Kaleidoscope
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Interview: Sterling Ruby

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Piero Golia When I arrived in LA, you were already "Sterling." So you should tell me the beginning of the story, the piece that I'm missing, and then we can start the conversation.

Sterling Ruby Well, my family moved around a lot in my early childhood, but we finally wound up in Pennsylvania when I was about eight. By 1994, I had already done four years of art school there. It was a real "draw the bowls of fruit and the nude figure" kind of school, totally foundational and non-accredited. The program represented the "classics," everything from the past: *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* was our main textbook; the most recent person you would be someone like Philip Pearlstein. But in my last year, I started to look at contemporary art books. I don't know why, but I remember our school, which had a very small library, acquiring Schimmel's "Helter Skelter" book. It was so out of the ordinary. It didn't look like anything I had seen or thought of or even been told existed. I had no knowledge of what was going on in New York at that point. I'd been to New York a few times, but to tell you the truth, the city intimidated me. After all, I grew up on a farm. So I finished up this four-year school, but it had no degree attached. A lot of the people I knew were starting to leave Pennsylvania, but as I said, I was still too intimidated to go to New York. Sarah Conaway, who lived in the same part of Pennsylvania, had moved to Chicago to do her graduate degree at UIC. So during that last year

in Pennsylvania, I started going to Chicago fairly regularly, and eventually decided to move there.

PG What years are we talking here?

SR Mid-'90s to late '90s. So I wound up going to Chicago for a number of years to finish up my undergraduate degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. That's basically where I met all of my art friends. I tried to have a studio and exhibit in Chicago, but to be quite honest, it was a downhill battle for me. Around that time, I wound up buying a copy of that Schimmel book. That catalog made it seem like there was something pathological coming from California that made more sense for me. I had never been there, I really didn't know what it was like, but I knew I did not want to go to New York. So I got into Art Center and moved out here blindly, not knowing what to expect. But once I got here, I started to meet everybody—Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Richard Hawkins, Ann Goldstein, Chris Williams, Lawrence Rickles, Diana Thater, all of them. And then later on, I met Chris Burden and Nancy Rubins and Barbara Krueger. LA just made sense to me.

PG Do you think LA's still that city?

SR Speaking specifically from a student's perspective, I don't think it is quite the same anymore. I think it's much different than it was in the early 2000s, and I think it was much different then than it was in the 1990s. There was such a trajectory with the schools: at that time, mid-'90s to 2000s, everybody was still teaching. Chris Burden and Nancy Rubins were at UCLA, Mike Kelley and Liz Larner were at Art Center. There were still people teaching at CalArts, and USC was just starting to get their program together. LA still had a very strong teacher-student ratio. Also, compared to anywhere else in America, LA had a generational history of working artists teaching, and the students would graduate, become working artists and then teach, then that generation of students would graduate and then teach. So you could look at this lineage between John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, Jason Rhodes, Sharon Lockhart—I mean, all of those artists were students of someone at one point in time, and then they became teachers. But I don't think it's that way anymore.

PG No, nobody wants to starve anymore! It's funny, because I always considered you the first LA artist who wasn't jaded. For example, when I first arrived here and was looking for those gods—Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Chris Burden—I had this naïve idea about arriving at this Olympus. But then I realized that these guys were really on the street, available for everybody. None of them had this status as an artist; even now, people don't talk about Paul like he's a Master—they just say, "Oh, that's weird." But I considered you the first artist in LA who had his own consciousness, and who understood the role of the artist as more than just a privilege. Today, you have all of these kids who come here because they have seen someone like Sterling Ruby, and they believe that if you come to LA, that's what you're going to get. It's a package. But you always saw it as a social duty, a role with real and lasting implications.

SR During the last year that Mike taught at Art Center, we were pretty close. I was his teaching assistant, and he was still going out—like, if a student had a party, he'd go to the party. But that last year, something changed for him, and I started to see him get more paranoid about his success. He started to have more anxiety about going out in public. I was with him on a number of occasions where he'd be out in public, and someone would come up to him and start

