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THE ART ISSUE

STERLING RUBY - CATHERINE OPIE - SHULAMIT NAZARIAN - HAAS BROTHERS

STREET LIVING

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY









Looking at the body of work that the artist Sterling Ruby has created—hundreds of spray paintings, massive ceramic vessels, soft fabric sculptures, dripping polyurethane towers, working wood stoves, couture fashion collaborations—it could be hard to put together how everything relates, or even has come out of one person, one mind, one creative process. But that is Ruby's intention. His work appears schizophrenic because he wants it to. There is a lineage that links it all, the artist told us, and his expansive L.A. studio helps him continue to make those connections.

Whitewall visited Ruby in that studio early this year, and he told us about his resolution to clean up and sweep the floor more often.

WHITEWALL: *You can see references to growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in some of your work—there are quilting traditions in the soft works and fabric collage paintings, and when I saw the “Stoves” pieces, it immediately made me think of Pennsylvania, having lived there myself. What about that early visual language continues to speak to you?*

STERLING RUBY: I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and New Freedom, Pennsylvania. My mother was from the Netherlands. I was born on an Air Force base in Germany, and then moved to the Netherlands for a number of years before moving to the States. I spent four years at a foundation art school in Lancaster, but that was when I was older. My moving around early on was somewhat intense—I really don't remember much until the age of 11 or so.

I did spend most of my youth in rural Pennsylvania. I went to an agricultural high school. We had calligraphy and we had drafting—those were the only two art classes available. I recognized the value in crafts, particularly quilt-making, before I understood “fine” art. Amish quilt-making stood out. The quilts were so vibrant, and in such contrast to the drab environment. The community where I grew up had very distinct ideas of gender roles—the women sewed and the men were violent. That's how it felt anyway. My mother taught me how to sew, and I took to it, I enjoyed it, but I also had to physically defend myself for it, which at the time was confusing. I certainly wasn't thinking about gender politics, or the association of crafts with domesticity, when I was in high school. But that is what it was; I just didn't realize it at the time. All those old associations still mean something to me, and I continue to see it in my work.

WW: *Do you see your ceramic works as fitting into that as well, or something else?*

SR: I did come to see this in the ceramic works, but much later. For me the ceramics started out more conceptually. I thought of them as social and psychological studies at first, initially associating them with art therapy. But over time I have also come to see the connection to craft and autobiography.

WW: *Why did you want the “Stoves” to be actual functional wood-burning stoves?*

SR: Years ago I started collecting and assembling wood-burning stoves in the studio in Los Angeles. Some stoves were traditional cast-iron stoves. Some were barrel stoves assembled from mail-order kits. We burned scrap wood in them. The studio yard would be smoky, and filled with the scent of a wood fire. This led me to want to make my own set of fully functioning stoves—as sculptures, as monuments.

WW: *You said that when you started the ceramic works, you had wanted to make a monument to gesture that was truncated—a gesture that was frozen in time. Why?*

Previous spread:
Sterling Ruby
SP250
2013
Spray paint on canvas
160 x 235 x 2 inches

Opposite page, this page, and next spread,
left, works in progress.

Next spread, right:
Sterling Ruby
FIGURES (BL.RD.)
2014
Fabric, yarn, and fiberfill
28 x 257 x 204 inches





SR: Ceramics became key for me. It was a medium that wasn't being used at the time by artists my age. At that time, clay was craft. It wasn't conceptual. It had nothing to do with body politics, which back then was what everyone was doing. I was working at the Video Data Bank in Chicago (this was around 2000). It seemed like a way to just make something. It was malleable, but that gestural aspect of the clay was then truncated through the bisque firing process, which I thought of as a kind of pathological or psychological study, or a social study in art therapy. I also saw them as monuments to my generation's seeming inability to make a sincere gesture. For me, the ceramics became intimate monuments representing the fact that my generation had too much baggage.

WW: *The urethane works came when you couldn't make the ceramic works any bigger, as you can only go so big with ceramics. Why did you want to make something that could really be scale-less—was it to make a gesture scale-less, as well?*

SR: Well, they aren't exactly scale-less, as there are limits, but I did want to think of them as monuments, like civic sculptures or something. I wanted them to feel overwhelming. I wanted them to defy gravity in a way that the ceramics couldn't. Buried within that was the idea that there is a futility hidden in the creation of large monuments.

