

The Performative Gesture

Janet Abrams elucidates the work of multidisciplinary artist Sterling Ruby.



1 *Blue Angel*, ceramic, 2007, H53cm

'I'm not a real ceramist per se,' says Sterling Ruby, the 38-year-old Los Angeles artist whose practice ranges across painting, installation, photography, sculpture, and, yes, clay. Ruby's been working in clay for over ten years, and has had solo exhibitions of these pieces – in addition to numerous shows of larger-scale artworks – at the prestigious New York gallery Metro Pictures, the Pierre Marie Gallery, Brussels, and at the Setouchi International Arts Festival, sponsored by the Taka Ishii gallery, Tokyo.

The word 'voracious' seems apt for Ruby's ceramics: they look gnawed at, by frenzied thumbs and fingers that leave telltale indentations, almost like rows of bared teeth. At first glance, these works give off a disturbing, aggressive quality, as residues of a raw, unbounded action, a maniacal 'going at the clay'. His signature forms – with their dented, crenellated surfaces, basket-like structures and stringy elongated 'handles' – allude, variously, to classical vessels, insect limbs, or the jaws, rib cages, and skeletons of unnamed, perhaps unknowable creatures.

EDUCATION To make sense of his ceramic work in relation to the rest of his œuvre, it helps to know that Ruby has been preoccupied, since his student days, with issues of institutional behaviour, and with notions of monumentality, gesture, and malleability – both social and physical. After attending a small non-accredited art school in rural Pennsylvania, where he grew up, Ruby transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for his BFA. There, he took mostly humanities classes; a course on the psychology of death, and the writings of sociologists like Robert J Lifton, particularly sparked his interest.

Later, pursuing his MFA at Art Centre College of Design in Pasadena, California, Ruby worked for two years as artist Mike Kelley's teaching assistant. Here, though, the atmosphere of post-conceptual art-making felt somewhat unsatisfying. 'Most students in my peer group were worried that their work had become tongue-in-cheek or cynical. I was afraid that the burden of theory had done that: it had left me cold. It seemed impossible to make a sincere gesture any more. I found myself and my fellow students making predetermined work: we would do research papers on an idea; present a test study on whether the idea would work; give slide lectures on it – without doing it. We were still artists, but we didn't seem to be making anything.' A seminar on the writings of Donald Judd only reinforced Ruby's rejection of minimalist art: 'The minimal works that were dependent on the system of the "discrete object" were supposed to have come into existence without any residue of process: like a freak accident, like something that fell from the sky. I thought that it

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2 *Basin Theology/False Positive Prophet*, ceramic, 2010, Ø99cm 3 *Basin Theology/Pewter Remains*, ceramic, 2010, Ø99cm 4 *American Risk*, PVC pipe, foam, urethane,



wood, spray paint and Formica, 2009, H422cm 5 *Basin Theology/HEX#D18600*, ceramic, 2010, W60cm



'The larger vessel holds all of these failed attempts. It's a way of working through my own archaeology'

wasn't possible to make that kind of work any more, partially because contemporary society didn't reflect that.'

Meanwhile, in Chicago, he'd discovered clay in a two month long community education course on 'freeform building' through a friend who was taking it as part of her Art Therapy PhD training. At first, Ruby was sceptical: 'I thought, this idea that clay is the most immediate material for art therapy – of course, everyone thinks that, it's a trope. It sounded so elementary, so exactly what you would expect.' But he soon found himself hooked, and revising his assumptions about the impossibility of making an unpremeditated gesture. 'Regardless of generation, everybody was making the same work: hypersexual, lots of holes, very biomorphic, overly glazed. It struck me that this might be something innate. Most people in contemporary art find that idea blasphemous, but I found it enlightening. The things I made back then look exactly like what I'm doing now: 3D models of HR Giger imagery with ramped up rainbow patinas. The forms were somewhat goth, but the glaze

took it out of that realm. My pieces were like a cross between Grateful Dead, Goldie, and Slayer album covers.'

IN HIS PRACTICE Ruby divides his time between projects in different materials; the day of our first conversation, he was planning to spend a couple of hours working on clay in a building specifically devoted to ceramics. He has a team of five people in his studio, and another five in the studio's office. 'It got to the point with the large-scale work that there was no possibility of me doing it by myself. I could make it but I couldn't put it into the kiln or take it out by myself. We always need four people on hand.'

Ruby lavishes multiple layers on most of his pieces, and fires them several times, relishing the random interactions between the coats; often he pushes a glaze deliberately beyond its recommended firing temperature in order to achieve a volcanic, blasted surface, which lends them a quality of having survived a conflagration, or been retrieved from within the earth's crust.

