

# SPRÜTH MAGERS

## **DAMNATION**

**Sterling Ruby**

**Sprüth Magers Los Angeles FEBRUARY 13 - MARCH 23 2019**

Public reception: Tuesday, February 12, 6-8pm

Since the early 2000s, Sterling Ruby has developed an eclectic and uncompromising practice that has mined the triumphs, tragedies, and peculiarities of the American experience across an ever-evolving range of media. Finding a tensile balance between chaos and order, grand and intimate gestures, and high and pop cultural references, Ruby's paintings, sculptures, ceramics, collages, textiles, and videos expose the cracks within many of the aesthetic and social constructs we take for granted as fixed or immovable. Uniting his work is an overarching compendium of visual archetypes that continue to unfold into a distinct and rich artistic vocabulary. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are proud to present DAMNATION, the artist's fifth solo exhibition with Sprüth Magers and his first at the Los Angeles gallery.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is STATE (2019), a single-channel video projection that the artist has spent the past five years researching and producing, working with a videographer and helicopter pilot to film aerial views of the 35 adult state prisons of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Ruby transforms the ground floor gallery into a giant black-box theater, immersing viewers within the artist's ongoing investigations into the California prison system as both allegory and atrocity.

In the video, we see prisons dotted across the landscape of California; rolling hills, deserts, forests, farmland and rural areas open up onto sites that resemble cities, often with populations the size of small towns. Connections can also be drawn to the ways in which war zones and conflict areas are shown in the media, via distanced surveillance footage or drone reconnaissance. A repetitive, structural rhythm is created as the video cuts back and forth between the landscapes and the sites of the prison grounds. We are confronted with the stark contrast between the majesty of the expansive landscapes and the massive institutional architecture of the prisons.

The artist has taken cues from Bruce Nauman's video installation *Learned Helplessness in Rats (Rock and Roll Drummer)*, in which a young man is shown frenetically playing a drum set. Here, Ruby himself has composed and performed the accompanying drum track. The drumming also acts as an uncomfortable and insistent disruption. The soundtrack slows as the video progresses, ending as a heartbeat, and suggesting the distortion or elongation of the passage of time.

Both the medium of video and the architecture of prisons have been subjects for the artist for nearly two decades. In his previous videos, Ruby has played with questions of criminality and confinement, sometimes performing himself in situations that approached, but always ultimately suspended, narrative. In early collage works, Ruby explored the structures of the prison tier system as defined in both physical and psychological space. And in SUPERMAX 2008, the artist's first major exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the artist correlated the architecture of the museum with that of the California prison system. SUPERMAX was a reference to American maximum-security prisons, where prisoners in solitary confinement can be on lockdown for up to 23 hours a day. In all of these works, the artist connects a state of mind with the state of incarceration. A deep-felt sympathy to the injustice of these institutions coincides with a psychological understanding of the power wielded by these systems, and how this shapes the American psyche.

In the upstairs gallery, the artist presents SKULLS, a new body of sculptural works. These oversized, animal-like skulls are in fact facsimiles of the underlying armatures of Hollywood special effects creatures. Some of their surfaces are realistically bone-like, while others are obsidian, and some appear raw and mottled as if their skin has been removed. Ruby has overlaid each with large, brightly colored wigs and eyes that add an element of levity to the apotropaic beasts. Their bared teeth and bulging eyes, evoking exaggerated and heightened emotions, also resemble the Hannya masks of Japanese Noh theater. In the context of the exhibition, and its title DAMNATION, they also recall Cerberus, the mythological multi-headed dog who guards the gates to the Underworld. The sculptures act as harbingers, standing at the crossroads between life and death. Fierce, if also rife with fantasy, they present a departure for Ruby and a counterpoint to the austere and disquieting imagery of STATE.

One hundred percent of the artist's exhibition proceeds from STATE will be contributed to the ACLU of Southern California, an organization with initiatives to end mass incarceration.

Sterling Ruby (American/Dutch, born 1972, Air Force Base in Bitburg, Germany) lives and works in Los Angeles. Recent solo exhibitions include *Sterling Ruby: Sculpture* (2019), which opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, last month, as well as the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2018); Des Moines Art Museum (2018); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2017); Winterpalais, Belvedere Museum, Vienna (2016); Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris (2015); The Baltimore Museum of Art (2014); Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Ghent (2013); and *SOFT WORK*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2012), which travelled to FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims (2012), Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2012-13), and MACRO/Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome (2013). Selected recent group exhibitions include *West by Midwest*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2018); *Christian Dior, Couturier Du Rêve*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais Du Louvre, Paris (2017); *Made in LA 2016: a, the, though, only*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2016); *2014 Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2014); *Taipei Biennial 2014*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2014); and *The 10th Gwangju Biennale: Burning Down the House*, Gwangju (2014). Ruby received the MAD Ball Annual Visionaries Award from the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, in 2017.

The artist will also participate in Desert X 2019, on view in Coachella Valley, California, from February 9 to April 21, 2019.

For further information and press enquiries, contact Claire Rifelj ([claire@spruethmagers.com](mailto:claire@spruethmagers.com)).

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Opening hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm