

GAGOSIAN

VOGUE

## Sterling Ruby Explains the References and Process Behind His Couture Debut

Luke Leitch



*Photographed by Acielle / Style du Monde*

Sterling Ruby's scope is broadened and his rhythm altered. He's expanded from contemporary artist to artist of the hypercontemporary, a.k.a fashion designer. As he presented his first collection as part of Paris Couture Week today, we Zoomed to his studio in California to talk through this second presented collection of his S.R. Studio. LA. CA. label and reflect on its impact upon his wider work in other art forms.

**Vogue Runway:** The first show for S.R. was June 2019 at Pitti Uomo in Florence. Why did you decide to emerge with this second collection at Paris Couture Week in January 2021?

**Sterling Ruby:** It felt like the right time, and there were a number of things behind that. Between Pitti and now, we thought about releasing another kind of project or collection three separate times—and mostly due to COVID, we stopped. We would really, really work on it, very hard, and then realize it was absolutely impossible for us. We would stop and start over again. When the invitation [from the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode] came in, we were in a pretty good place at the studio and in L.A. Everybody was excited, and I was excited. It's an honor. Also, I think, for the team, we *needed* to do it. It was a morale boost to see something through when we had started so many different times and then just stopped.



*Ruby, left, in the process of making his couture collection Photo: Melanie Schiff / Courtesy of S.R. Studio. L.A. C.A. A model shooting the collection video Photo: Melanie Schiff / Courtesy of S.R. Studio. L.A. C.A.*

### **What was the process of this show?**

We had planned a much bigger, outdoor, live show—probably not with any audience but something that was relative to the studio—outside. It wasn't even four weeks ago that the cases were going up, and we just scrapped that idea. It just didn't make sense, and it didn't feel safe, so we had to really shift gears. One of those shifts was to limit the amount of models. In the end, we wound up using one of our fit models and one other model, so that we can change during production.

### **Where and what was the location of the background footage?**

I shot the footage a number of years ago. It's this paintball course on the outskirts of L.A. I do this pretty often: If I see something that I find interesting, I'll go out and film it. Right now I'm sitting on maybe seven or eight different projects that we've started over the course of the last couple of years. Sometimes it's nice to look at [those projects] from time to time and figure out whether or not they mean anything at that moment. When we switched gears [for the show] I assessed all of that footage, and this made a lot of sense because there's this kind of inevitability of working through what's been going on in the U.S. over the past year. Thinking about this militarized scenario that all rights are patriotic rights ... for me that is played out in places like that, this kind of postapocalyptic zone.

I had the idea when we were working on the clothes and editing down looks of trying to build what I loosely was thinking about as some sort of American trajectory: some sort of American history of looking at everything from colonialism, bonnets, and dresswear to skatewear to chiffon dresses. All of that had to be gone through logistically within the studio because we wanted to try different materials. In the end it was this kind of procession of American history that was seen through this filmic, noir, Hollywood, smoky montage of these apparitions, or ghosts, in that mazelike, postapocalyptic zone. I kept thinking, conceptually speaking, that these should be spirits that are either leading you out of this or continuously confusing you to the point where you are in your demise. Couture has always seemed very operatic to me, so maybe that was part of it too.

**So we were seeing a chorus of American spirits representing competing forces and repeated memories?**

Somebody asked me the other day about the tension in America over the course of the past year, and I was like, Well, it's been *horrible*. And it really has been. I mean, I live in California, and I have for 20 years, and it is a relatively liberal state, but I had to go back and think about where I grew up, which was completely biased and predominantly white and far-right.

**Where did you grow up?**

In this tiny little town in southern Pennsylvania called New Freedom—and it was not new, and was not free! I went to this, like, this farming school almost. My parents were hippies. They were great, but they thought that they wanted to buy this farm and become farmers. Without really knowing it they plunked us down in one of the hardest areas. The neighbors looked at my parents and thought, you know, What are these freaks doing here?



*Filming the S.R. Studio LA. CA. collection Photo: Melanie Schiff / Courtesy of S.R. Studio. L.A. C.A.*

**And farming is emblematic of both the Puritans and the Pilgrims, as is the bonnet. That is such an evocative garment in the U.S. — the hoodie of the 17th century — and you used it in this collection....**

They really are. Also, we had a number of communities close to us when I was growing up there were Amish or Mennonite. I remember I would be standing there with my skateboard at the convenience store and there'd be these Mennonite or Amish kids with their heads down. I always felt the nuance of that was so intimate—just kind of *hidden*. The longer I've thought about clothing, the performance of it, and the way that people wear clothing, the more I can relate to them. I like things that are very simple to wear. I mean, I'm wearing a pair of jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. The sweatshirt bonded with this neoprene material inside. We made it for me, it's *heavy*. I think I probably have some sensorial things that are habitual. But I like things to be a little bit more around me; it feels safe, it feels intimate. And I relate to that in those bonnets as well.

