



Mad. Sq. Art 2006. Ursula von Rydingsvard.

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Madison Square Park
Presented by the Madison Square Park Conservancy



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Foreword.

One of the great experiences of my life has been sharing the creation of Ursula von Rydingsvard's exhibition in the park from a wisp of an idea in Ursula's fertile brain—through the artist's long and masterful creative process—to the installation.

It has been particularly exciting to share in the daring enterprise that is now called *Damski Czepek*, and sits so serenely and majestically on the Oval Lawn of Madison Square Park.

In the fall of 2004, Ursula began to walk the park and to talk to us about her vision of a new sculpture in a new material that would capture the morning light off 25th Street. In early 2005 she presented us with a tantalizing, preliminary sketch of her piece for the lawn, then known as “the princess piece” or “the bonnet” or simply “she”.

Later, in Ursula's studio in Bushwick, we saw a miniature cedar maquette of the work. Then, over the summer of 2005, we stopped by the studio frequently to watch Ursula and her team throw themselves into the process of building the giant grotto-like piece in cedar, a technique that Nancy Princenthal discusses so articulately in the catalog essay.

In the manner of the Old Masters, Ursula's studio is a great gathering ground of workers and friends, family and pets, critics and patrons. Being the great public artist that Ursula is, no matter how tight her work schedule, she drops what she is doing to share with the visitor the latest challenges and breakthroughs in her artistic process.

In early 2006, when the cedar form was complete, we even followed Ursula to the Walla Walla Foundry to watch the “bonnet” molded, then cast in translucent polyurethane resin. Typical of Ursula's daring, no artist had ever before attempted to cast such a large object in the material.

Finally, with Ursula at dawn, we met the tractor-trailer that carried *Damski Czepek* back across country to be installed on the grass—where its gemlike magnificence fulfills the vision that the artist tried to describe for us over eighteen months ago.

Not just the “Bonnet,” but each one of Ursula's four sculptures in the park demonstrates an artist in her prime showing her mastery of her medium in achieving her vision.

Debbie Landau
President



Ursula von Rydingsvard: At Home in the World

By Nancy Princenthal

Damski Czepek (detail), 2006
Polyurethane resin
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

A bonnet, a well-worn sweater, a pair of wooden bowls—the associations invoked by the four sculptures that Ursula von Rydingsvard has installed at Madison Square Park are timelessly domestic. But there is nothing uncomplicatedly cozy or home-bound about this work. Scaled for the public realm, it takes cues from the landscape as well as from the way light is shaped by the tall buildings of the urban environment.

The first time von Rydingsvard used the bonnet form was in *Na Onej Gorze* (2002), a work created for a bowl-shaped wooded site that suggested a natural sanctuary, where she grouped seven hood-like wooden shelters in a hospitable, reverent circle. At Madison Square Park, *Damski Czepek* (the title is Polish, von Rydingsvard’s native language, for “lady’s cap”) also offers shelter both literal and spiritual: the crown of the bonnet might serve as protection against weather; seating is offered by its flowing “ribbons” or “sleeves,” as she alternately describes the long extensions that meander outward along the grass from the

bonnet’s base. But von Rydingsvard, who has been creating work for outdoor (as well as interior) spaces since the late 1970s, is not particularly motivated by the need to provide basic amenities (a need in any case well served by the park’s devoted stewards, the Madison Square Park Conservancy, who commissioned these sculptures). It is on the other hand crucial that even when her work assumes considerable size, as here, it is as emotionally and perceptually resonant as the most intimately familiar objects of household use. For these sculptures, it also matters that the scale of the park is almost residential, its small, individually planted zones tended with the care, and concern for detail, of a much-loved home. Even the buildings nearby have the quality of favored urban home furnishings, most famously in the case of the Flatiron Building, named of course for an altogether ordinary home appliance.



(Above)
Damski Czepek (detail), 2006
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

(Right)
Damski Czepek mold preparation
at Walla Walla Foundry, 2006
Photo by Kynde Kiefel



(Above right)
Damski Czepek cedar mold in
Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 2005
Photo by Bart Karski



(Opposite page)
Damski Czepek, 2006
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

(Overleaf)
Damski Czepek, 2006
11'11" x 33'10" x 30'4"
Polyurethane resin
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson



The billowing, lucid form of *Damski Czepek* is as much a bloom as a bonnet, and as abstract as it is representative of either. It was built in cedar, in the von Rydingsvard studio's usual, arduous process, before being cast in polyurethane resin, itself a ferociously difficult undertaking that taxed to its limits the foundry where it was accomplished—not an unusual circumstance for von Rydingsvard, who has always pushed herself just as hard. But from the start, it was the characteristic translucency of the resin that she held in mind. The daily and seasonally shifting arc of sunlight that slices through buildings adjacent to the park, and that light's effects on the perceived color of the resin, which is as close to colorless as the material can be made (it has a slate-like grayish cast), as well as the amount of light transmitted to the area beneath the bonnet's crown were key considerations. "The main goal for this sculpture would be to enable the light to come through it," von Rydingsvard says. "The sun rises and shows itself like an arrow coming in from the east on 25th Street. It continues to shine boldly on the piece from its top down until it sets over the Flatiron Building, where the

buildings are still low enough not to inhibit those rays until late in the day. I would like this sculpture to have a possibility of spiritual content through the way it negotiates with the sunlight." The ways in which light is modulated are manifold. For instance, there is the big ruffle-like frame around the work's entrance. Primal, maternal and magnanimous, it is also just a little forbidding, just as the sheltered area it beckons to is safe but also deliciously covert, at once luminous and shadowy. Like any reverie of home—or, say, like swimming in a mountain lake—*Damski Czepek* is a limpid, sunstruck dreamspace almost subliminally troubled, in spots, by darker, chillier currents.



