URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD: The point that you bring up about the whole feel, the whole sentiment, toward women being artists, to begin with, is much more generous now than it seemed years ago. I also think that given the scale in which I work, and in some ways the scale in which you work, Claudia, it’s huge! I don’t know if people were used to that 30 or 35 years ago, particularly in regards to female sculptors. For me, however, it’s obvious that scale has nothing to do with being a male or a female and that good art is not related to either sex. That realization was important. I simply felt that I absolutely needed to do this. It was a part of my life that I could not do without. My evolution took a long time but that’s how it is with me. I work equally intensively whether I have a show or not. I’m very grateful to the exhibition I had in 1988 at Exit Art with Jeannette Langthorne as I feel that, in a sense, it was a debut of my work. For this show I had four quiet years without any sort of representation from a gallery to focus on building my work. So I only can say that I am glad to get the opportunities I am getting now and have been getting for the past several years, while at the same time, that gestation and the constant making of my sculpture was also extremely important. It informed the way in which I work now.

BRAULI: Ursula, having worked with the pioneering sculptors George Sugarman and Ronald Bladen during your time at Columbia, how did the discussions surrounding material and abstraction resonate for you, and how have you attempted to transcend those early Minimalist and (largely masculine) influences?

KARA ROONEY: My time at Columbia University was a point at which I was evolving. I did a lot from the Minimalist artists teaching there. I was very close to Sol LeWitt. But there was a way in which they pissed me off! Their philosophies seemed to float in the pastel atmospheres, superior to almost any other way of thinking. I had friends who made work that was realistic, that was figurative, for example, and they didn’t have a chance. Nobody else had a chance. This was a reaction to the Abstract Expressionists that had preceded them, so in a way, they were killing their fathers. The work was devoid of emotion or at least they tried as hard as they could to make it intellectually oriented and, I could think for a while, “How can you clean emotion out of things? How can one do that?” Minimalism did become a very consequential base for me—I repeat a lot, like you do, Claudia, with your stripes—and that got from them. In this sense I’m grateful. I used this Minimalist training as a jumping-off point, but ultimately, I think I ended up in a very different place.

RAIL: So the cleansing and the purity of the work is something you are expecting.

VON RYDINGSVARD: Yes but more importantly, that kind of superiority, the idea that this is the way to do it. Art never demands a way. It doesn’t. Just as when the waves of the ocean work their gorgeous magic, they don’t make a decision that this is the way to do it. It’s in the context that all of the ocean’s complicated elements produce such an incredibly amazing surface. So there is no specific way art leads you. It gives you a sort of blank card to do with it as you like.

Labor Intensity
GLADSTONE GALLERY

COMPT: It's very nice of you to say that and I totally agree. There is something to be said for the abstraction of minimal geometric shape being reserved for men, but I don't say this from a feminist perspective, I don't want to be aligned with male or female, actually, because that's not the point. As you said, it's the person and the art that produces this person. Along those lines, I do really like to play with those geometric shapes; I try to give them a lot of humor and a lot of character. In doing so, something strong and even funny occurs between the paintings, the wall, and the sculptural forms of my installations. It makes them alive. I love to reactivate modern shapes but also to give my sculptures a kind of human character, like something or someone out of a cartoon.

RAIL: This type of duality and contradiction are qualities I might ascribe to both of your outputs, Claudia. In your work there is a playful dismantling of the high and low—the influence of Brancusi, Jean Arp, and the Swiss Constructivist Olivier Mosset, on the one hand, and the popular culture of modern cartoons and animated series like The Simpsons on the other.

COMPT: It's the reason for my work. I think it's a very important woman in my life who didn't know how to read and write. She could sign her name but it was very difficult. It didn't contain the kind of smoothness, the kind of fluidity that we have in our handwriting, precisely because we've so used to it. This fascinated me, and so I had her write some words in Polish. I then made a huge profile of those words on the ground that I built upon. The letterforms were an excuse to build these organic, more sensual walls from her handwriting. It's not as though the content, the words themselves, were so important, it's that I used them as a sort of grounded root from which to grow, and then I made the rest up as I went along.

RAIL: "Blackened Word" is one of the first works of yours I saw, Ursula. I was so moved by the way that language, something that is so exactly and ephemeral, could be the driving force for this very monumental type of physicality. The way that you speak about your process, how it forms in the aggregate, developed out of previous decisions and past experiences, is this wonderful metaphor, in sculptural form, for the way that identity is formed within us.