WW: *With your current studio that you moved into a couple years, you have enough space to store and show finished and past works. How has being able to see your older work while working on something new affected your process?*

SR: My intention is to use as many mediums as possible, and to project a schizophrenic personality as a kind of overwhelming labor strategy in the production of the work. Studio time is important for what I do. There is a lineage that links everything that I do together, and the studio helps me to figure out the catalysts between one work and another. In the new studio I can unpack work from 10 to 15 years ago; I can install it in the same space where I am making new work. I can consider my work through time, my subject matter, my preoccupations . . . I can see my aesthetic choices and changes over time, I can consider something new in the presence of older work, in real time.

WW: *While watching a video of you working on the urethane sculptures, we noticed that the elevation machine used to drip resin onto the sculptures is itself covered in drippings. Is there a point where those machines become a kind of monument to your process?*

SR: The lift cages become too covered in urethane to use anymore—they become inoperable, useless—but I keep everything so perhaps someday they could become something like that.

WW: *Related to that, you've said that the studio has become an excavation site over the years, and it has taken your work to a new level of cycling through materials. Can you tell us more about this excavation process for you?*

SR: What I am talking about is autobiographical excavation and archaeology. I think that it's always been there, but recently it's been an obsession of mine, that the work has to have archaeology built into it—a "ruin value." I am taking ephemera from the studio, fragments of previous works and incorporating them into newer work. It is a way for me to think about my own autobiography in a critical way. It represents something specifically about me as an artist, my choices; it is an archaeology of my history.

WW: *You've described what you do as schizophrenic, and said that it's important as an artist to keep constantly changing. Does having your past work onsite in the studio help you to continually push toward the next thing?*

SR: Yes.

WW: *To that end, you've talked about how now you've started to see certain series and bodies of work come to an end in this new studio—and that can give anxiety, but it's also important for you. What are some things that have come to an end for you? How do you know when the time is right to stop?*

SR: The nail polish works, the "Trans Compositional" series, the "Alabaster" series, the "EXHM" cardboard collages, and "BC" textile works, and even the "Stalagmite" sculptures have all come to an end. I can tell when a series is finished by how much I want to start something new.

WW: *Having made around three hundred spray paintings, "SP"—are those something that you think you'll continue to go back to?*

SR: Maybe. My "SP" series of spray paintings might be done—I'm not sure just yet. I started doing them in 2007, and I've only made a couple since the 2014 "VIVIDS" show with Gagosian in Hong Kong.

WW: *One thing about having your studio in L.A. that seems to be a plus for you is that you can be a bit more insular than in other cities. How do you think that affects your work?*

SR: I have a deep connection to the city, which in all actuality is not a city. Los Angeles is a sprawling suburb; it has the capacity to feel urban and rural at the same time. You can drop out and see no one for long periods of time in a way that you might not be able to do in a place like New York. My work ethic and my paranoia seem parallel to the city—it can feel very productive in that way.

WW: *Your collaborations with Raf Simons are super. It was kind of magical seeing the 2012 Christian Dior couture show with your spray paintings as prints for these super-feminine garments. When Raf Simons first approached you about that specific collection, what were your initial thoughts?*

SR: I completely let go and trusted his vision for my works. That type of relationship is very, very rare for me. Raf and I have been friends for such a long time. Also, behind the scenes at that time was Delphine Arnault [of LVMH], for whom I have a lot of respect, and she is someone who has supported me and my work for many years. So I had total faith that she and Raf wanted my work to be represented in the right light. It is important to be able to trust people like that; otherwise, I wouldn't be able to do those types of collaborations.

WW: *What are you working on currently in the studio?*

SR: I'm working on an exhibition with curator Mario Codognato for the Winterpalais, Belvedere Museum in Vienna. It opens in July 2016.

WW: *Does the start of the new year ever bring out any new studio resolutions for you?*

SR: Yes, every new year makes me want to reassess, but mostly it makes me want to clean up . . . to sweep the floor more often.

Opposite page:
Sterling Ruby
SCALE (4416-2 BARE BLOCKS)
2015
Steel, paint, wood, and mixed media
306 x 204 x 136 inches