Similar emotional inflections can be felt in the tall, svelte, bowl-shaped *Czara z Babelkami* (2006), of untranslated cedar. This sculpture's surface articulation is indebted to a long-lost sweater that was, von Rydingsvard says, "the most prized piece of clothing I owned as a child." The sweater's popcorn-stitch embellishments—the *babelkami* of the title—"initially formed a loose grid which over time, though I would only wear this special sweater on Sundays, would stretch around the parts of my body which bulged, like my shoulders." That slow entropic drift, which occurred despite—or, because of—fond attention to the garment's preservation, exemplifies the kind of incremental departure from regularity that also characterizes organic and even geological form, and is fundamental to von Rydingsvard's work. *Czara z Babelkami*'s surfaces undulate with a slow, fluid movement that is, in the artist's words, "impulsive, wayward, not staccato." It has, she says, "the muscular grace of a big animal." Similarly, the benignly decorative aspect of the budding protrusions, festive and even floral in some places, elsewhere form aggregates that are darker

and more complex, even incipiently cancerous. Solid and strong in its primary profile, visually and tactilely inviting at close hand, *Czara z Babelkami* nonetheless harbors recesses of calibrated uneasiness, not a source of menace so much as a form of latent energy. The same calculated transitions from muscular strength to delicacy and vulnerability characterize *Bowl with Fins* (2004), whose walls are more readily likened to such escarpments as the rocky palisades along the Hudson; its scale and vigor are distinctly tectonic, though there is a deeply sensuous, heaving rhythm to its irregularly ridged flanks. *Ted's Desert Reigns* (2006) internalizes tension in a different manner, enacting the restraints of its punning title through the low-slung lateral forces animating its three sloping, discrete forms, connected along the top like a team of horses.



(Left)
Czara z Babelkami, installation
Photo by Zonder Titel

(Right)
Czara z Babelkami, 2006
16'10" x 10'5" x 6'2"
Cedar
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson





(Above)
Bowl with Fins, 2004
 7'10" x 7'3" x 6'11"
 Cedar, graphite
 Photo by Zonder Titel



(Top center)
Bowl with Fins, installation
 Photo by Zonder Titel



(Top right)
Ted's Desert Reigns, 2006
 4'9" x 8'9" x 2'8"
 Cedar
 Photo by Jerry L. Thompson



(Right)
Ted's Desert Reigns
 Photo by Jerry L. Thompson



(Far right)
Ted's Desert Reigns, installation
 Photo by Zonder Titel

Over the course of her career, von Rydingsvard has worked in a variety of mediums including vacuum-formed plastic, bronze and animal gut as well as resin, all difficult, resistant materials that must be more or less literally wrestled into shape. But she has always returned to cedar, with which she has worked for 30 years, and which has become as familiar, and in her hands as flexible, as the most supple cloth (indeed in some recent sculptures, she has used it to describe lace). She describes a childhood experience, in a German refugee camp for displaced Poles, of softening raw linen, stiff as a proverbial board, into material suitable for use. Always, she works with demonic energy, now employing roughly four full-time assistants in a studio that hums like a factory, though—power tools notwithstanding—it is fundamentally pre-industrial. Building one of the big cedar sculptures begins by laying out commercially milled, four-by-four cedar beams. Von Rydingsvard pencils the profile of the desired cuts on all four sides of every beam—marks she determines by eye, drawing on well-practiced intuition, which enables her to see three-dimensionally without a moment’s hesitation. (When the sculpture begins to rise, this decision-making process involves scrambling up and down a scaffold.)

After being marked, the beams are taken down and cut with a circular saw, which is wielded, almost absurdly, as if it was an instrument flexible as a sumi brush. The saw’s teeth “nibble” at the wood, as von Rydingsvard puts it, to describe curves of surpassing grace and complexity, though the lethal-looking whirring blade is, of course, straight-edged. Then the cut beams are repositioned and screwed into place for stability, and the process continues. Ultimately, the entire work is unscrewed and disassembled (each beam numbered in the process), glued back together in big sections (roughly doughnut-shaped in the case of the bowls), and held during the drying period with pony clamps (of which she now boasts several thousand); glue is preferred to hardware because screws would pop out of the wood as it dries and settles. A multitude of shims further prevents the wood from “dancing,” as it wants to do as it dries. In the bigger sculptures, troughs are cut for stabilizing two-by-fours to be doweled into place, further guarding against the cedar’s tendency to check as it dries. Finally, the glued sections are reassembled on site. And in some of the work, including *Bowl with Fins*, adjustments to surface color are made with graphite. As if the whole prodigious effort were not sufficiently demanding, von Rydingsvard has over the years developed an allergy to cedar’s powerful resin, and so must work in a respirator as cumbersome as a space suit.



