

i-D

sterling ruby and the apocalyptic nature of los angeles

by Nadja Sayej
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Photography Melanie Schiff. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio

It makes sense – if you live in L.A. -- to create work inspired by the picturesque landscape of the Swiss Alps. Snow is exotic. So exotic, it deserves a whole series of art devoted to snow-capped mountains, hiking trails and The Sound of Music reminiscent valleys. Entitled *MIX PIZ*, Sterling Ruby's new show, which runs until 16 April, includes a broad swath of blood moon-esque brush paintings, yellow sun-coloured ceramics, mountain-inspired collages and a bronze sculpture of a hiker. All in all, it's an ode to the European countryside and the local Swiss tongue, Romansh.

The word "Piz" in the show's title is a Romansh word for "mountains" in the Engadin region, where the gallery resides. "The language is old, ancient, hidden, like it came from before time," explains Ruby. "But it also seems somehow familiar; it feels like a language I might invent. I like how it sounds and looks. But the word 'Piz' really stood out to me. It's the apex, the mount, the peak."

The show came about last year when Ruby was installing his previous solo show at the gallery. He started musing on the history of the region and its landscape, which he

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learned was the very same place Friedrich Nietzsche retreated to develop book ideas while on long hikes in the region. Ruby followed, hiking around the same trails. "I have gone on a number of hikes around Sils Maria, where you can see Nietzsche's summer house," he says. "We can't help but feel like history continues to repeat itself; there is a palpable tension you can feel between the ancient primordial and the intellectual or the cultural."

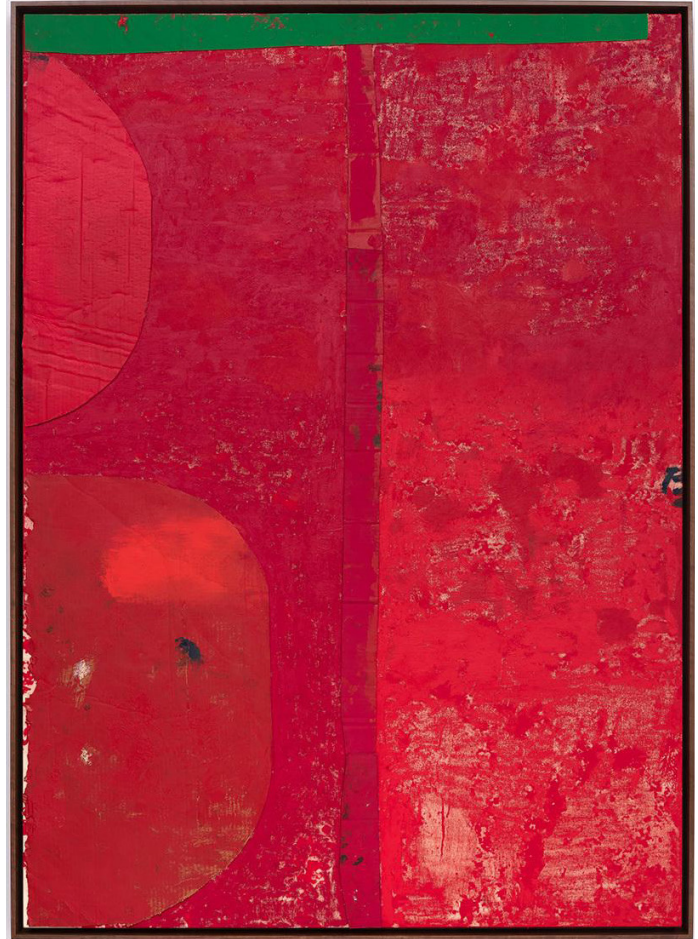
The pieces in the show range from abstract paintings to collages that have jagged peaks that look like mountains. One large bronze sculpture entitled *Modern Hiker* calls to mind the artist in the Engadin's mountainside and *Moonrise/Moonset* is made of two round circles, seemingly looking like two moons in an eclipse. Everything has a witchy, otherworldly feel. "The subject matter for the show started to become archaeological with bones, artefacts," said Ruby. "For this exhibition, I was creating a collection of symbols of astrological omens, eclipses, suns, moons and nature walks."

But beyond the mysticism, maybe Ruby is getting back to his roots? He was, after all, born in Germany to a Dutch mother and an American father before they moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Ruby grew up around Amish farmland, but since the Alps bleeds into Germany, maybe the mountains are a long-lost childhood memory. "I am starting to realise that I am innately drawn to certain places, certain landscapes," he said. "I have fallen for this particular mountain setting, I feel comfortable there."

He has been living in Los Angeles since 2003, but also has a special relationship to Switzerland. "My father is American, he is somewhat of a nomad, always has been," said Ruby. "My first experience of Switzerland was with my father; I remember him taking me along on a side trip to the Alps, while we were visiting my mother's family in the Netherlands."

This nature-filled series is more than what meets the eye, however. "There is something seething beneath the picturesque meadows and above the mountains' majestic peaks," he said.

Just beneath the surface, it's not all postcard landscapes and snow-capped mountaintops—this region near St. Moritz is the second most expensive place in the world to



Sterling Ruby, *HALF TETRAD*, 2017

take a vacation (after New York City).

This ritzy ski town was put on the map by famous guests like Alfred Hitchcock and Charlie Chaplin. Nowadays, celebrities like Robert de Niro, Heidi Klum, John Travolta and even Ivanka Trump have been spotted on ski lifts and dining on fondue at the local chalets. In other words, it's not an accessible tourist hotspot for backpackers to glide on through.

Fur coats are everywhere in St. Moritz, so are Chihuahuas in gold-studded purses. The streets are lined with Gucci boutiques and red carpets are rolled out when art galleries have openings. Everyone drinks champagne. It could be a forerunner of the increasing class divide that Ruby sees at home in America.

He draws a parallel to his artwork *Half Tetrad*, which refers

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to the astrological phenomena of four lunar eclipses within two years. It's not something we'd see every day—it's a prophecy of the apocalypse.

"Maybe it's a bit easier right now to visualise the end, I would say that people have been predicting the apocalypse for a very long time," he said. "I feel that drive particularly strongly in the locations that I am most drawn to—Los Angeles has it, and so does St. Moritz."



Sterling Ruby, *Modern Hiker*, 2017