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STERLING RUBY:

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Working between collage, painting, textiles and more, **STERLING RUBY** has created the perfect ‘excavation site’ for his practice in East LA. ‘Los Angeles fits me,’ he tells **KATYA TYLEVICH**. ‘It often seems like a mutual anxiety that the city and I share.’

The term ‘artist compound’ has become so diluted. What comes to mind? Some sort of spa retreat for people wearing terry-cloth pants, trying one hand at pottery and another at white wine. But Sterling Ruby has a compound compound. The real thing, protected by an impenetrable black gate and barbed wire. Ruby’s neighbours here in Vernon, CA, are other compounds, where trucks shake the ground as they enter and unload. A train runs parallel to the complex, a chemical smell pollutes the air at the height of the midday heat. Standing below a flight path, in the compound’s industrial courtyard, I ask the artist how long he’s been here as one aeroplane then another dulls my voice. Five years, and the artworks are already (clearly) bursting the seams. He’ll hold on to this space, says Ruby, but he’s currently moving to a new one, custom-designed, not far from here.

Inside the gates, warehouse-style studios surround the yard, each one dedicated to a different art form. I walk through rooms divided as: collage, ceramics, sculpture, painting and textiles. Colourful large-scale sculptural works stand outside, too, exposed to the elements, even during the rare February rain in Southern California. Studio assistants pass by or look up with a brief hello, but no intention of stopping. Seems like a tight ship you run here. Ruby, wearing his signature hand-bleached get-up (the artist collaborated with Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons last year on a fall/winter collection), is very friendly, but all business. He answers my questions between tending to those of others in the workspace. He walks with purpose from one end of the complex to another and checks his watch, probably anxious for us to wrap up so that he can get back to work.

Ruby has an exhibition opening at Xavier Hufkens in Belgium the day before the opening

of Art Brussels. It will be his fourth exhibition at the gallery and the first time an artist will be showing at both of its spaces at the same time. I ask him about the environment he creates in the relative isolation of his studio in order to create his works for exhibition. I ask him, more specifically, about his newest pieces for the upcoming show, and their necessary departure from his extremely varied body of work, but also their inescapable connection to everything he’s done before and keeps on doing.

I’ve read about your famous art complex in nearly every profile of you I’ve come across. Clearly, it makes an impression. Do you feel that your work environment is a necessary factor in the art that results?

The studio has become a kind of excavation site for me. Years of accumulated material and work are spread through the buildings, almost like a dumping ground. This setting has taken my work to another level of cycling through materials. There is this idea that projects are laid to rest, but over time, these things that are always present as material or as remnants are dug up and reassessed, catalysts are created between works from the past and new works. The studio is a safe haven for me. I can retreat into the studio or isolate myself in it in a way that I can’t in the world. I get to decide who gets to see what I’m working on and who doesn’t. There is a hands-on quality the studio ultimately lends itself to. It’s vital for my practice to have a handmade quality, and we keep the majority of production in-house, although that may not be immediately apparent to an outsider. It’s an important consideration for me in a time when artists often source experts from outside fields, and have a hands-off process. I still want everything to feel intimate and lived-through.

Can you tell me about the new works specifically, which you’re making for your show at Xavier Hufkens?

I’ve been working on a new series of collages titled ECLPSE, which is my own acronym or abbreviation for the word eclipse. The ECLPSE collages are all made from cardboard, stripped down, simple and formal, and covered in primary-colour tempera paints. The abstract shapes in them remind me of suns, moons and overlapping landscapes. In a way, they continue with themes, theory and concepts that have been central to my previous work, but to be honest, I’ve been trying to make them abstract and formal—my attempt to connect to the historical lineage of Suprematism. There are two concurrent shows. At the second space, I’m hanging a group of mobiles called SCALES. I see them as three-dimensional manifestations of the collage works and have been referring to them as floating collage. They contain simple monochromatic shapes like the ECLPSE collages, but because of certain recognizable scraps and objects thrown into the mix, the SCALES feel more narrative than the ECLPSE works.

