"I CAN'T EKE HUMANENESS OUT of something that's not made by the hand," says Ursula von Rydingsvard, sitting in a large, open room on the second floor of her Bushwick, Brooklyn, studio, where she's surrounded by woven textiles, a patchwork quilt, carved wood bowls, masks, and fabric scraps. "I just can't really communicate without the relationship between the hand and the material," she adds. At first it's hard to connect the humble scale suggested by handcraft and the large-scale works for which this artist is known. At the time of our meeting, the 72-year-old artist had just opened an exhibition at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield, England; was working on a commission for a Krueck+Sexton–designed federal building in Miramar, Florida; was finishing a work destined for Frieze London's Sculpture Park; and was preparing for a solo show at Galerie Lelong in New York, which opens October 23 and runs through December 13.

Standing among her sculptures in the cavernous rooms of the studio's ground floor where they come into being, one senses the intimacy that von Rydingsvard speaks of, the delicacy and detail. What's astounding is that this visceral experience of communion is inspired by works that can tower as high as 20 feet. "This is a baby one," says the artist, referring to one of her cedar "bowls." It's about average human height, roughly five and a half feet. There are also "combs," "shovels," and "plates," descriptors that von Rydingsvard uses when referring to the basic shapes many of her works have taken on, at 50 times the typical size.

The inner workings of the studio leave one in awe. But it's not only the scale of von Rydingsvard's works that overwhelms; it's also the time and effort that go into making them. Each one is a monument to labor. It all starts with cedar. Even the few sculptures that are cast in a different material begin life as full-size wood models. Four-by-four cedar beams are stacked into a rough form before being cut with a circular saw to create the notched and cratered surfaces for which the artist has become known. After that: total deconstruction.

"Everything is meticulously marked with numbers," she explains, "to keep track of every single piece. After we take it apart, we stack it again from the bottom up." So begins the gluing process, to which an entire room is dedicated. "We do one layer of beams a day because it takes about 15 hours for the glue to dry." Each seam is completely sealed with glue running the length of the joins. "Then we go over every seam with a chisel" to remove the excess. After this, she works graphite powder into the wood, creating a unique patina.

BY JULIET HELMKE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

LIFE

WROUGHT LARGE

Towering sometimes 20 feet, the sculptures of **Ursula von Rydingsvard** are remarkably human

Ursula von Rydingsvard with finished sculptures on the 7,200-square-foot first floor of her Brooklyn, New York, studio.

"This was my 60th birthday present from my husband," she says, pointing to the forklift given to her by neuroscientist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Greengard. After 12 years of use it's a little dinged around the edges, with an open wad of exposed foam for the seat. "It got pretty worn," she deadpans. Early in her eighth decade, the sculptor still spends at least five days a week cutting, gluing, chiseling, and hauling lumber from room to room, aided by a team of assistants, in a space previously used to manufacture caskets, off one of Brooklyn's most sought-after L-train stops.

A wave of gentrification has followed the urban pioneer from studio to studio in New York. Before moving her operation to Bushwick, von Rydingsvard shared two floors of a building on Williamsburg's North Fifth Street with fellow artist Judy Pfaff, whom she met while working at the Yale School of Art in the early 1980s. Before that, she worked out of her apartment on Spring Street in SoHo, where she lived as a single mother after earning an MFA from Columbia University in 1975.

