

## The Boston Globe

### Sterling Ruby's dirty hands, heady work at the ICA

by Murray Whyte  
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Sterling Ruby's "ACTS/WS ROLLIN", from 2011. Robert Wedemeyer

The ghostly, glistening beauty of Sterling Ruby's new show at the Institute of Contemporary Art begs a question, right from the start: Should we buy the line – artist as outsider, rebel with a cause? That's harder than it used to be, and not for just for Ruby's ascendant career. With the art world turning inside-out in recent years – simmering with social critique-infused form, history interrogated for the narrow tale it is – Ruby, through no fault of his own, now lands awfully close to the center.

Does that make him an inside-outsider? You've got me there. But it's the prolific, polymathic artist's first full-blown career survey, a joint effort between the ICA and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (it opened there in the fall before coming here). Gathering up a sampling of two decades of work across every media but video (though he makes those, too), "Sterling Ruby" unravels a life's work of intuitive, visceral craftiness.

He's an interesting guy: Born on an American military base

in Germany and raised in Pennsylvania Amish country, Ruby, 48, started working with his hands as a kid and never really stopped. That positioned him nicely for contemporary art's rising interest in the handmade in the early part of the 21st century, after so many years of heady video (think Matthew Barney), conceptual photography (think Jeff Wall) and manufactured-looking work (try not to think of Jeff Koons; you can't). But that was less a strategy than a compulsion, driven as Ruby was by a manic material curiosity. He was, from the start, relentless – making this, trying that. The early portion of the show bundles photography, collage, ceramics, drawing, sculpture, and painting. And that's just the first room.

What unites it all is an appealing kind of obstinance – to not be categorized or caged, to embrace high and low as one. The two glossy urethane obelisks at the show's start look like mounds of flesh, stretched and melted (he calls them "Stalagmites"), and they'd be right at home on a David Cronenberg set. (Have you seen "The Brood?") Ceramic

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works look like shimmering entrails, disembodied and metal-plated; "Blue Angel," a viscous arch of fleshy pink and blue, looks like a prop from a sci-fi slasher flick. Ruby's relentless restlessness confounds. On the walls nearby, collages reference everything from H.R. Giger's techno-organic aesthetic from the "Alien" movies to prison architecture.



Sterling Ruby's "Blue Angel", from 2007. Robert Wedemeyer



Sterling Ruby's, "Basin Theology/HELIOS BOAT", from 2019. Robert Wedemeyer

You might get a little lost, though there's something to be said for that. Ruby's practice is rigorous but not disciplined, principled on working things out along the way. He's governed by urge, following where his interest leads. (Many of the pieces here were cobbled from failed experiments, reclaimed from the studio scrap heap and repurposed when inspiration struck.) The show feels less expository – A to B to C – than a tumble into Ruby's hectic, overactive mind.

That could leave you feeling unmoored if not for the unrelenting stream of eye candy the artist puts forward, room

after room after room. There's endless satisfaction in the tension between beauty and terror, attraction and repulsion; for Ruby it seems imprinted in his DNA. His "Basin Theology" works, huge, shimmering ceramic vessels filled with lumps and shards from various failed experiments, are gorgeous, sensual, and abject; they feel almost cosmic, the proverbial dustbins of history. But they're also bodily, with certain forms looking organlike and moist, like something freshly killed.



Sterling Ruby's, "ZEN RIPPER", from 2008. Robert Wedemeyer

Careful, though. Ruby may project the air of an intuitive savant, but there's deep intention here. An irregular grid of small abstract paintings from 2009 shuck their anodyne nature with a blunt, dire warning: They're stamped with bright orange labels that read "PELICAN BAY," after the notorious maximum security prison in California. Their mute stains of green, gray, and red shift from placid to urgent; violence, suddenly, abounds.

You'll see Ruby slipping into what now feels like standard practice: Skewering the old to make way for the new. A pair of blocky, monumental forms ("Big Grid/DB Deth" and "ZEN RIPPER" from 2008) evoke the bleak purity of classic 1960s Minimalism, which he's defaced and defiled with spray paint and crude inscriptions. (Is he saying, "Screw you, Modernism!" That's how I read it.)

These gestures feel pulled straight from the canon-rebuffing playbook, latest edition. The preciousness of Minimalism denied meaning, declaring material and form both a means and an end (standard-bearers like Carl Andre and Dan Flavin imagined their work to be "objective," as if that were possible). Though it helps that Ruby was among those who wrote that playbook, muddying up its purity with his gleefully filthy hands. Two blocks of urethane (from his ACTS series), clouded with pigment from within, offer maybe his gutsiest, most powerful retort: They're sleek and crisp, gruesome and abject all at once.

Ruby can be heavy-handed when implicating his forebears.

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A series of steel-pipe-and-rebar sculptures surely reference Donald Judd, a Minimalist godfather whose career retrospective opened at MoMA this week. Where Judd's steel sculptures – most famously, boxes repeating in sleek formation, as though from an assembly line – made a refuge of purity, Ruby's carry a social stain: They sure look like guns to me. The fact that he made them while a resident at Judd's Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, says a lot about where the artist's mind rests on purity, period.

This can all feel like inside baseball, surely, but here comes Ruby's inevitable defense: You don't have to know a thing about art to be wobbled by the sheer presence of things here. "ACTS/WS ROLLIN," a yellowing slab of urethane perched on a grubby, graffitied block of formica, contains trapped tendrils of red, curling like smoke, looking like blood. Behind the guns (a.k.a. his "MS" series of sculptures) hangs "FLAG/QUILT," from 2018, a tableau of black denim spattered with rivers of bleach; it's bordered with lovingly stitched quiltwork, making it feel homey and cosmic all at once. For Ruby, that feels about right – thinking big thoughts, lashed tightly to the ground. Ruby will always be an artist happiest with his hands dirty, no matter how far out he gets.



Sterling Ruby's, "FLAG/QUILT", from 2018. Robert Wedemeyer

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At the Institute of Contemporary Art, 25 Harbor Shore Drive, through May 26. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)