Is there something about these works that feels completely new to your approach?

They’re pared down to their basic formal elements. In the past, I’ve insisted on seeing the conceptual element, as opposed to feeling confident that it is there even when it isn’t evident at first glance. They are also playful, in a way, which feels new to me.

What about in terms of the narrative you mentioned for SCALES: is it one that you continue with each exhibition or body of work? Or is each new body of work a chance to start entirely from scratch?



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Opening spread
Laying Figure *MACRO*, 2013
Fabric and fibre fill
414 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm

Opposite
VAMPIRE 107, 2013
Fabric and fibre fill
213.4 x 114.3 x 10.2 cm

Above
Installation view
of *SOFT WORK*
at Bonniers Konsthall,
Stockholm, 2012

In some sense, I think everything is building on what has come before it.

Well, visually and materially, your work is very varied. But do you find that it shares a psychology or atmosphere?

My intention is to use many mediums as a kind of schizophrenic position; the variability factor is schizophrenia. It has taken me years to convey that this scattered routine belongs within a coherent trajectory, but again, I feel more confident having worked through this for such a long time now.

Can you tell me more about your interests and studies in psychology? I know they've contributed to your works in significant ways, and I'm interested to hear about how you start and conduct your research.

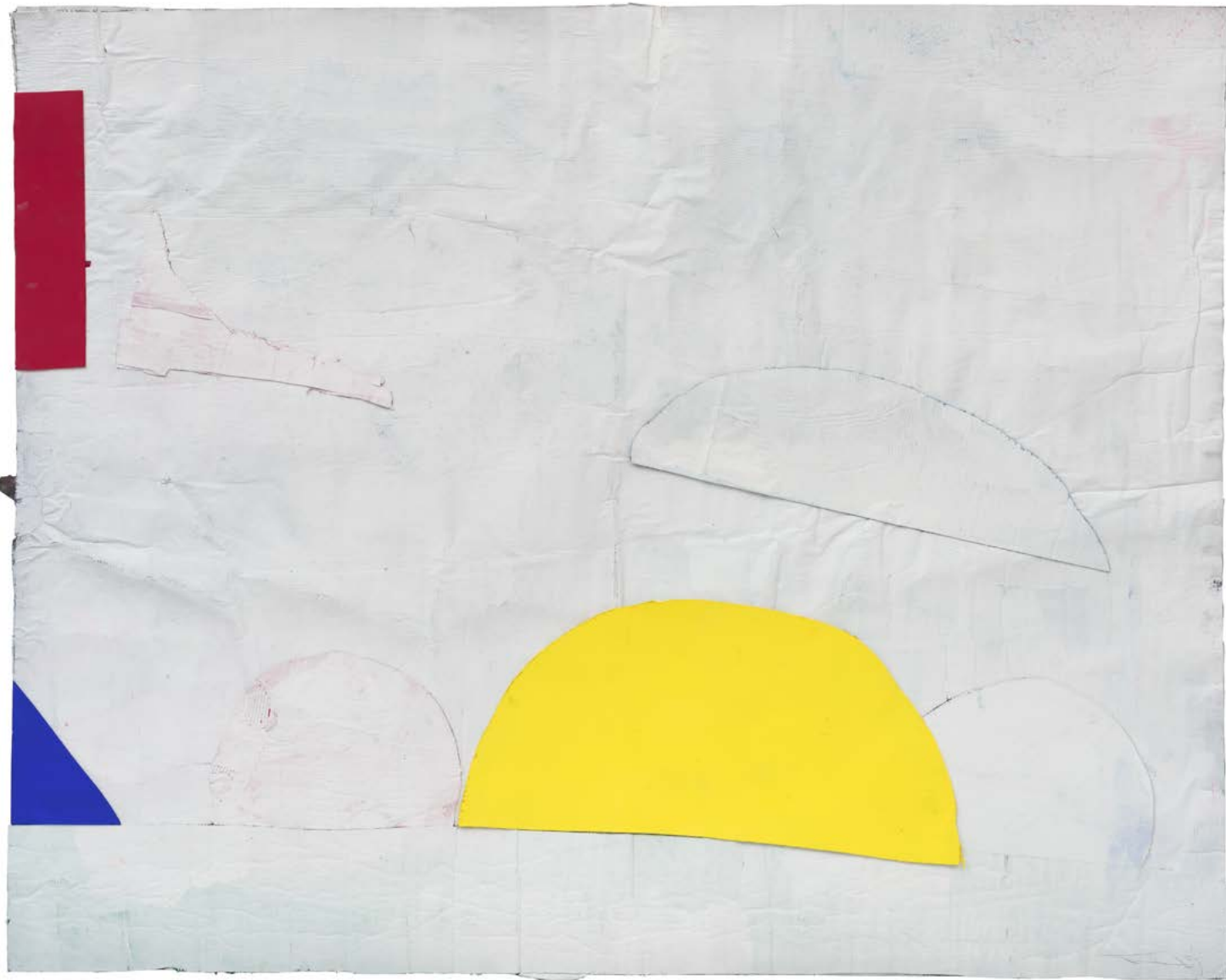
Of particular interest to me are theories about the psychology of violence and trauma, as well as the conflicts of desire and repression, but I am not interested in making an artwork that didactically

