

7 LIFE AS A RUNWAY

Style at the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition. BY JOHN ORTVED

5 NOT JUST COVER-UPS

Paola Mathé's headwraps, full of color. BY TARIRO MZEZWA



4 CRITICAL SHOPPER

Finding peace of mind in a pajama set. BY JON CARAMANICA

3 BROWSING

Five fall trends to wear now. BY HAYLEY PHELAN

FASHION | BEAUTY | NIGHTLIFE

Thursday Styles

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ANDREW WHITE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

An Invitation to Imagine

The long collaboration between the artist Sterling Ruby and the designer Raf Simons comes to fruition at Calvin Klein.

By ALEX HAWGOOD

Blue-chip art adorns many suave Manhattan addresses these days: Jeff Koons's "Balloon Rabbit (Red)" at 51 Astor Place, James Turrell's glowing "Light Box" at 505 Fifth Avenue, Yayoi Kusama's giant bronze pumpkin at the Sky building on West 42nd Street.

But few have taken it to the extreme that Sterling Ruby, one of the most dazzling con-

temporary artists to emerge out of Los Angeles in recent years, has done at the Calvin Klein headquarters at 205 West 39th Street.

Under the patronage of Raf Simons, the brand's chief creative director, Mr. Ruby has transformed the towering Art Deco building in his kaleidoscopic vision.

The first three floors of the facade have been painted black. An assemblage of pom-poms, chrome buckets and Calvin Klein

briefs (Mr. Ruby's own) hangs over the ground-floor space where a runway show was staged last month. The top-floor showroom, once a minimalist white cube, is swathed in hand-painted wallpaper and fabrics with Mr. Ruby's signature mix of bleach stains and red-and-blue splotches.

"Raf kept saying, 'I'm getting nervous, there's so much red,'" said Mr. Ruby, 45, who is ruggedly handsome and has a sweep

Sterling Ruby this month in a room he designed at Calvin Klein's headquarters on West 39th Street in Manhattan.

of long hair tucked behind his round face. "But that's why I love working with him: Both of us can vent and come to terms with what our differences are."

And that is only for the office. In a high-brow reinterpretation of Calvin Klein's iconic ads, the brand's current campaign features underwear-clad models standing in front Mr. Ruby's oversize tapestry, "Flag

CONTINUED ON PAGE D8

An Invitation to Imagine

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1
(479).” But his most visible project will be unveiled this summer, when Mr. Ruby reimagines Calvin Klein’s flagship store on Madison Avenue, as was first reported in a recent article for Surface magazine.

At first glance, it might seem odd for an artist of Mr. Ruby’s rarefied stature (he currently has a show at the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue, and his works can fetch \$1 million and higher) to wade in the comparatively shallow waters of retail architecture.

But for Mr. Ruby, whose multidisciplinary, genre-fluid artworks encompass such diverse mediums as autobiographical quilting and male pornography, Calvin Klein is just one more addition to his toolbox.

“If we’re talking about gender, sexuality, highs, lows, politics — all of those things can be played within the context of this massive corporate American brand, too,” said Mr.

collaborated on fabrics for his debut show. (The project was memorialized in the 2015 documentary, “Dior and I,” which captures the drama behind Mr. Simons’s first collection, and how the atelier struggled with fabricating Mr. Ruby’s color-saturated motif.)

Two years later, they designed a small-batch men’s wear line, Raf Simons/Sterling Ruby, that included a hand-painted canvas parka with a reported \$30,500 price tag.

But their latest collaboration is arguably the most involved. For Mr. Simons, who left Antwerp, Belgium, and now lives in New York for the first time, Mr. Ruby not only acts as an unofficial brand ambassador and image consultant for Calvin Klein, but also serves as a kind of cultural translator.

“I suppose I understand what Calvin Klein means from the outside,” Mr. Simons said, “but Sterling understands what Calvin Klein means from the inside — he’s American.”



CALVIN KLEIN

WILLY VANDERPERRE



Above, the artist Sterling Ruby at the Gagosian Gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with his 2016 collage, “CRUX. YELL.” Left, Mr. Ruby and Raf Simons salute the audience at their fall men’s fashion show in Paris in January 2014. Above left, Calvin Klein’s current campaign features underwear-clad models standing in front of Mr. Ruby’s 2014 tapestry, “Flag (479).”



FRANCOIS GUILLOT/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

“It was an invitation for him to imagine something, and I had total trust in what he might imagine,” he added. “That relationship, that complete trust in somebody, that’s what evolves over time.”

Creative marriages between fashion designers and artists may not be new, but they speak to a modern sentiment wary of a celebrity-saturated culture.

