

One Man, Many Mediums: Sterling Ruby at the ICA

by Julia Barber
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Work by Sterling Ruby at the ICA Boston. (Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio)

Sterling Ruby is like a magpie, picking shiny fragments from myriad artistic and cultural traditions and rearranging them to striking effect. His assemblages are broad in taste, often irreverent, and occasionally quite charming.

The thoughtfully hung survey of Ruby's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art is a great show to argue with: at times compelling, at times vexing. The 20-year retrospective, a first for the artist, allows the viewer to evaluate the artist's wide-ranging career, to decide which of his "illicit mergers" are successful, and which miss the mark.

Ruby's work can best be described as a pastiche or collage. For Ruby, the art-making process entails alchemy: the combination of everyday and unexpected materials with a catalyst to form a product that is greater than its parts.

Ruby has experimented with a staggering range of media: painting and sculpture, ceramics, quilting, welding and collage. Arranged chronologically, the exhibition reveals a larger pattern of an artist in the studio seized by an idea, grabbing blindly for whatever material is at hand.

The completed works are evocatively juxtaposed in the exhibition space, a collage on a larger scale that yields its own insights.

The works at the entrance to the exhibition, a monumental portal flanked by two of Ruby's Stalagmites, are assembled from PVC pipe, foam, wood, and spray paint, and coated in layer upon layer of dripping polyurethane. Though the urethane is dry, the shiny, wet viscosity of the drops, combined with the strong smell, suggests that the work has not finished drying, that it might continue to ooze behind the viewer's back. These works have an immense physical presence: greater than human scale, they exude menace.

My favorite piece, *ACTS/WS ROLLIN*, reflects a more playful approach to the medium. A large rectangular block of clear urethane shot through with striking red dye rests on a defaced gallery plinth. The sinuous ribbons of dye through the urethane catch the eye and refuse to release it, a neat contrast to the dingy pedestal below. Whether an irreverent send-up of the traditional White Cube art gallery model or a curious investigation of the possibilities in commonplace

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material, the piece has a startling beauty in person. It's worth it to walk all the way around every piece you can, as Ruby works in the round and each face of the three-dimensional works reveals something new.



Sterling Ruby, *ACTS/WS ROLLIN* (2011). (Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio)



FIGURES. *PILE*. (6991), (2018) by Sterling Ruby at the ICA. (Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio)

Ruby prefers to interrogate big ideas with everyday tools: *FIGURES. PILE*. (6991), a tortured web of long-limbed bodies in a messy pile on the gallery floor, is sewn from scuffed, cartoonish flag-printed fabric. The figures' hair is made of cheap yarn, their bodies resembling a pile of attenuated dolls carelessly strewn on a child's bed. Ruby's use of mass-manufactured materials points to American exploitation of bodies and resources on the global stage. The message was a bit on the nose, but I was unprepared for the discomfort I felt in front of the piece. I found the grotesque distortions of the limbs and feet, overseen by a pair of fanged mouths dripping blood, profoundly unsettling. There was an uneasy tension between the cuddly softness of the figures and

the frenetic energy of the carelessly pieced flag fabric, the eyeless figures, slumped in exhaustion or despair.

Ruby draws his art historical inspiration from a wide range of geographical and temporal sources, only some of which reflect his own lived experience. His approach to the American flag hails Jasper Johns' encaustic work; his remarkably erotic black and white photographs of muscle-bound men juxtaposed with different sizes and shapes of candles is a clear gesture towards Robert Mapplethorpe. But Johns and Mapplethorpe interrogated American masculinity from the perspective of queer Americans living on the knife's edge of tolerance: for me, without this charge, Ruby's experiments lose some of their sting.

Many pieces in Ruby's *Flag* series incorporate chopped-up pieces of his antique quilt collection, most sewn by Amish craftspeople from Ruby's childhood home, as well as traditional Middle Eastern weavings. The creators of these pieces are not named, or even identified by region. Unlike the branded packaging used alongside the textiles, these pieces lose much of their identity when they are fragmented. Often, I found myself wondering exactly how much significant transformation these images and ideas had undergone. Some pieces were successful; others, less so. But the exhibition is beautiful and provoking, and that alone is worth the visit.

The thoughtfully curated show presents viewers with a series of puzzles to contemplate. What does this work hide or reveal about the artist himself -- and does it matter? What artistic and cultural traditions are his to explore? Are other artists' pieces transformed by inclusion in Ruby's work? I left the exhibition with these vexing questions, and days later I'm no closer to making up my mind. I found some of Ruby's pieces tremendously compelling, while others left me disappointed. It's Ruby's willingness to try any medium and draw from any source that yields these successes: his scattershot approach is charming in its audacity, even when it doesn't work.



FLAG/QUILT (6625), (2018). (Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio)