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Go See Sterling Ruby's Giant Sculptures at the Nasher

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The Los Angeles-based artist creates on a massive scale.

by Natalie Gempel



Last night's opening reception was a first for the Nasher Sculpture Center; the museum set a piece of artwork aflame. Sterling Ruby's *STOVE*, 2013, radiated warmth and woody perfume through the garden, a rustic counterpart to the slender, shiny patio heaters burning a few yards away.

The massive furnace, one of 28 large-scale works that comprise *Sterling Ruby: Sculpture*, is the most literal example of the artist's interest in functionality as an aesthetic. Raised in rural Pennsylvania by an American father and a Dutch mother, Ruby's upbringing in a culture of crafts and utilitarianism

permeates his work. His practice includes everything from collage to ceramics to clothing to photography to painting. That Bauhausian sensibility, paired with astute social commentary and a keen eye for minimalism, has made Ruby one of the art world's most prolific stars. He has a place in many of the world's most prestigious collections, including the Guggenheim, MOMA, Whitney, Tate Modern, Centre Georges Pompidou, and L.A.'s Hammer Museum.

The Nasher's survey—the first museum exhibition dedicated to Sterling Ruby's sculpture—gives a small taste of the artist's vast body of work. (It's worth noting that about half of the exhibition is on loan from local collections, while the other half comes from Ruby's humongous studio in the industrial city of Vernon, California.) In the entrance gallery, you'll find a few ceramic pieces—huge, thickly glazed basins filled with broken shards from previous projects. The main gallery is the meatiest, with several giant poured urethane sculptures on display. There is plenty of room to walk around and inspect them from every angle (make sure to look inside *The Cup*). The idea of frozen gestures—lingering drops of glassy urethane on plywood, the grip of hands on once-supple clay—is prevalent.

His soft sculptures, shown in the downstairs gallery, have a similar tactile appeal. A grid of a quilt hangs on the back wall, sculpted by its own weight. On the floor, a plush candlestick lays on its side with a lifeless flame.

Ruby began working with fabric as a teenager, using a sewing machine gifted by his mother to make clothing for himself; something that he says got him beat up in school. That early interest not only created a lasting impact on his sculptural practice, it also thrust him into fashion and pop culture. The artist is a frequent collaborator with Raf Simons, who hired him to design the soon-to-be-closed Calvin Klein flagship in New York, among countless other projects.

That may be the most impressive thing about Sterling Ruby—not that he's able to take mediums traditionally associated with crafts and prove their place in fine arts, but that he's able to make them simultaneously luxurious and gritty, ordinary and alien, sexy and troubling. He's at the pinnacle of the art world, but he has an outside perspective, and that maintains the cool factor.

Sterling Ruby: Sculpture is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center February 2 through April 21. Opening day coincides with the museum's Free First Saturdays, with free admission from 11 a.m. – 5 p.m. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Nasher is presenting *Foundations: Sterling Ruby*, a selection of works from the permanent collection which relate to Ruby's practice.