

# Sterling Ruby

## Teaching Resource

*Sterling Ruby: Sculpture* | February 2 – April 21, 2019

### About Sterling Ruby

Artist Sterling Ruby (born 1972) works in a wide variety of media, including ceramics, installation, textiles, painting, collage, sculpture, and video. Ruby's work is influenced by punk, graffiti, hip-hop culture and sometimes addresses themes such as the prison system, poverty, globalization, and urban decay.

Ruby was born on an American military base in Germany and was raised in New Freedom, Pennsylvania. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, where he was a teaching assistant for artist Mike Kelley. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

### Ceramics

*"Once fired... clay becomes a kind of monument to its prior malleability or expression. As soon as it hits the kiln, it takes on the status of what once was and it becomes a truncated or frozen gesture."* – Sterling Ruby

Sterling Ruby started making ceramics while he was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After discussing clay with his friends in the Art Education program and taking a free-form ceramics class, he became interested in the raw, primal forms people made in clay when they were given no instructions. Ruby says his own ceramic work has "kept pretty close to those original kinds of forms discovered during this class."

- When you work with clay, what kinds of forms do you naturally create?
- Look for other works in the Nasher collection that look like they were made from clay. Where do you see evidence of the artist's gestures?

### Basin Theology

In his *Basin Theology* series, Ruby creates large ceramic basins that he fills with broken pieces of other ceramics that exploded in the kiln. The artist considers this a way to salvage the time he has put into failed attempts at artmaking. The term "basin theology" comes from a Christian school of thought that focuses on humility and service, as seen in the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in a basin of water.

- What do you do with work that you are not satisfied with?
- How could you incorporate parts of these artworks into a new work of art?

### Urethane

As described in the quotation above, Sterling Ruby became interested in how clay, when fired, became a "frozen gesture" that transformed a malleable material into a solid, permanent sculpture. Ruby was able to take this concept of a frozen gesture to a monumental scale using poured urethane, which is a two-part polymer material that can be poured as a liquid but hardens quickly into a solid due to a chemical reaction. Some of Ruby's urethane sculptures include forms that are typically made from ceramics, like cups or mortars and pestles.

- How does a static work like *The Cup* show movement?
- As a group, brainstorm a list of materials that could be used to create a "frozen gesture." Think of media that may begin as fluid and workable, but can be hardened into a permanent form. Choose a material and create a proposal for a sculpture that captures the material's original state in a frozen gesture.



Sterling Ruby



*Basin Theology/2C-T-XX*, 2013. Ceramic, 23 1/2 x 51 1/2 x 43 in. The Rachofsky Collection. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.



*The Cup*, 2013. Foam, urethane, wood, and spray paint, 92 x 115 1/2 x 88 in. Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.

## Social Justice

Sterling Ruby's first exhibition after graduate school was titled *SUPERMAX*, and used the minimalism of the gallery space to comment on the sometimes dehumanizing minimalism of architecture in institutions like hospitals, schools and prisons. A number of Ruby's works relate directly to the prison system and incarceration.

- How can artists draw attention to issues that matter to them? What are you passionate about?

### *Big Yellow Mama*

In *Big Yellow Mama*, Ruby has created a modern, geometric sculpture that mimics the shape and color of an electric chair used by the state of Alabama from 1927 – 2002. The original Yellow Mama chair was built by an inmate in 1927 and was painted using leftover yellow highway stripe paint from the State Highway Department.

- What were your first impressions when viewing this artwork? What associations do you have with the color and the title? How do these contrast with the history of the object that inspired the artwork?

Ruby has said that when he first saw Yellow Mama, it reminded him of a cheerful modernist piece of furniture or a Transformer from a Michael Bay film. He struggled to reconcile that impression with the object's past. He was inspired to create a large, public sculpture that "looks innocent and playful and yet it comes from such sinister origins. Making art out of this loaded object," he says, "opens up a whole can of worms."



*Big Yellow Mama*, 2013. Powder coated aluminum, 96 x 56 x 60 in. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio. Photo: Henk Schoenmakers, courtesy Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens.

### *This Generation*

The sculpture *This Generation* is a large geometric form built around an open space containing a tie-dyed fabric cushion. It is painted black and inscribed with the phrases "THIS GENERATION / SICK GENERATION / BAD INCARCERATION GENERATION / STEALTH GENERATION / SUPERMAX GENERATION / LOSS OF INTEREST / ROBO GENERATION / OVER EDUCATION NO EDUCATION GENERATION."

