



Sterling Ruby

by Alain Elkann
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Portrait of Sterling Ruby
Photo by Melanie Schiff; Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.

Being an artist represents autonomy.

The American artist Sterling Ruby works in a large variety of media including ceramics, painting, drawing, collage, sculpture and video. Proclaimed as one of the most interesting artists to emerge in the twentieth century, and recently as Calvin Klein's latest muse, Ruby's work examines the psychological space where individual expression confronts social constraint. *MIX PIZ* is the title of his show at the Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz, Switzerland, that runs from March 12 to April 16.

Sterling when did you start making art and where did you grow up?

I drew as a kid in Baltimore, where we lived until I was nine. Then we moved to New Freedom in Pennsylvania. My mother was Dutch, my father American.

How did you become an artist?

I started working in construction right after High School. I got a labor job in Washington D.C. But then, around age 20, I got so depressed that my mother said you have to do something with your life that you like. So at 21, I started art school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, drawing figures and

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Installation views, Sterling Ruby, *MIX PIZ*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2017; © Sterling Ruby; Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio and Vito Schnabel Gallery; Photo by Stefan Altenburger

still lifes. It was a very foundational art school, we only read *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. After I graduated, I worked in a sporting goods shop.

When did you understand that you were an artist?

Very early. When I was a child my mother used to take me to visit relatives and we would take day trips to see paintings by Bosch, Rubens, and Van Gogh, the Dutch masters. I didn't think that to be an artist could be a career. After 4 years at art school in Pennsylvania, I still didn't have a degree. A few years after that, I moved to Chicago, and I finished my BA degree. There I also studied philosophy and psychology, and then everything changed. I started to understand that there was a possibility to be an artist for life, or as a life.

Where did you show your first works?

In Chicago. It was easy to show. There were all of these artist-run spaces, all very DIY, there wasn't the idea of dealer/artist or collector relationships at the time. We did shows in apartments and garages.

It then became a career?

I wouldn't have called it a career, not yet anyway. To go back to the school in Pennsylvania, they had a very small library and they had a copy of the *Helter Skelter* catalogue of the exhibition from MOCA in Los Angeles. This book was very significant for me. It completely shifted my understanding of what art could be. After Chicago I went to LA to get my MFA. The desire to go to LA was mostly because of *Helter Skelter*.

Did you live in LA since then?

I have never felt that comfortable in a big city, but I felt OK there because it didn't look like a real city. I found that the work that had been made in Los Angeles in the 80s and 90s was more pathological than in New York.

What happened to you?

In school I was working with artists. Everybody was showing in LA. I became an exhibiting artist. I wasn't very successful. I was doing photography, sculpture, painting, ceramics. I didn't have real success until 2005 when I was in my early 30s. I had a couple of shows in Los Angeles and in Europe. Shortly after that I had a show in LA at MOCA. The curators were Paul Schimmel and Philipp Kaiser, a Swiss curator.

And then something changed in your life?

I had a lot of debt to pay, but after 2005 I saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

What was your art about?

I had this idea that my work was operating between expression and repression, and I wanted my work to represent both. I saw my work as an intermediary between law and crime, old and new, future versus past. I wanted the work to be a balance of these things.

How did it come out?

This is how my head works. My personality and behaviour, it was about two polar extremes. I started to think that the work was a representation of my bipolar personality. The relationship between expression and repression was me.

Did you take a lot of drugs?

Well, yes, I did, mostly ecstasy, before I went to Chicago, and then I stopped...cold turkey.

Has your work changed much over the years?

I make a good bit of work even if things have changed. I see a lineage from everything I have been doing. There are artists who are known for a repetitive kind of gesture, like Bacon or Still, whom I admire greatly, but I have to work with multiple mediums. I am not criticising the singular gesture, but I couldn't just make one kind of painting, one gesture.

Do you have a specific colour that you love?

Red is my favourite colour. I just opened a show in St. Moritz, *MIX PIZ*. There is an all red painting in the show. I did all of the work for the show thinking of this region, the Engadin. I was thinking about the eternal return of Nietzsche, the landscape, the physical act of hiking and walking. In the show, I represent hiking and walking in an abstract way, just the sun and the moon and mountaintops, an inspiration that is very far from Los Angeles where I live.

You seem to be in love with Los Angeles?

I am, but it also has significant problems, like homelessness and earthquakes.

You thought of moving somewhere else?

I have three kids. I am heavily invested there. I would love to live in the mountains, but it is not realistic right now.

So the city is not good for you?

I don't feel comfortable in the congestion of a city. In LA you spend a large part of your day in the car, by yourself. That is good for me because I like the solitude, the space to think. You can't get that feeling in New York, or Paris or Hong Kong.

Colour is very important for you?

Yes it is, and I like the representation and symbolism of colours, like flag colours.

Did you have teachers, models, professors?

I always looked at the Bauhaus as the most significant historical movement. I love Russian Constructivism. I love Vasily Kandinsky, I like Paul Klee, Bernhard Schemmel, Marcel Breuer. They represent a non-hierarchy.

This has to do with your Dutch roots?

Most of my childhood I saw people working. My mother, grandmother and my aunt were sewing. I felt comfortable



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when men and women had tasks. I felt pretty comfortable with sewing and woodwork. When I was in California I had a lot of teachers. I was the teaching assistant for Mike Kelley, some of my other teachers were artists Diana Thater and Richard Hawkins, and theorists Sylvère Lotringer and Dr. Laurence Rickels.

Is there somehow an 'LA School'?

Not so much now. Most artists in the late 90s early 2000s were teaching. There were four colleges where important artists were teaching: UCLA, CalArts, Art Center, where I went, and USC. Nowadays artists don't teach so much anymore.

Do you have to produce a lot of work?

I enjoy doing a lot of shows. It helps me to move through new ideas and new series.

What are you working on at the moment?

A ceramic survey for the Des Moines Art Center, a show at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, and a survey that

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will include painting, sculpture and collage presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

What is the material that you most like to work with?

I don't like one material in particular. I switch from one thing to another because I am restless.

What influences your work?

It can be anything. I like cinema from Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel...to *Blade Runner*. We can talk about this movie industry, such a big industry that one person cannot work without a team, but there are still auteurs that do things on their own. We can talk about dogs like the one you just asked me to draw for you. I like big dogs. I prefer them over small ones. I know a lot about cats. I might even love cats more than dogs. My favourite cats are Russian Blue and Bengal cats. The content of my work can come from anywhere I suppose.

How do you work?

I have a 9 to 5 Monday to Friday routine when I am in LA, and in the weekend I work at home. All the drawings and collages are done at home. I like the difference between the very big space of the studio and the team, versus the house where it is just me working in a small space. I like that my kids are there and sometimes if I leave my work on the table for too long it becomes their work.

Do you work very hard?

Yes, I am pretty obsessive. My family were mainly labourers and I feel comfortable with that work ethic.

All the business that is going on around art bothers you?

I know that regardless of the market I will always be an artist.

What is an artist?

I cannot think of another thing that represents autonomy as well as being an artist.



Installation views, Sterling Ruby, *MIX PIZ*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2017; © Sterling Ruby; Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio and Vito Schnabel Gallery; Photo by Stefan Altenburger



Sterling Ruby drawing a dog
© Alain Elkann; Photo by Alain Elkann



Artist Sterling Ruby and gallerist Vito Schnabel
© Alain Elkann; Photo by Alain Elkann