Andy Warhol did a silk-screen portrait of Yves Saint Laurent in 1974. Vanessa Beecroft worked with Helmut Lang in 2002 and, more recently, Kanye West. Takashi Murakami created monogram handbags for Louis Vuitton in 2003. Gucci commissioned GucciGhost, a Brooklyn street artist, for multiple collections last year.

It’s rare, however, for an artist and designer to collaborate as exhaustively and continuously as Mr. Ruby and Mr. Simons



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have. Their current alchemy involving high art with low-waisted underwear gives Calvin Klein, arguably one of today’s most influential (and commercially successful) American fashion houses, a distinctly European flair.

The timing has never been more right.

“The industry is tiring of the Hollywood embeddedness in fashion where you can see the dollar signs all over the actress who was paid X amount of dollars to sit front row,” said Nicole Phelps, the director of Vogue Runway, a part of the magazine’s web portal. “By equating fine art with celebrities, Raf is putting Sterling’s work on the same level as these faces that are so overexposed.”

Big Debt, Changing Fortunes

Mr. Ruby’s fascination with clothing goes back to childhood. Growing up on a farm in New Freedom, Pa., he created his own patchwork fashion inspired by the D.I.Y. look of post-hardcore bands like Black Flag.

In 1999, he enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago and soon after met his future wife, the photographer Melanie Schiff. In 2003, he moved to Los Angeles to attend a master of fine arts program at the Art Center

College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., where he was a teaching assistant for the artist Mike Kelley and had also amassed \$300,000 in debt. (Mr. Ruby still lives in Los Angeles with his wife, their two children and his daughter from a previous marriage.)

His fortunes changed with his first solo show, “Supernova 2005,” at the Marc Foxx Gallery in 2005. Mr. Ruby’s gritty pastiche of graffiti techniques and allusions to prison surveillance jump-started his metamorphosis into a mercurial art star of the highest order.

Three years later, a solo show at Metro Pictures in Chelsea featuring amorphously-shaped ceramics garnered exalted praise. Roberta Smith, the art critic of The New York Times, in her review called him “one of the most interesting artists to emerge in this century.”

His works have continued to mutate and turn more wildly imaginative, and have taken on such disparate forms as pillow-like sculptures shaped like vampire mouths, dripping polyurethane structures, spray paintings, videos, and monumental works made from submarine parts and other found materials. In 2014, he was included in the Whitney Biennial and his beanbag-size ceramic basins, which resemble deformed ashtrays, were declared best in show by Jerry Saltz, the art critic for New York magazine.

As Mr. Ruby’s reputation and the work’s scale grew, so did the value of his pieces. At a Christie’s auction in 2013, one of his acrylic and enamel paintings went for over \$1.7 million — about five times its estimate. His anarchic work is now in the private collections of Ingwild Goetz, Maurice Marciano and other notable collectors.

But it hasn’t been all roses. Mr. Ruby is quick to point out that there has been the occasional gatekeeper who scoffs at his entanglements between art and fashion. “There are so many different levels of hypocrites that are involved in both worlds,” he said. “I’ve never cared, but they have.”

But for the most part, he appears to be exempt from any real snobbery.

“The art world might be suspicious of an artist working hand-in-hand with any kind of industry,” said Philippe Vergne, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. (A selection of Mr. Ruby’s sculptures from the museum’s private collection opens on April 2.) “From the commercial side, it will always be someone’s job to make sure that an artist is neither underexposed or overexposed.”

“But everything I’ve seen from Sterling and Raf working together is a creative dialogue rather than using the artist as an added value,” Mr. Vergne added. “It’s not like Sterling is jumping from house to house.”

Serena Cattaneo Adorno, the Gagosian’s director, agreed.

“We’re not making a distinction between his art and fashion practices,” she said.

Getting Things Just Right

On a balmy Wednesday earlier this month, three hours before his latest show opened at the Gagosian Gallery, Mr. Ruby was characteristically low key. He had just finished installing the show, which includes new sculptures and paintings — among them ceramic basin that resembles an ashen dinosaur nest.

With the gallery quiet, he walked to one of the smaller fabric paintings — “CRUX. YELL.” — and spoke softly about how it had taken a dozen attempts to get the forest-green hue just right.

But as always, his work is not confined to just the gallery’s walls.

As Mr. Ruby prepared for the opening night, he wore one of his black hooded sweatshirts and dark denim jeans with a backside label that read “S.R. STUDIO. L.A. CA.”

“It’s nice to play a brand,” Mr. Ruby said, before quickly adding, “not necessarily become one.”