The elegant, richly inflected surface that results from this Herculean effort is, roughly, a three-dimensional grid, each unit a four-by-four-inch square. The grid as a natural spatial template, if not quite organic then certainly native to the processes of human thought, is basic to the visual and structural logic of Rydingsvard’s work. She is sensitive to the delicacy of negotiating between the messily biological and the transcendently abstract. Nature, she says, has its own perfection, which is not an easily understood regularity but an ordering system too complicated for us to understand. It is a formulation that suggests her work’s kinship, which over the years has grown more pronounced, to analytic Cubism. The spatial lenience that was Cubism’s most sensuous component is extended in Rydingsvard’s work, just as the key Picasso and Braque paintings’ essential colorlessness is recuperated by the cedar’s warmth and receptivity to shifting conditions of light, weather and time.

But von Rydingsvard’s sculpture (like all successful artwork) resists simple historical equations, and indeed strains against stylistic summary. Instead, it reflects the narrative of its making, which involves not just the creation of each individual work, but of those that preceded it, and the ongoing life story they reflect. Letting experience run like water over the hard ground of geometry and milled timber, watching cross-currents develop, shaping some and encouraging others to flow unopposed, von Rydingsvard forms her sculptures the way a lifelong horticulturalist tends a garden, or an urban designer a social community. She has the highest respect for the constraints of the material, and a practiced ability to see with equal clarity when looking inward and out.

Nancy Princenthal, Senior Editor at *Art in America*, is a New York-based critic.

Czara z Babelkami in process, 2006

(Top)
Photo by Ursula von Rydingsvard

(Bottom)
Photo by Zonder Titel

(Middle)
Photo by Ted Springer

(Far right)
Photo by Zonder Titel

Ursula von Rydingsvard.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2006
- Madison Square Park, New York
Sylwetka, Galerie Lelong, New York
- 2004
- Galerie Lelong, Zürich
- 2003
- A Psychological Landscape, Butler Gallery, The Castle, Kilkenny, Ireland
Primitive Jarring, Galerie Lelong, New York
- 2002
- On an Epic Scale, Neuburger Museum, Purchase, New York
Cedar Lace and Tossing Loops, Galerie Lelong, Paris
- 2000
- Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Bowl With Folds, Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park, New York
Galerie Lelong, New York
- 1999
- Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan
Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston
- 1998
- Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture, Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin; traveled through 1999 to Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire; Chicago Cultural Center; and The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu
- 1997
- Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England; traveled through 2000 to Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; and Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana
Galerie Lelong, New York
For Ursie A, T.F. Green Airport, Providence, Rhode Island
- 1996
- Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence
- 1995
- Socks on my Spoons, University of Massachusetts at Amherst
- 1994
- Galerie Lelong, New York
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
- 1992
- Ten Year Retrospective, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York
Zamek Ujazdowski Contemporary Art Center, Warsaw, Poland
- 1991
- Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York
- 1990
- The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia
Capp Street Project, San Francisco
Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York
- 1988
- Exit Art, New York
Laumeier Sculpture Gallery, St. Louis
- 1982
- Rosa Esman Gallery, New York
- 1977
- 55 Mercer, New York1

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Baruch College, City University of New York
Bloomberg Building, New York
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn
Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
T.F. Green Airport, Providence
High Museum of Art, Atlanta
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, New Hampshire
Laumeier Sculpture Park, St Louis
Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington
Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, Florida
Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York
Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts



Ursula von Rydingsvard 2006
Photo by Zonder Titel

Previous Mad. Sq. Art Exhibitions.

2005	Jene Highstein	Eleven Works
2005	Sol LeWitt	<i>Circle with Towers, Curved Wall with Towers</i>
2004	Mark di Suvero	<i>Aesope's Fables, Double Tetrahedron, Beyond</i>
2003	Wim Delvoye	<i>Gothic</i>
2002	Dan Graham Mark Dion Dalziel + Scullion	<i>Bisected Triangle, Interior Curve</i> <i>Urban Wildlife Observation Unit</i> <i>Voyager</i>
2001	Nawa Rawanchaikul Teresita Fernandez Tobias Rehberger	<i>I ♥ Taxi</i> <i>Bamboo Cinema</i> <i>Tsutsumu</i>
2000	Tony Oursler	<i>The Influence Machine</i>

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Mad. Sq. Pk.

The Madison Square Park Conservancy, dedicated to keeping Madison Square Park a bright, beautiful and active park, is one of New York's newest not-for-profit organizations. The Conservancy raises the funds that support lush and brilliant horticulture, park maintenance and security. The Conservancy also offers a variety of cultural programs for park users of all ages, including Mad. Sq. Art.

The Madison Square Park Conservancy is a public-private partnership with New York City Parks & Recreation.

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