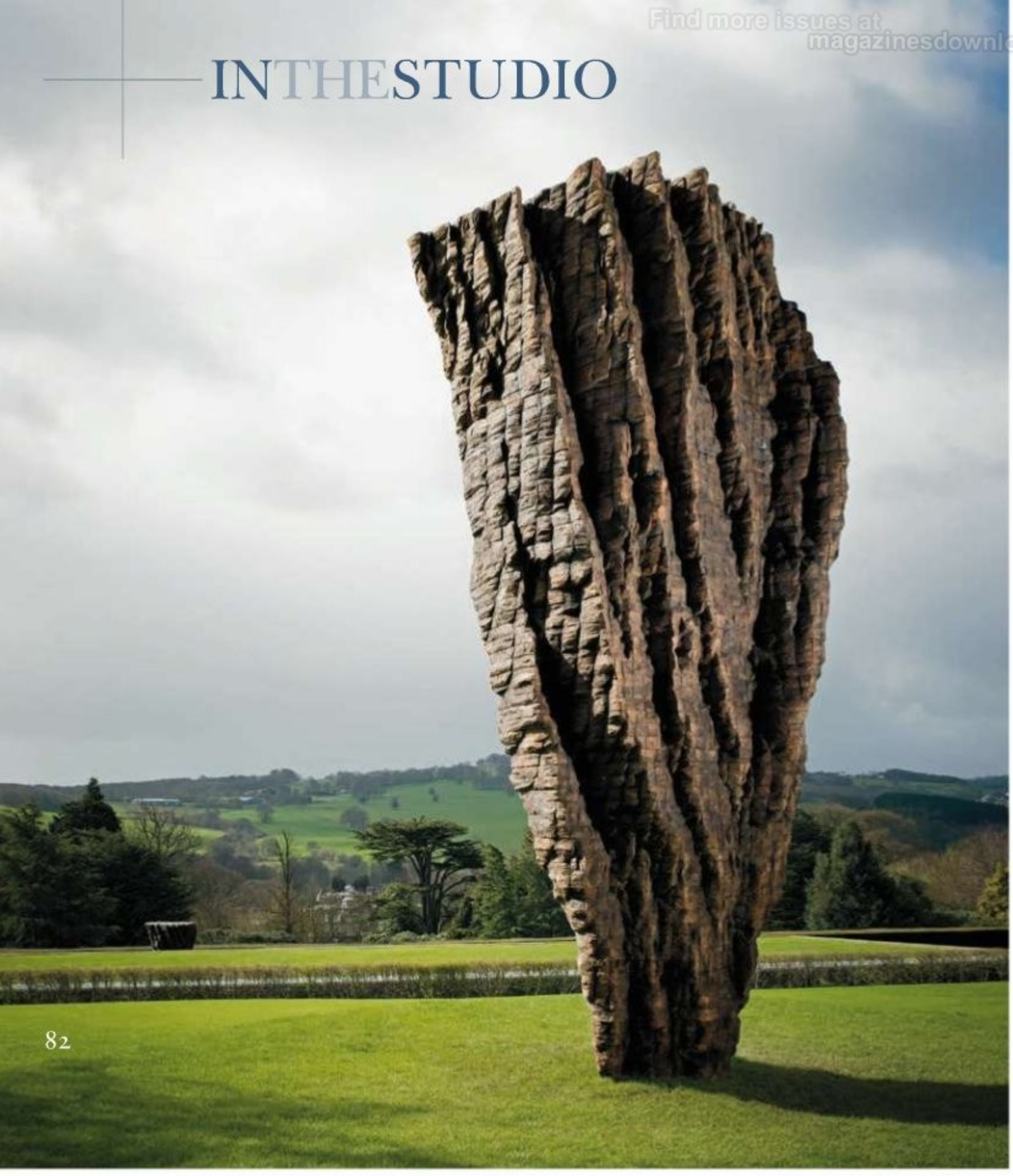
Von Rydingsvard affectionately recalls the galleries that showed her work, and the people and organizations that supported her early in her career. "In 1979 I made *Saint Martin's Dream*, a commission sponsored by the nonprofit Creative Time, on the landfill where Battery Park City is now." Back then, it was all sand. The 260-foot-long work comprised a series of winged cedar trunks that crawled up and down the dune in the shape of a crescent moon. The piece stood in the shadow of the World Trade Center's twin towers. The artist remembers being paid $350 for the entire work—including installation and materials—and was "in absolute heaven."

By 1988, von Rydingsvard was still without gallery representation, often having to sit on her art ideas, allowing them to

"I WAS ALWAYS ATTRACTED TO LARGE SCALE. I HAVE THIS URGE TO SURROUND THE BODY."

Above, from left: *Ocean Voices*, 2011–12, in cedar and graphite, stretches nearly 151/2 feet long; other works of cedar and graphite occupy the studio's sculpture area. At right, fiber pieces are made in a second-floor studio.

TOP LEFT: MICHAEL BODYCOMB, URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD, AND GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK



***Pierwsza*, 2013–14, above, reaches more than 20 feet in its current setting at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Below, the artist stands on scaffolding in her studio to cut and fit 4-by-4-foot cedar beams together to form the sculptures. Once the shape is determined they are disassembled and glued together.**

"simmer and gestate" while waiting for the moment she could find the money to realize them. A solo show at the now-defunct Exit Art gallery proved to be the turning point. From the works presented, the Metropolitan Museum of Art bought *Untitled (Seven Mountains)*, 1986–88, the first work she had ever marked with graphite, and the Brooklyn Museum purchased *Umarles (You Went and Died)*, 1987–88.

"She started to build a network of collectors after the Exit Art show, and had done one or two commissions at that time," recalls Mary Sabbatino, vice president of Galerie Lelong.

