

GAGOSIAN



STERLING RUBY

THAT MY NAILS CAN REACH UNTO THINE EYES

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22 Anapiron Polemou Street, Athens

Sterling Ruby, *WIDW. KNACKS. TRIFLES. NOSEGAYS. SWEETMEATS.*, 2020, acrylic, oil, elastic, and cardboard on canvas, framed: 75 7/8 × 53 7/8 × 3 1/4 inches (187.6 × 136.8 × 8.3 cm) © Sterling Ruby. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

April 8, 2021

*And are you grown so high in his esteem
Because I am so dwarfish and so low?
How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak!
How low am I? I am not yet so low
But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes.*

—William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (act 3, scene 2)

Gagosian is pleased to present *THAT MY NAILS CAN REACH UNTO THINE EYES*, an exhibition of new paintings and ceramics by Sterling Ruby.

In an oeuvre encompassing sculpture, ceramics, painting, drawing, collage, video, and textiles, Ruby engages art history, his own autobiography, and balances of social power. Creating disruption by contrasting clean lines and recognizable objects with rough and uncanny forms, his works interrogate the canon of art while seeking to critique the institutions and shortcomings of modern society.

Ruby composes his *WIDW* paintings (2016–)—the series is titled after an abbreviated form of “window”—with thick, vibrant coats of acrylic and oil paint, also adhering squares of cardboard and patterned fabric onto canvas. These collaged elements demarcate the canvas into halves and smaller rectangles, transforming the compositions into gridded windowpanes that offer a glimpse into the physical and cerebral strata of Ruby’s working process.

In this new body of work inspired by William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Ruby makes allusions to theater, likening the vantage of a window frame to the proscenium. Taking a cue from the play’s contrasting settings of judicial ancient Athens and the mystical forest beyond, Ruby bisects each canvas vertically with a strip of painted cardboard, introducing a pillar-like barrier that bright pigments rebound against or cower behind.

Featuring dynamic bursts of pink, teal, white, and gold, Ruby’s paintings evoke the fertile yet impermanent aura of springtime. Opposing realms—order and chaos, love and violence, civilization and wilderness—are key to his works, which dwell in moments of transformation. Exploring the liminal space between these dichotomies, Ruby taps into the loss of self that occurs when the identities and innermost desires of the play’s protagonists become enmeshed within a collective subconscious. The exhibition is divided in half between both floors of the Athens gallery: visitors enter a suite of black-grounded “night” paintings before ascending the stairs to reach a set of ethereal “daylight” paintings. Passing through physical space and metaphorical time of day, the viewer follows a path akin to Shakespeare’s characters in their passage from luminous dreamscapes to bright-hued works that impart a vivid psychological clarity.

Also on view is *ACHERON* (2021), part of Ruby’s *Basin Theology* series (2009–). The sculpture’s title refers to a line in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—“The starry welkin cover thou anon / With drooping fog as black as Acheron”—that invokes the name of the river in Greek mythology that carried the souls of the dead through the underworld to Hades. To make *ACHERON*, Ruby gathered broken pieces from previous ceramics projects in a flat-bottomed vessel, fusing everything through the firing process. Glazed in volcanic black and lustrous turquoise, the fragments emerge from the kiln in a reincarnated form reminiscent of entombed remains. Employing a similar technique for *MORTAR. KISSING WALL’S HOLE* (2021), Ruby references text from the play in which a “wall’s hole” creates an access point for forbidden lovers, rendering the ceramic work as a symbolic opening between spaces and people.

Sterling Ruby was born in Bitburg, Germany, in 1972, holds American and Dutch citizenship, and lives and works in Los Angeles. Collections include the Tate, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Exhibitions include *DROPPA BLOCKA*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2013); *STOVES*, Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris (2015); *Belvedere*, Vienna (2016); *Ceramics*, Des Moines Art Center, Iowa (2018, traveled to Museum of Arts and Design, New York); and Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2019–20, traveled to Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston).

In June 2019, Ruby launched his clothing label, S.R. STUDIO. LA. CA., after debuting at Pitti Uomo Immagine in Florence, Italy. At the invitation of the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, Ruby presented a collection during Paris Couture Week in January 2021.

Concurrently, a selection of ceramic sculptures by Ruby will be exhibited within the permanent collections of the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens. The installation, *Sterling Ruby at Cycladic: Ceramics*, will also extend to the museum’s temporary exhibition wing and will be on view from May 12 to June 21, 2021, with dates subject to national public health guidelines.

#SterlingRuby

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