In this regard, even though the significance of the hand is critical to both of your outputs, your approach to approaching this quite differently. Claudia, the violence of working with a chairing is typically hidden behind a veneer of glossed and polished surfaces, while for you Ursula, it seems important to leave the marks of that engagement visible. Your monolithic pieces, in many ways, could be described as poetically quiet "monuments to labor." Can you discuss your individual relationship with the hand?

VON RYDINGVARD: I need to sit myself physically. I can't stand sitting. Sculpting is part of what makes my heart beat faster, or makes the blood run in a way that's more intense. I'm not falling asleep, you know. I'm really focused—at least most of the time! There are many, many boring moments when I'm trying to get something that becomes more exciting or I'm leading up to that; but even then, since I'm physically engaged, I have to be aware of what I do with my body. I think I've spent one third of my life on scaffolding /legba/.

COMPT: The chairing is my tool. It has nothing to do with feminism or any other political act, because many people ask me that. It's simply the tool I need to do what I need to do. I used five different types of chairings, and they create different lines, different speeds, and all that is good for the work.

VON RYDINGVARD: I can feel something from those chairs. There's a kind of softness to them but at the same time, they know where they need to go. They've been kept in check by your hand. And in connection with that, I can also say that I think there were times when there were much heavier prejudices towards wood than there are now. Just as there was a heavy prejudice towards glass.

RAIL: As it being a craft-based medium.

VON RYDINGVARD: As it being craft based no matter how you manipulated it. Regardless of whether it was close to art or not, the wood itself made "art" impossible in some people's minds.

RAIL: You have spoken about your choice of using cedar in a very similar way to Claudia's description of her use of the chairing in that it's not so much about the wood itself as it is about its specific material properties. It is simply the one material that allows you to get to what you want out of it.

VON RYDINGVARD: That's correct.

RAIL: You're very utilitarian about this, Claudia, is it not?

COMPT: I first used a lot resin and plastic things, all kinds of materials, and I finally started using wood because it's so interesting to look at what happens inside—the colors, the structure—it's like it's still alive. My sculptures, for instance, are all cracking a bit. They continue to lose water. This is really fascinating to me. It gives me energy to work with this material because that something has been growing for many years. Some of the trees I've used to make the work in the Gladstone show are more than 80 years old. It's wonderful to be able to work with such a material.

VON RYDINGVARD: I'm different in the way that I work with ears that are cut to an exact measurement, so that there is a neutrality. When I look at the trunk of the tree, all of its growth rings and all of the grain, it starts to look so beautiful. I can't deform it. In a way, Claudia, you don't deform it. You bring out the best things in that wood. You bring that out of that surface. I couldn't do this. I couldn't use anything that retained a significant echo as to where it came from. I feel that nature is such a grand plan in and of itself, that I could never, for example, make that branch better. I could never make the bark any more complex and any more breathtaking than it already is. I would be too shy. Whereas with the neutral boards, I can squeeze the hell out of them. I can force the material to go in directions that it never thought it could go. In my mind at least, there is more freedom.

RAIL: The utilization of wood, it seems, also extends from the landscapes both of you grew up in. Ursula, much has been written about your Polish/Ukrainian heritage and the formative years spent in the forced-labor and refugee camps of Germany at the close of
the Second World War, Claudia, you are from the rural countryside in Switzerland but currently live and work in Berlin, more than half a century after Ursula’s experiences in that same country. Can you both speak about how the natural surroundings and in some cases, loaded history of these locations, informs the aesthetics of your work?

VON RYNGVARD: I’m not sure that I can explain it very well. I do come, it’s a fact, from a long line of Polish peasant farmers. For many generations that’s what they did. But for me to say that I make the work that I do—and many people have said this—because I lived in the refugee camps, I don’t know. This has been used as a key to understanding my work that I don’t agree with, simply because the work is much more complicated than that.

RAIL: How do you work with this kind of emotionally freighted baggage, whether it’s baggage that you’ve been forced to bear or because it has been imposed upon you through the critical lens?

VON RYNGVARD: It’s because I have this baggage that—and this might sound horrible—I’m so determined. In a way, I’m trying to figure out who I am, to figure out my place within the context of these experiences. In some ways, this was the most horrible thing that’s happened in my life, but in other ways I am grateful for it. It sounds so odd, but I have this hunger to kind of work it out. I know I’ll never work it out. I know I’ll never figure it out. But I want to come closer. I want to think that I might be coming closer. In terms of the connection with wood, I remember one of the camps had an enormous brick building that was bombed, so all that remained were little bits of the wall. There were a lot of bricks scattered about the ground. And I remember the pieces of those bricks and playing with them, you know, making structures out of those bricks. And feeling something. I must have been only 6 or 7 years old, but I felt something almost erotic in being able to handle them in that way, to see the material grow. The way I work with wood is very similar. You’re exactly right when you say it’s a means through which I seem to be able to speak better than I can with clay, better than I can with a lot of other things. Even when I make pieces out of resin or out of bronze, I make them out of wood first because somehow I can manipulate it in a way where the results speak more closely to what I want to say.