Ruby connects this sculpture to the harsh conditions and labels applied to inmates of what he calls the "prison industrial complex."

- How do we reject or embrace the way others try to label us?
- Building on the title of the sculpture, think about how the media and people from other generations have described your own generation.

Working with a group, come up with a list of phrases both positive and negative that have been applied to people your age. Create an artwork that uses these phrases to create an abstract portrait of your generation.



*This Generation*, 2007. Wood, urethane, spray paint, denim, fabric, and fiberfill, 61 x 94 x 60 in. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.

### *Sightseer*

*Sightseer* is a large Formica and wood sculpture that the artist spray painted black. A teardrop shape is inscribed in the surface at the corner of one of the open squares. It is easy to imagine *Sightseer* as either a wall with small windows or of a face with open eyes. The teardrop could suggest either a cartoon representation of sadness or the tattoo of a prisoner.

- When you look at this form, what does it remind you of? How did the artist humanize an abstract form?
- How might this sculpture relate to the experience of someone inside looking out or outside looking in?



*Sightseer*, 2008. Formica, wood, and spray paint, 96 x 96 x 48 in. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.

### In the Classroom

- As a class, make a list of contemporary social or political issues that matter to students. Take a vote to choose one for everyone to focus on.
- Individually or in small groups, create abstract paintings, drawings, collages or sculptures that relate to different aspects of this issue. Consider Sterling Ruby's use of text.
- Work together to decide how the finished artworks will be installed. Think about how placing objects next to one another may change their meaning or interpretation.
- Collectively decide on a title for your exhibition.

## Soft Sculpture

Sterling Ruby first took up sewing at age 13 when his family moved to rural Pennsylvania. Feeling out of place in the conservative community, he got permission from his parents to go to punk shows in nearby Washington D.C., saying, "I think that's where I began to understand that clothes could be an attitude, whether it was the local hunters in their camouflage and bright orange safety stripes or Henry Rollins on stage in just his gym shorts." He worked on his mother's sewing machine to make his own clothes as a way to express his identity.

### *CANDLE* and *VAMPIRE*

Many of Ruby's artworks build on that history and are sewn from commercial or hand-dyed fabrics then stuffed with fiberfill. The result are forms that appear soft and domestic, like a pillow, while often depicting edgier subject matter.

- Choose a sculpture from Ruby's *CANDLE* or *VAMPIRE* series to focus on. Draw a Venn diagram on a sheet of paper (two circles that overlap in the middle). In one circle, write words that describe a real candle or a traditional vampire. In the other circle, write words that describe the texture and appearance of Ruby's sculpture. In the middle, write words that describe both. How do the material and scale of the sculpture change the viewer's interpretation of a candle or vampire?



*CANDLE (5136)*, 2014. Fabric and fiberfill, 21 1/2 x 21 1/2 x 195 in. Courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio.



LEFT: *VAMPIRE 62*, 2012. Fabric and fiberfill, 84 x 45 x 4 in. Collection of Christen and Derek Wilson. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Sterling Ruby Studio. RIGHT: Sterling Ruby in collaboration with Raf Simons Menswear, Fall 2014.

## Fashion

In 2014, Sterling Ruby collaborated with Raf Simons, who was Creative Director at the fashion label Christian Dior. For the collection, Ruby experimented with fabrics by hand-painting or bleaching them. The finished clothing reflected some of the qualities of his early experiences with punk – making something creative while at the same time working to deface or destroy it.

- What do you wear to express your personal identity or interests?

## Additional Resources

Video: Sterling Ruby pours urethane sculptures in his studio

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjNj5N2iF44>

Video: Sterling Ruby gives a short tour of his studio

<https://www.surface.com/videos/art-studio-visit-sterling-ruby/>

Interview with Sterling Ruby

<http://www.alainekanninterviews.com/sterling-ruby/> Interview with sterling ruby

Interview with Sterling Ruby

[https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/book\\_report/sterling-ruby-interview-kate-fowle-54236](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/sterling-ruby-interview-kate-fowle-54236)

Sterling Ruby on *Big Yellow Mama*

<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2016/september/27/the-truth-about-sterling-rubys-electric-chair/>

Sterling Ruby's fashion collaboration with Raf Simons

<https://www.matchesfashion.com/mens/the-style-report/archive/aw14-new-season-now/designer-interview-raf-simons-sterling-ruby/>

## Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Historical and Cultural Heritage, Critical Evaluation | §117.52. Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)

Social Studies: Individual and Society, Social inequality | §113.46. Sociology (c) (9) and (10)