Born to a Polish mother and a Ukrainian father, Ursula von Rydingsvard spent her childhood displaced, moving with her family among Germany’s post–World War II labor and refugee camps. Not surprisingly, her sculptures seem to resound with echoes of these formative years. “I was exposed to very few objects,” the artist recalled, and the ones I grew very attached to were the things that belonged to my father, his agricultural tools; and the things which belonged to my mother, her domestic implements, like bowls, washboards and spoons, and so on. . . . I still feel that these very primitive implements, without a machine attached to them, that you work food with, that you work the soil with, they’re the real icons in my eyes, in my head.

The manual labor von Rydingsvard associates with these objects and with her family also informs the making of her sculptures. Although she uses electrical tools, her works require a physically demanding process. She repetitively cuts and stacks beams of cedar as she stacks, clamps, and laminates them together, finally darkening their surfaces by rubbing them with powdered graphite.

These complex sculptures invite multiple, sometimes contradictory, readings. Their rough, abraded surfaces evoke natural landscapes and manmade ruins. Their substantial masses feel at once rehearsing and protective. *Bowl with Lips* bears these characteristic traits and also employs von Rydingsvard’s signature vessel form. A motif she turns to often because of its rich associative potential. Bowls are a fixture in her own thoughts, but their archetypal form also recalls how bowls have been universally used for both domestic and sacred purposes, as holders of nourishment for both body and soul. For von Rydingsvard, the bowl is “a world, a vessel of emotions.” She also frequently thinks about the bowl’s kinship to the human body – a link underscored by the present work, whose title and round opening suggest lips parted in speech. Habitually reticent to assign a single interpretation to any of her sculptures, the artist undoubtedly would hope that this one speaks differently to each viewer.

Emily Stamey

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Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarn is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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