *New York Times* critic [Michael Branson](#) discovered my work and loved it. I remember when he came, because I was just finishing the installation. This was also the first time I exhibited "[Zakopane](#)" (1987), a huge sculpture that is part of my show *The Contour of Feeling* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum. The exhibition at Exit Art almost functioned as my "launch" in a way. I've had such a long career.



Pictured left wall: SCRATCH II, COŚ. Foreground: PODERWAĆ // **PODERWAĆ**, In collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2017, Leather, cotton, steel, and polyester batting, 129 x 102 x 45 inches. /// **SCRATCH II**, 2015, Cedar, graphite, 10 feet 9 inches x 8 feet 6 inches x 3 feet 9 inches, Courtesy Ursula von Rydingsvard and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. /// **COŚ**, 2017, Cedar, graphite, 9 feet 2 inches x 4 feet 4 inches x 2 feet 11 inches, Courtesy Ursula von Rydingsvard and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

There aren't many woman artists who are doing what you do. Can you say something about that?

There aren't many women working this way, and I think they are smart not to. Honestly, it's not something I'd recommend. It's physically very trying. It's like blue-collar work, but I dictate and decide every move that is made, which is a huge difference than that of the blue-collar worker who has a designated job. I've always had a sense of relating to blue-collar workers due to the hands-on nature of my practice.

My parents had the same impression. In the late '70s, I had a loft on Spring Street and 6th Avenue. My father visited, and rather than see sculpture, he saw that I was doing blue-collar work. And my mother would say about my practice, [translated from Polish] "She's like a chicken that constantly digs in the mud, in case she might find a seed."



Nothings, 2000-2015, Various materials, Dimensions variable, Courtesy Ursula von Rydingsvard and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

When you attended Columbia in the early '80s, Minimalism was all the rage. Did you ever connect to that movement?

If you made work with a figure, you'd be dead in the water without any hope to show in a gallery. The minimalists were really in power for many years and they had a haughty idea of what was right and what was wrong in art. The minimal look is minus feelings and full of philosophy and erudite high-end talk. It's so not me, although it's not that I didn't borrow from them either. I borrowed the grid from [Sol LeWitt](#), and their use of repetition.

I adored Sol—he was a good friend of mine for many years. He had a little bit of a sense of humor and lightness in what he was doing. There is poetry in his forms. He didn't talk a lot except when he was showing art. He used to go to [Robert Ryman](#)'s studio and the two of them would enjoy sitting together, not talking.



Ocean Floor, 1996, Cedar, graphite, and intestines, 36 x 156 x 132 inches, Courtesy Ursula von Rydingsvard and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

Your work doesn't necessarily expose a grid at first glance, but you work tirelessly, fitting together very specific shapes in the process of constructing and deconstructing a sculpture from pieces of wood.

Each piece is a grid, but that's only evident when you look at the end grain, such as in the princess, "[Bronze Bowl with Lace](#)" (2013-14), a large sculpture on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The piece started as wood, a mold was made, and the end result is in bronze. If you're looking at her directly, you can't help but see the whole grid, which is an important part of the sculpture. The grid is my guardian.

One sculpture installed on the wall in your recent show at Galerie LeLong reminded me of a high-heeled shoe. While "[Proga](#)" (2009), on view at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, seems to resemble a cat in slumber from one angle and an ominous cave from another. I translated the title, and discovered it means "Road."

[Laughs] That's the best thing about art, you can't label it. You won't find an answer, ever. Just like in the paintings of Cézanne, you don't find an answer but it takes you on a trip of metaphors.



Untitled (2017.003), 2017, Fabric, thread, yarn and pigment on linen handmade paper, 29.5 x 28.5 inches, Courtesy Ursula von Rydingsvard and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

Five things that have been inspirational to Ursula Von Rydingsvard:

A studio visit from Philip Guston while she was an MFA student at Columbia: "Guston revealed that he was at an insecure part of his career, standing on soft ground, not sure where he was going or why. To have heard a man be that vulnerable whose work I was in admiration of, was very helpful."

My routine before slumber: "I conjure a series of colorful images that evolve and transform and this allows me to fall asleep."

I had a Burmese Mountain dog that weighed a 135 pounds, named Mis. Born a male, the dog had a female presence and spent years with me at the studio.

The frescos of Giotto: "All my life, I've had a huge crush on Giotto."

I come from generations of Polish peasant farmers. I've always been inspired by their tools and wood piles. There is nothing that is superfluous.

Name

Ursula Von Rydingsvard

Vocation

Visual Artist



