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The high art, high fashion world of Sterling Ruby

With his invite to Paris haute couture week, the artist occupies a unique space in the fashion world

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Artist and designer Sterling Ruby © Melanie Schiff

The contemporary artist-cum-fashion designer Sterling Ruby doesn't conform to the stereotypes of either. Aged 49, he is affable, smiling and warm. His art pieces, produced over a 16-year career, challenge the slick, cynical surfaces of much contemporary work with a predilection for craft — ceramics, dribbly paint and collaged textiles he calls “soft sculpture”.

Sterling broke further from the conventions of high art with the 2019 launch of his own clothing label, SR STUDIO LA CA. His clothes are unusual, scribbled with pattern and dyed or bleached like his trademark vast, spray-painted canvases. What they certainly don't resemble is haute couture, fashion's most storied and venerable echelon dominated by the likes of Chanel and Dior, who create six-figure, hand-embroidered ball gowns for a minute moneyed global elite (estimated, generously, at 1,000 worldwide).

Yet Ruby has been invited to present as part of Paris haute couture week, which begins on January 25. “It was an honour to be asked,” Ruby states, with pride. His brand is one of only three invitees — the other two are AZ Factory, the new venture of former Lanvin creative director Alber Elbaz, and young designer Charles de Vilmorin, great-nephew of the writer Louise de Vilmorin.

The intention, of course, was to show physically in Paris — a goal Ruby had confessed to me 18 months ago when he debuted his first ready-to-wear collection in Florence. And though his clothes may not look like traditional couture, they share many of the craft’s inherent values, its intricate silhouettes and handworked surfaces — these patched and ruched, some printed with photographs of machinery or melted candles, created by Ruby’s wife, the fine-art photographer Melanie Schiff. Ruby creates a number of one-offs — “our atelier’s bastard version of haute couture,” is his description.

“I’ve worked around enough people and enough large luxury goods houses to know what their couture studios are like,” Ruby says. “We don’t have that, but there’s something else that we have that I believe holds that core value of the atelier — made in-house, that the designer’s hand is on each and every garment.”



Sterling Ruby in his Los Angeles studio © Melanie Schiff

Yet, as with many other fashion houses, Ruby's couture show was not to be. Which is unfortunate — they're important for him. "I like live performance, I equate the viscerality of these moments with the first time that I saw the band Slayer or my first experience watching the choreographer Justin Peck dance," Ruby says.

Ruby's fashion line may be young, but it reflects a long-held fascination. He has been making clothes for himself since he was 13, when his mother first gave him a used Singer sewing-machine, and never drew a line between ideas of "craft" and "art" in his work. He grew up in a rural, right-leaning town in Pennsylvania, where the Amish quilts and redware pottery he encountered both influenced his art.

"There wasn't contemporary art where I grew up, just craft," Ruby says. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena, and was artist Mike Kelley's teaching assistant before going it alone. His rise was swift, his work exciting and multidisciplinary and feted, and he is represented by multiple international galleries, including the global powerhouse of Gagosian and Sprüth Magers in Berlin.

He is collected by major institutions, and influential figures such as Hollywood mega-agent Michael Ovitz and the Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons, now co-creative director of Prada. It was Simons who first brought Ruby into fashion: first, in 2008, to redesign Simons' namesake store in Tokyo, and then for Autumn/Winter 2014, when the two collaborated for a co-branded line that was critically and commercially successful (Simons told me it was one of the best-selling collections of his 25-year career). "Besides the logistics of production, I don't see any difference between making a dress or a sculpture," he says.

As part of his fashion brand, Ruby produces four lines — regular ready-to-wear; garments in limited-edition runs of 50 accordingly labelled ED50; pieces named "SOTO", after the street Ruby's studio is located on, which are made from specially dyed and treated fabric with accordingly small production batches; and the aforementioned one-offs, labelled "Unique". They are executed by the artist himself and are priced accordingly — starting at \$15,000. "The unique pieces have, for the most part, been collected by institutions," Ruby comments. "Some pieces have been acquired by people who are also art collectors. So they see it as the equivalent of an artwork." The same is true of haute couture — most of it is in museums.



Sterling Ruby SS20

Ruby's business figures are under wraps: the brand has a number of wholesalers, mostly "small single-door boutiques who act like galleries," Ruby says. Those include esoteric names such as The Broken Arm in Paris, Mameg in Los Angeles and Blake in Chicago, rather than major department stores. The Canadian ecommerce site Ssense is probably the largest. Ruby also operates his own ecommerce, and allows that direct contact has distinct advantages: since his first show at Pitti Uomo in Florence, the artist has fielded "a number of offers" to either buy into the label or license. "But nothing seems to be right, just yet." He owns 100 per cent of the company.

In lieu of a show, Ruby will be showing his collection as part of couture week digitally — as, indeed, will other houses. Ruby's offering is still being refined — the collection comprises SOTO and Unique pieces, the most expensive and handcrafted. Haute couture is traditionally sold made-to-order only: Ruby's version, in his words, will be "cut-to-order", pre-purchased by customers through a selection of wholesale partners, with a delivery time of four to six months.

This collection is more ambitious and varied in volumes and shapes than his last, which focused on workwear uniforms. Over Zoom, he shows me a huge cocoon coat, a giant fluff-ball with wafting fronds that look like ostrich but are actually yarn, and delicate chiffon dresses with

fringes of loose threads. There are long prairie dresses, hoods and bonnets. The former feel protective; the bonnets, today, seem part plague doctor, part *The Handmaid's Tale*, and that yarn coat is in a check of red, white and blue. Ruby is, of course, affected by the state of the world — especially America — during the past 12 months.

“I was thinking about these nuanced suggestions of what the US was going through and, thinking about the politics of it, alluding to certain things and backing off and trying to make these other associations,” Ruby says. “Responding to the history of the United States, the current political climate, the Trump administration, and the ongoing threat of rightwing anger.”

Some of the photographic prints juxtapose hot rod engines and artificial hearts — a reference to respirator shortages, “the need for machinery to keep people alive,” Ruby says. If haute couture has traditionally been seen as fashion’s escapist fantasy, this is another interpretation entirely — certainly one more akin to fine art.

Ruby’s self-dubbed “California couture” — “where the highest form of fashion intersects with bohemian subculture” — will be presented to press and clients via a digital short film. So will the designs of his couture cohorts, many of whom will employ big-name directors to do that. Ruby is, of course, ideally positioned to create that himself — although he was still shooting and editing the footage a week before his debut was planned.

“I do think it’s been beneficial to me that these things have changed,” Ruby allows. “It’s allowed me to make something digitally that is going to be on the same platform as every other conglomerate or large company. And I get to do it in a way that is like an artist, like putting together an exhibition.”