reiterates or illustrates such theories. I often start researching on the internet. There is so much visual information to digest. I am a visual artist, so I tend to drift toward visual information before anything written. The research-oriented conceptual practices of a lot of artists often make me wonder: why even make a visual artwork if research is the only important aspect of the work? I don't strive to make work where you need specific knowledge to understand or appreciate a piece.

Was becoming an artist a very deliberate choice for you, or was any part of it accidental?

Growing up, I was always drawing, and then I got into music. I would make 'zines, and do all the editorial and design work myself. I was working in a very specific DIY way: I shot all the photographs myself, made collages and designed the layout and covers. I did interviews with bands and reviewed albums. I would make a new 'zine every month to give away. This was during my early teens.

After I graduated from high school, I was work-



ing a construction job that got me so depressed I felt like my life was over. I kept thinking to myself, 'How do I get out of here? How do I do something that can give me autonomy?' My mother had a friend who was a wildlife illustrator and he worked at an art school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania [The Pennsylvania School of Art and Design], which is where I first enrolled in 1992.

Before that, did you ever have romantic ideas of what it means to be an artist?

My mother was from the Netherlands, and we would always go to see the Van Goghs and Rubenses when we visited, so to touch on the previous question, being an artist seemed historical, a far-removed scenario, something that had happened in the past, not something that people did in the present. I grew up in the middle of rural Pennsylvania and went to a high school that had no art classes, so it seemed unimportant or even frivolous to most people I knew when

I was younger. It wasn't until I saw the Bruce Nauman survey at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1995 that I really started to think about what it meant to be a contemporary artist.

At present, do you feel that you belong to any kind of generation or community of artists, here in LA or in a more global sense? Personally, do you prefer the idea of an artistic community, the lone artist, or something else?

I feel comfortable here in LA, like I belong here, but I don't really think about it in terms of being part of a community or some kind of globally recognized capital. Los Angeles fits me, it is transient and I sense that I can represent it in a way because of my kinship with its environment and atmosphere—it often seems like a mutual anxiety that the city and I share.

ECLPSE and SCALES will run in both Xavier Hufkens gallery spaces in Brussels between 23 April and 23 May

Above
ECLPSE (RWYB), 2015
Collage and paint on
cardboard
241.3 x 304.8 cm

Opposite
ECLPSE (BYRG), 2014
Collage and paint on
cardboard
292.1 x 246.4 cm