But this kind of experimentation takes its toll. 'I have three kilns, and they look...horrible!' he says. He currently has two top-loading kilns and a front-loading car kiln, and admits that he's gone through three other kilns already. 'I'm still not a very technically proficient ceramist. Over the past ten years, one out of every three of my ceramic works has blown up. Usually when pieces blow up, they blow the elements out. Bricks get shattered and we have to repair.'

What might seem like failures to a traditional ceramist can be catalysts for new ideas, new pieces. Ruby has diligently, perhaps obsessively, kept all the broken remains from the pieces that didn't make it intact through firing, and now he's using them as components in the *Basin Theology* series, begun in early 2010. The series title alludes to the parable of Christ calling for a basin to wash the feet of his

disciples the night before his death, and to the concept in Christian theology of a vessel that provides forgiveness for anything that is put in it. Ruby became intrigued by the concept when a friend told him about Christian Summer Camps where kids are taught Christian principles through clay exercises.

Rather in the manner of a saggars, the Basins in Ruby's series are not discarded but become permanent components of the items they hold. Ruby makes a large-diameter, low-rimmed vessel, then carefully stacks and arranges various broken shards from previous works in them, like a three-dimensional collage. 'I wanted to make a whole new work out of these scraps. The larger vessel holds all of these failed attempts. It's a way of working through my own archaeology.' Some of the Basin pieces are extremely large, as much as four

6 *Archangel Orange*, ceramic, 2010, L66cm 7 *Clover Dear*, ceramic, 2007, H51cm 8 *Crime Against Nature*, ceramic and pyrite sphere, 2009,

feet in circumference, and weigh around two-hundred pounds. ‘Unfortunately,’ he says cheerily, ‘they blow up too! They’re cracking under their weight.’

THE ROLE OF GLAZE A photograph of his desk in his clay studio shows numerous glaze samples and sheets of commercial colours pinned above the desk. As lead-based glazes started to be phased out, Ruby stockpiled what he could find of certain reds and oranges, and says he’s tried out fifty different reds that ‘don’t have the same vibrancy’ that the lead-based reds did. So, working with a couple of specialists from Laguna Clay (the California-based ceramics supply company), he has developed his own cone 06 red, and a metallic gold, shown off to spectacular effect in the piece called *Crime Against Nature*.

Smothering the *Basin Theology* pieces in a white expanding glaze to hold the separate ‘relic’ pieces together, Ruby enjoys the unpredictable interactions between this first unifying coat, and other layers – either bits of glaze left on the shards, or glazes he applies to the piece after its baptism in white. ‘Sometimes they aren’t compatible, and they eat into the white glaze. It has different cone reactions depending on what you layer over it. I like to burn the glaze before I do a final coat. I take glazes that were meant to go to cone 06 up to cone 8, to scorch them, and get this “charred” aesthetic.’

Deliberate splotches of colour, some held within their own little basin within the larger Basin, sometimes appear in contrast with the background. Like dollops of jam, or lipstick – tasty, alluring, vivid – they demand to be viewed from above. One such piece, *Basin Theology/Hex#D18600*, is kind of ashen, with what looks almost accidentally like a map of America in red and orange. ‘I was looking at this piece as monochromatic,’ says Ruby, ‘but I wanted to punctuate it more like a painting. When it came out of the kiln, I was completely obsessed by the colour combination of orange, red and brown. So I ran it through this online thing, and it gave me the hex number.’ Short for hexadecimal, hex numbers are also used in psychological studies to explore how people react to certain colours.

PERFORMATIVE RESIDUE Ruby freely admits that the immediacy of clay is one of its greatest attractions, especially compared with making pieces in other materials, for example those in Formica and bronze, which are developed with other people. ‘I get the greatest satisfaction out of the ceramics because it really is a private and physical endeavour. We weld every day in the studio, and that’s quite physical, but you don’t see that gesture in welding. Same with painting: I’m working on a show for next year where the canvases are roughly eleven or twelve feet by eighteen feet. So it’s like painting on a wall; it’s performative. But I find the ceramics leave the most performative residue of that physical making. It’s just a block of clay: I can pile as much onto it as I want. I like the lineage of it being an additive and subtractive medium. It’s probably the process I get the most gratification out of.’



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H58cm 9 Installation view of *SUPERMAX 2008* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, 19 June-19 September 2008

Exhibitions *Paintings*, Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium, 24 February-2 April 2011; *I am not free because I can be exploded anytime*, Sprüth Magers, Berlin, Germany, 8 April-20 May 2011; *Lustwarande 2011 – Blemishes*, Park De Oude Warande, Museum De Pont, Tilburg, Netherlands, 25 June-25 September 2011

Representation Foxy Production, New York, USA; Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; The Pace Gallery, New York, USA **Janet Abrams** is an artist and writer on design and visual arts. She completed her MFA in ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2010



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