One look, number 19, is just *everything*. We started making these bonnets and we tried to make them longer and expand them, and then it just all collapsed. When I'm putting together an exhibition I think to myself, This is a very nice exhibition, it's a good group of work, but where's that red herring? For me, that look was allowing this collection to have one look that was closer to the possibility of no negation. That's kind of nice that fashion allows me to do that in a similar way to how I can when I make an exhibition of ceramics or paintings: You can have this one thing that's just so far out from everything else.



*Looks from Ruby's debut collection shown at Pitti Uomo in 2019 Photographed by Acielle / Style du Monde*

### **Speaking of everything else...**

We tried to take some of the lighter-weight things that were part of [the] Pitti [Uomo collection] and elaborate on those, trying to figure out how to dye silk better; how to do our own printing; how to work with chiffon, silks, different types of crepes, and even velours. There were printing things we did in velour that really looked saturated and glimmery and kind of beautiful.

We've definitely been honing our dyeing techniques. Because this is all happening in-house, we can lay down a yard of hand-dyed fabric; I can place the pattern directly where I want it to be cut on that hand-dyed section. We can then take the sleeve and we can position that so it has a juxtaposition, more like a real-life collage. We're dyeing it, placing the pattern, we're cutting it, and then we're sewing it together. So it really is like a quilt or a collage.

### **Where are the hot rod images from?**

We invested in this massive heat press a year ago. It allows me to work on fabrics the same way that I work on a collage on paper. The hot rod engines are appropriated images from different sources, hot rod magazines and so forth. They're juxtaposed with all of these images of artificial hearts. I have been making this archive of those images for quite some time, and I haven't really made too many collages with the images, but it's something that I've kind of become obsessed with.

I became obsessed with Dr. Jarvik [inventor of the artificial heart]. I bought an autographed photo of him holding the Jarvik heart, which is completely cryptic. There was so much this past year about life support, and mechanics, and shortage of respirators that I wanted to combine those two elements. They're so chrome, and they're so souped-up, and they're so powerful, but

they're completely cold. Placing these two things side by side made another dimension to push in, different layers to juxtapose. It's also very garish: souped-up blue and hot red and chrome images of engines and hearts.

**The hot rod mechanics and graphics are so entitled and assertive. In the context of feminine couture, they made me think a little of toxic masculinity and aggressive revving at the intersection....**

It felt a little bit like that to me too! And I have to say that all these things are being very much played out right now. Every morning we sit there and listen to the news, and it's something *else* about toxic masculinity.



*A look from Ruby's debut collection shown at Pitti Uomo in 2019 Photographed by Acielle / Style du Monde*

**What about the challenge of producing an object specifically for women as couture, which I imagine you have not faced in your other disciplines?**

I don't feel that hung up on gender specificity. I do get a bit more entrenched in, like, persona, and maybe sexuality, and the performative nature of making something. But there is also materiality and craft in that. I kept going back and forth with whether or not I was making something that was couture. I certainly am not suggesting that I'm doing a traditional couture, but there were certain materials and certain techniques like that ruching that I wanted to play with that are probably related to dressmaking and couture. When you look at them you can see that they're a little frayed or rough; there are some patches in it. I liked that. Sometimes—and this is within art too—I feel like some sculptures that are out of contemporary art history, the works that are made with the most skilled hands, feel *like nobody has touched them*, in a way. This collection was a way for me to explore not only material and techniques that are very traditional, but also to make sure that they hold this kind of sensuality and that you can see that they were made by hand.

**The last question is obvious, but now that you are a little further along the road with your work in fashion, has it affected your attitude towards the hierarchical way in which we**

**categorize art forms? And how do your feelings toward your works change when they are items that are worn and observed, rather than placed and observed?**

I think there might be a comparison to seeing a photo of somebody's house with a painting in it. Seeing somebody posting on Instagram or someone showing me a photo of somebody in one of the things that we've made, I really enjoy it. It gives me a real, it gives me a real thrill.

Also, I think that a lot of younger people just don't have the same hangups that maybe people my age or even older have about art and fashion, or music or film, or whatever. They just don't see it the same way that I was taught to look at it: that art is the most theoretical, the most elitist, the highest form of culture.

**So you're detecting that art forms are beginning to be seen on a horizontal, parallel scale of judgment rather than a vertical higher-or-lower classification...**

Yeah. Also, I do also believe it's somewhat hypocritical, you know, because so much art takes, borrows, appropriates, or is influenced by things that would be perceived as "lower culture." That's not to say I don't stand in front of a Lynda Benglis sculpture and think, "Wow, she's great," because she's really a great artist. But I can also stand in front of something that Rick [Owens] or Michèle [Lamy] has made and feel the exact same way. So this is just allowing myself to have that breathing room.