criticizing him, or start implicating him as having done something—stealing craft from feminist history, or whatever else. I would be out with him, and someone would just come up and start shit with him. That last year, we'd go out alone, like to a bar in Eagle Rock or something, and I could tell he was starting to think about his success as an artist in a different way. He still held the obligation for the people that were loyal to him and that he was friends with, but he was very anxious about the idea of opening himself up to too many people, and to the public perception of what the LA art scene was starting to become. I'd just come from this small school in Pennsylvania, and we'd never talked about being an artist as a career, or about galleries—you'd talk about having a job illustrating for a wildlife catalog, or you might illustrate for a greeting card company, but there was never any discussion of becoming a working artist. I suppose there was really no chance of that happening in Pennsylvania. And then Chicago had such a DIY mentality, there was no structure to it. The artists did everything on their own—most of the shows that we did were in garages or apartments. There were a couple of galleries in Chicago, but for the most part I had no chance whatsoever of showing with any of them. LA was different: it had a system. I'm sure New York did too, but LA had this infrastructure of galleries and working artists. I didn't automatically think that I was bound to be an exhibiting artist when I moved to LA. I still had the baggage of Pennyslvania and Chicago with me. It wasn't until later, when Mike or Chris would explain things to me in depth, that I learned about galleries, sales, museums and curators. Those two were the ones who opened my eyes to the notion that being an artist has responsibilities beyond just making art.

PG It's funny: when you look at Chris' work, you imagine him as somebody living a parallel reality. But then I met him and realized that no, he was completely aware and sentient. He'd remember who you were and know what you're doing. He was incredibly conscious. In LA, the recognition of other artists is what makes your name.

SR Yes. Strangely enough, the perception of Chris and Nancy is that they were outsiders. When you looked at most of those artists in "Helter Skelter," you had the sense that they were all pathologically insane. But then when you really got to know them, at least from my perspective, artists like Chris and Nancy or Mike and Emi [Fontana] became almost like parental figures. They were very logical. They gave me the best advice and helped me navigate what was to come.

PG They represent this LA thing: two young artists who fall in love and gain their fame in the street. But it's not like that anymore. Now, I feel like people in LA reveal too much of the game, you know? Art is not something you can set rules for, and yet everyone here seems to know what they are, and they follow them.

SR Right. The social dynamic of being an artist has definitely changed for me. I have a hard time going to openings, or to artist parties or dinners now.

PG I'm somebody who loves people, I love the art, but I can see the difference. Sometimes I think you get to the point where you realize, this isn't really a party, this is an event. These people aren't here to enjoy each other, they're here to make connections.

SR It's almost like a conference, in a weird way.

PG Exactly. Something has changed completely, and I don't know if it's LA or everywhere. When I first came to LA fifteen years ago, you'd have your weekend

calendar—for Friday, Saturday, Sunday, you'd drive through the hills, and you'd have barbecues everywhere, a party on every block. LA was this joyful place. It's not like that anymore. Now, everything's an event. People say, "I'm having a launch for a magazine at my house." And I say, "Oh, it'd be better if you were having a lunch for a magazine at your house!"

SR (laughs)

PG Now everything's always a give and take. Artists don't give a fuck about what other artists do. But that's important: you need to know what's going on in the universe. There is no idea of continuity anymore. Everyone is more interested in cutting himself off—not only from other artists, but also from history.

SR That's without a doubt true. I think in general, something is different—not bad, not good, just different—about the way our world has been changed over the past ten years. I think, for me, one of the most frustrating things I experience now is that a lot of the artists I meet don't actually look at art. They go to a gala, a launch, an opening—what you're deeming is more like a business party—and they don't look at anything. They exchange numbers and ask very particular questions about art as if it were an industry.

PG Like when you walk up to an artist and ask about a piece, and his answer is, "That's an edition of six." It's not about the thing itself.

SR Right—that's the logistic of it, but that's not it. I feel like that's increasingly more of an issue—that it's not about looking at work, or talking about work, that for a lot of artists it's become this conventionalized aspect of networking. And I find that to be disheartening. I also don't have a lot of time anymore. I have three kids, I have a family, I have the studio, so I have to feel good about how I spend my time.

PG But it's interesting: you said you have three kids, a family, and a studio. People cannot see your face when you say "the studio," but it's very funny, because there's no change of expression. You talk about your studio like a living entity, and it's not that you're saying they're equally important—it's that there's no shift in your animation. Whenever I come here, I feel that in your life, there's never been any line. The studio is a physical place, of course, but then I come to your house, and the laundry bag is a Sterling Ruby bag. You start to think there is no line.

SR I think reassessing the idea of the studio now is really interesting. I think that looking at history, artists have always found autonomy in being able to take refuge in the studio. It's a place to hide. And I think that it's true—I think the studio over time has become more of a living entity for me. Over time, I have let certain things go, allowed other people manage the logistics of it. I have people who've been working in the studio for ten years, so there is a trust in the way it operates, in who oversees certain aspects of the operation, and that has given me the time and freedom to simply think about my art. This idea of autonomy in the studio is increasingly important to me. This idea that the studio is this unrestricted, expansive zone. Over the years, the studio has become a physical mirror of my personality, and while I'm working in the studio, I can feel at ease with the quirks in my personality that I don't feel at ease with in public, or in some social scenario.

