

Artifacts of an Imagined Time

Legions of modern artists have been attracted to things prehistoric, archaic and primordial. Gauguin painted fantasies of a South Pacific Eden. Picasso drew

**KEN
JOHNSON**

**ART
REVIEW**

inspiration from African masks, which, misguidedly or not, he took for signs of timeless human ferocity. A traveler happening on Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" could mistake it for a ceremonial maze built by ancient pagans.

The huge, semiabstract woodworks impressively sampled in "Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture 1991-2009" at Sculpture Center look as if they had been made by Druids oriented to endless cycles of nature. And yet, like all archaic-style artworks, the 10 pieces in this show are conspicuously of their time. While they date from the last 20 years, their animating spirit is Post-Minimalist 1970s, when Ms. von Rydingsvard was in her 30s and had earned a master's degree in fine arts at Columbia University. (The exhibition was organized for Sculpture Center by Helaine Posner, chief curator at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y.)

That timely dimension is most evident and least exciting in works involving serial repetition. "Krasawica II," for example, consists of five similar vase-like forms, each 6 feet tall and collectively extending 22 feet along one wall. As is typical of Ms. von Rydingsvard's work they are made of laminated lengths of cedar roughly carved by hand and electric tools into gargantuan empty vessels. One of these objects has the vigorous rawness of a centuries-old artifact, but the quintupling mitigates that impression.

Eva Hesse, one of Ms. von Rydingsvard's major influences, made serial sculptures in the late 1960s, giving the Minimalist machinery of artists like Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd a personal, human touch. By the end of the '70s, however, the coupling of manual processes and grid-based serial repetition had become an overly popular shtick in contemporary sculpture.

Consider Ms. von Rydingsvard's "Five Lace Medallions" (2001-7), a quintet of nine-foot-tall

"Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture 1991-2009" continues through March 28 at Sculpture Center, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org.



JASON MANDELLA

Ursula von Rydingsvard's "Ocean Floor" at Sculpture Center.

Ursula von Rydingsvard Sculpture 1991-2009 Sculpture Center

rectangular panels, each with something resembling an ornate necklace incorporated into the upper half like a thick puzzle piece. Multiplying one section fivefold into an extravaganza that is more than 40 feet wide produces the effect of overblown, primitivist-style architectural decoration.

You sense more factory production than intuitive process. All the panels appear unfinished, with pencil and chalk marks indicating areas presumably meant to be more extensively carved. It looks like a lesson for people who don't know how sculptures are made rather than a fully realized work of art.

Ms. von Rydingsvard's most compelling constructions are mysterious and singular. Installed by itself in a square room that it almost completely fills, "Ocean Floor" (1996) is a knockout. A giant, graphite-darkened wood bowl 13 feet in diameter, it might have been unearthed by archaeologists from a site where colossal ogres once lived. This haunting object has a strangely suggestive series of twin pods connected by arching tubes around the outside of its waist-high rim. Made of stuffed cow intestines, their gonadal shapes hint at a possible fertility cult, and the whole piece evokes a time immemorial — a time out of time — long before (or after) the bells and whistles of industrial civilization came along.

"Droga" (2009) looks even older. An organic form, like a giant slug with a cavernous interior, it could be a pre-Paleolithic fossil

from an age when dinosaurs roamed the earth.

Ms. von Rydingsvard's works can also suggest a postapocalyptic time. Born in 1942 in Poland, she has spoken of her earliest memories: of war and of being shuttled among refugee camps before arriving in the United States in 1950. The nearly 14-foot-tall "Wall Pocket" (2003-4) recalls the remains of a chimney in a carpet-bombed city. The Holocaust comes to mind, and, in a larger, existential sense, the piece suggests the fragility of humanity in the face of the universe's violent energies.

A tendency for overbearing dourness — especially seen in her often enormous outdoor sculptures — is sometimes offset by an inventive playfulness. A 2006 diptych of roughly circular wall pieces, each nine feet across with a rimlike pie crust surrounding a flat expanse resembling hardwood flooring and with clusters of blobby forms hanging from the bottom edges, has the sad title "Weeping Plates." But they seem more comical, like parodies of Rococo mirrors, than tragic. "Collar With Dots" (2008), in which a nubby section is appended to a ropy element with flyaway ends, could be a false beard for an actor or a spy. Such works promise other possible discoveries to be made along less well-worn paths.

Allegorical tombstones, monuments, cenotaphs and elegies for a broken century are all very well, but grieving over the past can become routine, and an artist as industrious as Ms. von Rydingsvard can start to look like a professional mourner with a too-predictable bag of tricks. You want a bit of new life too, a sprig of hope for a new millennium.