RAIL: Yes, I think you’re right. For me, I grew up in a chateau next to the forest, so I tried lots of different materials but at some point I was compelled to try wood, because there were also possibilities with that. I met a lumberjack close to my parents’ house—those people are just so easy, you know, so practical. If I needed three trunks to work with, they would place them in the forest, but the day after, in this sense wood was a very practical material to work with and something I could handle because of my origins. I’ll have grown up in a big city that would’ve been more abstract for me, to recreate this kind of thing, or to deal with this kind of person. This environment is simply familiar to me.

VON RYNGVARD: I think the wood “familiarity” is very important. I also feel as if wood is familiar. It’s precisely because it’s not foreign that I can dig into it and abuse it in the way I do.

RAIL: While you have so much in common, color is one of the more interesting areas where your two practices appear to diverge. Claudia, with this exhibition and many of the others you have completed recently, color seems to be something you’re utilizing in a very calculated way. Conversely for you, Ursula, it’s something you almost don’t contend with at all. Can each of you comment on the importance of color and its utilization within your work?

VON RYNGVARD: I think I like to mix the identification of the natural that’s inferred by wood with something more pop, like a videogram, or a cartoon. This show, for example, I’ve said is a mix between a wooden cabin and a videogram. I like to create immersive environments where people can experience the color in these precise paintings in contrast to my rough work with the chairmen. It’s as if the color is something unnatural in this regard.

RAIL: So it’s also a way of dissolving the high and low distinctions between painting and sculpture, color and craft. And Ursula, for you, this sense of color transposition—

VON RYNGVARD: I open my closet and there isn’t one thing in it that’s not black! [Everyone laughs] I lived in Miami for about four or five years, and the colors in Miami too, used to have this piercing effect on my eyes. I used to run underneath trees, stand in the shadows whenever I went outside. So I don’t use color even though I tremendously admire painters, I drink from them, like the last show of Matthias’s cut-outs. I am not sure that the cut-outs were as profound as his paintings, but the colors were marvelous. For me, color is just such a complicated world. I don’t want to touch it because I don’t really know how to use it. I actually used to paint in my younger days, but my painting was not so great. The canvases finally became more and more three-dimensional until the paint finally fell down on the floor from the canvas. That, I knew, was my way to start working in three-dimensional forms.

RAIL: What’s next for each of you?

VON RYNGVARD: We’re coming onto the third year of pouring copper for a commission for Princeton University, the dedication which is tentatively scheduled for spring of 2016. It is the first time that I have used this material. Copper is a metal I have been eyeing for a good part of my life. This material looks really good when it’s cast as one sees in architecture, but copper in a voluptuous, rounded, organic form looks divine. My copper sculpture will be about 19 feet high and placed at the entrance of the Andlinger Centre, a brand new addition to Princeton’s campus, along with several laboratory buildings devoted to research on environmental sustainability, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.

This is an extraordinarily labor-intensive process, with all the cutting, pouring, and bending of the copper done by hand, as well as the bending of the bronze rods which receive close to 4,000 to 6,000 pounds of copper forms that get mounted onto a central steel base.

RAIL: When back in Berlin, I have three films to edit and complete. The first will be screened at the Swiss Institute in early March and is based on a large installation I did in Gstaad last winter, where I turned an ice rink into a large board game in which hockey players moved my polystyrene sculptures around the rink’s surface to the tune of different commands. The second video is about a horse-riding trip I undertook for three weeks in Kyrgyzstan’s breathless countryside, and the third is a film in which I burn my biggest sculpture to date, during nightfall, to the sound of a double piano concert. After these, I am working on a solo show to be mounted in France, it’s a collaboration of 4mCube, a wonderful not-for-profit space, together with Université Rennes 2’s own space, Galerie Art Et Faits. They have been doing great shows there for the last 30 years with many of my contemporaries from John Armleder to Ugo Rondinone, but also with prominent artists such as Martha Rosler. Later in the year, I have the pleasure of working with Oliver Mosset on a two-person show in a recently opened Parisian gallery. In short, there are many exciting and challenging things ahead.