PG The other day I was talking to someone about the problem—and I'm going to use a word that's so unfashionable—with capitalist society. Under the new consumerist model there is a massification process of what used to be elite, everybody wants an iPhone, a Porsche, a mansion, and they want to sell art to everybody as another luxury item. For many artists, there's a problem in this, because some work cannot be multiplied. You need Cy Twombly to paint a Cy Twombly. Sometimes you see artists where you think, "He must have been so busy networking in order to get the show that he probably didn't even mix the paint." But your work is a different example, multiplication is a fundamental aspect of the work, if that's the right word.

SR We could call it that, but I think a better word is "seriality." I don't just make one of one thing.

PG Normally, when we think of seriality, we lose the element of preciousness, but not so in your work. When I look at my "Vampire," I'm joyful and proud, even though I know there's many other vampires. I don't know why, but there's something behind the work, where you can always see the gesture of the painter—the weird moves of Cy Twombly's hand that nobody can copy. You're able to move through serialization without losing the touch. I can look and I know it's a Sterling Ruby.

SR Thanks, that's very sweet. I think this is something that is a bit of an issue right now, and I hope it will be more understood over time. I think it's hard, since the YBA movement, for curators, the public, whoever, to understand the idea of repetition that is not production-oriented. It's an interesting thing to think about the historical precedence of artist personalities who were manic—artists who couldn't stop making work. But something has happened to how people view artists who make work like that today. We could say that this is a Warhol analysis. Warhol was primarily making things by hand in the studio. Yes, he had a legion of assistants, and the Factory was in fact a factory, but it was still being made by hand. But I think that what has happened is that the idea of repetition as a manic scenario changed post-YBA movement. You could look at someone like Bruce Nauman, or Vito Acconci, their videos from the late '60s/early '70s—these artists were making work about manic repetition because it was a personality trait. It was like a schizophrenic tendency; they couldn't stop making the same works over and over again. It had less to do with this notion of a finite end result than with a drive to produce. That idea, I think, really got lost post-YBA. Now, people only look at repetition through "high production," when things get displaced from the studio to be made in these larger production scenarios. I like the notion of seriality because for me, it is derived out of this social or pathological definition of "serial." I don't think that people get my idea of seriality—to look at it from the perspective that "too much is being made" is missing the point. That criticism is off; they're not understanding that my routine is to embrace my manic personality traits. I am making something over and over and over again, until it lapses into something else, or you see a variation on a theme. But honestly, I don't really give a fuck what people have to say about it anymore. I have developed a system for myself that allows me to work directly within my own pathology. My work and the abundance of it comes from an internal drive. I can't imagine working without my bi-polar disposition.

PG Yes and no, because while there is a repetition that you can do by hand that saves what's essential, sometimes you lose it. Think of a chef now: in the old time, you'd be in the kitchen and one day you'd open your own restaurant where you'd be in the kitchen with everyone else. Today, you need to open three restaurants, because if you don't have at least

three they say your business won't be recognizable. So our chef's so busy keeping the three restaurants open, that he can't cook anymore. What's always been interesting to me is that you find a way to keep on cooking everyday. Even as I saw the building growing, the objects multiplying, the people multiplying, I still felt like nothing had changed. You can go from the handmade craft (if you want to use that word) to the industrially produced piece for a company, and it's always same quality. That's fascinating to me.

SR I think that the way a work is produced is always important.

PG But say it's a knife that cuts badly, to the point where it's non-functional. Is it still a knife? Or does it become something else?

SR I think it just depends. If the function of the knife is the primary goal of the object, then it has to cut. But if the idea of the knife is a representation of a knife, or if the aim is to somehow relay something knife-like, then it doesn't matter. It still remains a knife, but maybe it's not a utilitarian object. I don't think that anything I've ever made was solely functional. I've said before that I value the ideology of the Bauhaus movement, that I like this idea of non-hierarchical things, particularly in the studio. But I don't think I have ever made anything just to be functional.

PG When you say "functional," would you waste the same time on a painting as in designing a pen?

SR Yeah, as a matter of fact, the things that have to be translated to a different kind of production for somebody else to make, can take just as much time.

PG And for you, a pen is as important as a painting?

SR: Within the studio boundaries, in the way I think about things, there's no hierarchy. But I know that I can't control the things that I make once they leave the studio and inevitably get broken down into levels of importance.

PG But while it's in your control, every object gets the same attention.

