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Lurid but fascinating sculptures fill Sterling Ruby's exhibit at the Nasher

<https://www.dallasnews.com/arts/visual-arts/2019/03/15/lurid-fascinating-sculptures-fill-sterling-rubys-exhibit-nasher>

Los Angeles-based artist Sterling Ruby enjoys transforming a wide range of materials into diverse and raucously grand artworks.

By Matthew Bourbon

At 47, Ruby has tried his hand at nearly every medium you could imagine, including paintings, ceramics, sculpture and video. In his current exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Ruby's aesthetic polymorphism is firmly on display.

In his Instagram-ready work *The Cup*, Ruby offers a giant vessel densely encrusted over the entire surface with bloody red tendrils.

The artwork sits in a partial pour by the exterior window of the Nasher Sculpture Center, luring the attention of the outside spectator as it exudes a half-seductive and half-repellent quality. It's a resplendent, operatic and unnerving object.

Reflective and intensely shiny from layers of poured urethane, it suggests a prop from a horror film fixated on viscera. The meaty violence of the grotesque, corded drippings is undercut by the undeniable attractiveness of the material sheen.

This is not art that is meant to be comfortable; instead it aims to jar one's sensibilities. When looking inside the tilted cup, we gaze upon a deep maroon fluid that makes one feel trapped in some fairy tale about to turn darkly and horribly wrong.



Sterling Ruby, *The Cup*, 2013, foam, urethane, wood and spray paint, 92 x 115 ½ x 88 in. (Nan Coulter)

As with much of Ruby's art, *The Cup* feels like a macabre and slightly goofy meditation on death.

In *Time Machine*, Ruby constructs a dimensional grid reminiscent of the artist Sol Lewitt, but with an attitude decidedly unlike the restrained and refined art of Minimalism. Ruby's cube structure feels more like it was made by a teenage backyard skateboarder; it is constructed of cheap lumber and emblazoned with bright orange phrases including "The Past Has Cheated Me ..." and "The Present Torments Me"

These disaffected expressions written underneath a resin-soaked surface leads one to wonder whose voice is speaking and if we share the sentiments expressed. It has been purported that *Time Machine* is "about" the prison system, but like other works in this show, the psychological impact feels more urgent than any larger social commentaries attributed to the artwork.

The inherent contradictions within this graffiti-marked object give a lasting impression of something funny and serious — reckless and committed. Through all his punchy and slightly juvenile humor, Ruby seems to use this boxy structure as a way to wonder whether we are trapped by our limited sense of time and the predictable ways in which we narrate our lives.



Sterling Ruby's *Trough*, from 2014, suggests a bronze bed or ancient sarcophagus. (Nan Coulter)

In *Trough*, another transformation takes place. What was initially a simple, utilitarian studio tool to catch the urethane used to make other sculptures has been refashioned, becoming a stunning comment about our desire to monumentalize our lives.

The shape of this artwork suggests a bed or ancient sarcophagus. The golden-hued surface feels like a fossil preserved in a patina of bronze and welded seams. It speaks of the act of creation and the perhaps immature human impulse to mark the world — to say out loud "I have lived, and here is the proof of my existence."

It almost imitates the quasi-spiritualism of the artist trickster Joseph Beuys, combined with the grave ambitions of Anselm Kiefer. In Ruby's hands, this marriage is less serious, proving a perfect marker of



Sterling Ruby's *Basin Theology* suggests a gigantic ashtray filled with puzzling objects. (Nan Coulter)

our age, where the earnest is regularly destabilized by the preposterous.

Such contradictory intentions are also present in other works, like Ruby's large ceramic graveyards entitled *Basin Theology* and his soft fabric works such as *Laying Figure*. In the large ashtray-like ceramics, the artist uses discarded clay remnants as bones within the larger receptacle. Glazed in bright colors, they feel like witches' cauldrons, cartoon-colored by Matt Groening. The parts inside are unknown in their purpose but seem familiar as basic shapes, ersatz bones or rudimentary tools.

As with nearly all the other works in the exhibition, the basins are metaphorical containers of art production and resting places for the leftover or dead, like the unfortunate people frozen in the volcanic ash of Pompeii or Herculaneum. In the giant supine throw

pillow *Laying Figure*, Ruby creates another laughable aside to his usual ruminations on death.

The dirty-gold fabric is stuffed through a black zipper cavity running on the torso of the sculpture. It's as if a child of giants performed an autopsy upon a sculptural mummy. With a slight nod to his Los Angeles home, the figure also reads as a tumbled Academy Awards statue — a mute, beaten and puffy prize for our absurd age.

Matthew Bourbon is a painter, art critic and a professor of art at the University of North Texas. His latest exhibition, [Waiting For Now](#), is at the Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas, until May 18.



Sterling Ruby's *Laying Figure*, from 2013. (Nan Coulter)

Details

Sterling Ruby: Sculpture runs through April 21 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. 214-242-5100. nashersculpturecenter.org