The artist joined Lelong in 1992, on the heels of her 10-year retrospective at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York. "Since then her collector base, almost evenly made up of museums, foundations, and private individuals, has seen consistently strong growth," Sabbatino continues. "We've been climbing steadily over the years to reach the current level of interest that an artist of her intensity and prolificacy deserves." The gallery now receives so many inquiries about exhibitions and commissions that many must be turned down. Sabbatino credits the increase in collector activity to "an interest in her distinctive aesthetic and voice and the growth in the market for outdoor sculpture."

Von Rydingsvard was born Ursula Karoliszyn to Polish and Ukrainian parents in Deensen, Germany. Before she was 10, she lived in nine different displaced-persons camps along with her parents and six siblings before the family immigrated to the United States in December 1950, settling in Plainfield, Connecticut. She is hesitant to tie too much autobiography to her work, simply acknowledging that, thanks to a childhood spent overcoming considerable obstacles, she's not afraid to tackle mammoth undertakings, ones that would seem to others too large, their success too improbable.

"I was attracted to large scale from the very beginning," she notes. For her MFA show, when money to buy materials was hard to come by, she managed to forage clay and rusted pipes from a furnace that had been trashed and constructed a work covering the better part of a gallery floor. Building on this impulse for grandiosity, she began moving upward. "I've always had this urge to surround the body. There is something psychological that happens when you are surrounded that's different from just looking at something at a distance," she says. "That's not to say experience can't be moving, but I feel you can grip psychologically in a more

TOP: JONTY WILDE. URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD, AND GALERIE LELONG

intense way when you're surrounded, although I don't necessarily know where these urges come from."

Clearly, von Rydingsvard follows her instincts. For works large or small, there are no preconceived notions. She starts from the ground and builds up. Although she may have a picture in her mind, she admits it usually changes by the time the piece is completed. "It just grows," she says. The explanation is similar to how she talks about the shifts in her style and practice over the years. Of the "lacework"—her term for the delicate holes and circular hollows that have started to appear very recently—she says, "I don't really know quite where they came from . . . . It just happened."

There are numerous scraps of lace among the artist's textile collection in the studio, and even more at her country home in New Paltz, New York. Most were acquired while her mother was ill, during the time she spent traveling to Plainfield to visit. To lighten the difficult trip, von Rydingsvard would often stop to see a woman in the same town who sold lace on Saturdays. But it was many years later that the circular patterns started to appear in the artist's work, and she calls it a discovery.

A number of works in the Galerie Lelong exhibition reveal this change in texture and pattern, including the centerpiece: a nine-foot-high work in bronze titled *Bent Lace*. So, too, does an older work that was left unfinished for five or six years, a series of five platelike forms joined in a circle. The "lace" on this piece was recently added. Gouged out with a hammer and chisel, the design is more like fingerprints, not the way they look inked on paper, but rather clawed through wet sand over and over. The Lelong show will include this piece, along with a number of works in cedar and a group of works on paper.

One of the first works with lace ornamentation to be publicly exhibited, *Bronze Bowl with Lace*, 2014, is a standout in the Yorkshire exhibition. At night, lights mounted inside and below this 20-foot-high gentle giant illuminate the lacework at the top. It took some nine shipping containers to transport about 50 works to England by sea. "She had one container all to herself," von Rydingsvard says, referring to the piece.

Although she had created only two previous works in bronze over the past three decades, viewers will see more in the coming months. (She casts at the renowned Walla Walla Foundry in the state of Washington.) In addition to the piece on view at Lelong, the work destined for Frieze London's Sculpture Park is also of the material. Of course her notable bronze *Ona*, 2013, unveiled only last year, greets visitors to the Barclays Center and the Atlantic Avenue subway stop in downtown Brooklyn. At the official opening of the arena, von Rydingsvard recalls, a guard often stationed at the center's main doors remarked to the artist, "I've seen a lot of this sort of stuff, but I've never seen anything that gets people to make out like they do around this."

From top: The cedar and graphite work *Unraveling*, 2007, is a permanent sight at the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art in Bentonville, Arkansas; the artist experiments with ornamentation she calls lace by wrapping plasteline clay around rocks found outside the studio; and new fiber works that will be seen in this month's show at Galerie Lelong in New York.

People like to muse on the effect that von Rydingsvard's work has on its viewers—their reverence, awe, and apparently amorous leanings in the face of enveloping scale, tactility, and sensual form. Von Rydingsvard has some ideas about it, but she prefers not to overanalyze. Of *Ona*'s effect on passersby, she simply says, "I think that's a pretty good result." ⊞

TOP: MICHAEL BODYCOMB. URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD, AND GALERIE LELONG