

## In the Studio with Ursula von Rydingsvard “Keeping One’s Edge”

September 18, 2013: [Jan Garden Castro](http://blog.sculpture.org/2013/09/18/ursula-von-rydingsvard-2/), <http://blog.sculpture.org/2013/09/18/ursula-von-rydingsvard-2/>



Part of the challenge of working in large scale over a long career is keeping one’s edge — being innovative in aesthetic and conceptual ways. For Ursula von Rydingsvard, large scale demands working with core staff as well as with numerous other professionals in fields including art, architecture, and engineering in order to realize each project. Von Rydingsvard’s studio is humming with three major projects: a bronze commission for the LEED-certified Barclays Center in Brooklyn (September 2013), a retrospective exhibition for Yorkshire Sculpture Park in England (April 2014), and a copper commission for the campus of Princeton University (2015). Another current project, *Shadows Remain*, an exhibition at SCAD, Savannah College of Art & Design, closes September 22. *Ocean Voices*, the sumptuously-shaped cedar & graphite mega-form (53 x 185 x 67 inches), was in the studio when I visited back in February, one of three standing sculptures and four large wall pieces created between 2010 and 2012. This overview will focus on von Rydingsvard’s studio practice and the Barclays Center project, both in Brooklyn.

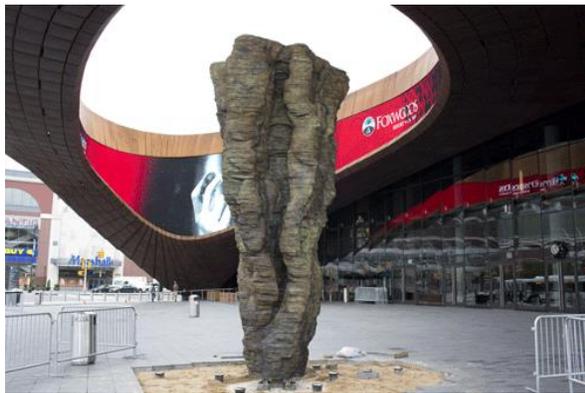


Ursula von Rydingsvard with her piece Ona at Barclays Center

Ursula was chosen as sculptor for the Barclays Center project—Brooklyn’s award-winning and largest sports/entertainment center, which sits atop the borough’s largest transportation hub—by a select committee of arts professionals, including the Brooklyn Museum’s Director Arnold Lehman and Managing Curator of Contemporary Art Eugenie Tsai, along with David Berliner, a member of the Barclays Center Board of Directors, and Bruce Ratner, majority owner and developer of Barclays Center, who stated,

“We want to continue to serve as a model for how an arena can be at the center of the cultural life of its community. Putting an artwork as significant as Ursula’s on view outside, where passersby and arena visitors alike can enjoy it, is a critical part of doing that.”

For her first outdoor, permanent sculpture in Brooklyn, von Rydingsvard began with a number of site visits. She wanted her work to have a presence in the context of the building’s architecture and with the proposed site, the sweeping front entrance. She crafted a full scale hollow cedar 20-foot-high vessel with a narrow base and a larger opening at the top. The model was constructed in two parts since its eventual height exceeds the studio’s. The cedar form was developed between July 2012 and February 2013. Then it was cast in bronze at Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry. Von Rydingsvard felt bronze was necessary visually, and also because of its durability outdoors. This is her third work cast in bronze; the others are at the T. F. Greene airport in Rhode Island and at Williams College. She named the sculpture *Ona*, a Polish word for “she” – a female form. *Ona* acknowledges the artist’s Polish heritage.



for “Ona.” Photo- Andria Morales

Ona at Barclays Center



the cedar model

Von Rydingsvard’s large studio covers one and a half floors of an industrial building in Bushwick. Upstairs is a business office, kitchen, and von Rydingsvard’s drawing and paper work studio. The much larger downstairs studio has areas for von Rydingsvard’s labor-intensive process of building sculpture out of cedar 4×4 boards milled from a special site in British Columbia, Canada. There are areas for all stages of making the work: cutting; initial construction; the gluing, clamping and hand chiseling of dried excess glue; and storage. Von Rydingsvard’s construction methods are visually illustrated on her website [www.ursulavonrydingsvard.net/](http://www.ursulavonrydingsvard.net/), discussed in the Prestel book *Ursula von Rydingsvard Working*, and in my prior cover stories on her work.[i]

All studio areas are well ventilated. Von Rydingsvard and her assistant each wear a full over-the-head ventilator hood, and her two to three other studio assistants wear dust masks and respirators. Everyone wears ear protection and safety goggles. The studio assistants and Andria Morales, the office manager, all have health insurance provided by the studio and all eat lunch together- a healthy lunch cooked by one of Ursula’s friends. Von Rydingsvard also graciously lets her studio assistants build their own career paths. Braden Weeks, the former studio head who now runs The Workshop Residence in San Francisco, has described why this studio stands out:

“I joined the studio because I wanted to keep learning; I still do. Ursula has taught at many schools, including Yale. I thought it would be a chance to learn from a master. Ursula, I think, is a national treasure. I’ve been lucky to learn her process, to learn how to lead a group of people, and to manage epic-scaled projects, many happening at the same time.” After describing how von Rydingsvard has developed her own system and processes over the past thirty years, Weeks added, “Some artists are struggling to communicate, struggling to find their language, but Ursula knows every letter and is completely literate in this language she’s speaking, and she’s free to make poetry with it. That’s one of the most beautiful things about her work.”

*Ona*’s installation took place in the middle of the night on August 30<sup>th</sup>. The dedication is in late September. For Princeton, a full-scale model was made in cedar and used as visual information for a pounded copper version. Von Rydingsvard may be known for her innovative cedar construction methods, but she has additionally used glass, urethane, co-polyethylene, bronze, animal intestines, paper, and other materials for different projects. Her body of work shows as well some ways that sculpture, painting, and drawing are interrelated – and all equally important tools for creating art. By [Jan Garden Castro](#)



“Ocean Voices,” 2012. Cedar, graphite. 53” x 185” x 67” Photo: M & R Bodycomb



*Ona* in Progress. Photos: Andria Morales

[i] See also Castro’s interviews “[Ursula von Rydingsvard: Topography of the Soul](#),” *Sculpture Magazine*, Jan/Feb 2007: 22-27 and “[Ursula von Rydingsvard: Draping and Shaping Wood](#),” *Sculpture*, Dec. 2010: 30-35. IMAGES (unless otherwise noted) COPYRIGHT URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD, COURTESY GALERIE LELONG.