SR Yes. Let's take the "Stoves," for example. The functioning stoves went through a couple different design phases. I was very excited about the idea of making a fully functioning stove as a utilitarian sculpture, but from a theoretical tangent, I associated them with my own autobiography. The pre-production process did take longer to make than, say, a painting or a collage—I had to sit down, do drawings, have engineering documents made, research material and run multiple tests just to get it to be a functioning object, so that they could be reproduced as an edition. So again, in the studio, there's no hierarchy, no difference in the attention given to one thing or another. But when the work leaves, I do worry that it takes on these different levels of importance. Nevertheless, I actually think that by my doing what I do in the studio, by my leveling the importance or hierarchy of my output, it actually breaks down the barriers. From an activist's standpoint, the idea that I'm introducing things like garments or dishware as art—coming from me, from the studio, things that might not be seen as precious or cost as much as a painting—this is actually an interventionist's stance by myself to delineate these ideas of hierarchy out in the world. I know for a fact that I have no real power over what happens to my work once things leave the studio. I've tried. I thought there were ways I could regulate it, ways I

could fuck with it, but I can't. I absolutely can't. It's beyond my control. But what I can do is continue to introduce things into the world that, in my vision, have no hierarchy, things that are accessible to people who can't either house a sculpture or a painting or even more importantly are cost prohibitive. These are my ways of intervening with a system that I can't control.

PG People always say, "Oh, Sterling Ruby's this super smart guy who's always known how to make the right decision." But I think you made all the wrong decisions, and no matter what, you're still standing. There's always people who love you and who really hate you, but I never hear that about you. You have a very strong presence in the market, and everybody's telling you, "If you want to be smart, you should keep making the same expensive paintings." Instead, you've done it all wrong—which I mean in a positive way. It hasn't mattered—it still works in the market. Like I said, I think it's because the poetics of the work completely validate this kind of production. There have been other artists who've tried—I don't want to be mean, so I won't name names—but I think they often fall short.

SR Thank you, Piero, for making sense of my decision making!

PG Then there's the materials. You use a lot of different materials—the marble, the metal scraps, things fabricated—but there's always an aesthetic continuity. You know it's a Sterling Ruby. What's interesting, though, is that you spend the same amount of time on a scrap as you do on something you've had fabricated. How did you start slowly creating this stable of materials?

SR I don't think there's just one lineage in why I use the materials I do. Sometimes the materials are extremely cheap—just recycled scraps—and in some cases, things are polished. I like to think that all materials have either a physical or a theoretical association of archaeology.

PG But another word you used was "archaeology." I think this is the key to describing the process.

SR You have to dig it up. The notion of archaeology is that it's something that was there previously, that ceased to exist, got laid to rest; and then the archaeology of it, the process of it, is to dig it up and reassess over time. I think that archaeology is the perfect studio process for me. I go back and approach older work, or work that I'm thinking about doing now, or work I might potentially do in the future. There's this lineage that's like a dig site. I also think about this idea of archaeology as a monument process, the creation of an object or relic to commemorate something lost.

PG I recognize the same people at the studio. Maybe sometimes the wrong choices are the right choices. Like in the moment you were changing on the market interface, you were still investing in the "factory" mode of working. So I think all those choices function towards a bigger thing—a goal that is the work. And again, you're still standing.

SR I like the pack mentality of the studio, having all these people around me, these ambitions. For a long time now, I've had dealers, other artists, even friends tell me, "Don't expect it to last." I feel very fortunate to be where I'm at right now; I feel very free. I actually don't feel like I have any real "art" obligations, which is liberating. I really don't do anything that I don't want to do anymore. Maybe I did at one point, but now I recognize that if I make choices based on somebody else's demands, it's not going to be right. I still have anxiety—I assume I always

will—but I'm in a different place now. If we have to look at what's at my essence, as a person or as an artist, there is anxiety and paranoia. Maybe it's important for me to know that I will always feel this way, but to be able to make choices that challenge the very core of my anxiety and paranoia.

PG It's important, I think, because sometimes you're an artist where everyone says, "I love you, love you, love you." But sometimes you're standing among the tigers. And when you're with the tigers, you're the only one. You're liable to die.

SR Yes, and sometimes you don't even know who the tigers are.

PG Do you think artists deserve something more, because they're fighting for their life?

SR I think that it is essential for artists to maintain constant survivalism. The idea of survival is a primitive thing for an artist. Maybe not all artists feel that way, but I know you feel that way, and I know that I do, too. The idea of surviving is almost an animal instinct. I think we've both tried to be strategic with things, to make the right decisions, even when we knew they would piss people off, decisions that were relatively "fuck you" to the enterprise that we work within. But seriously, the reality of an artist's day to day, of making work and putting work out into the world, is kind of crazy. There has to be a kind of survivalist drive. It's very animal.