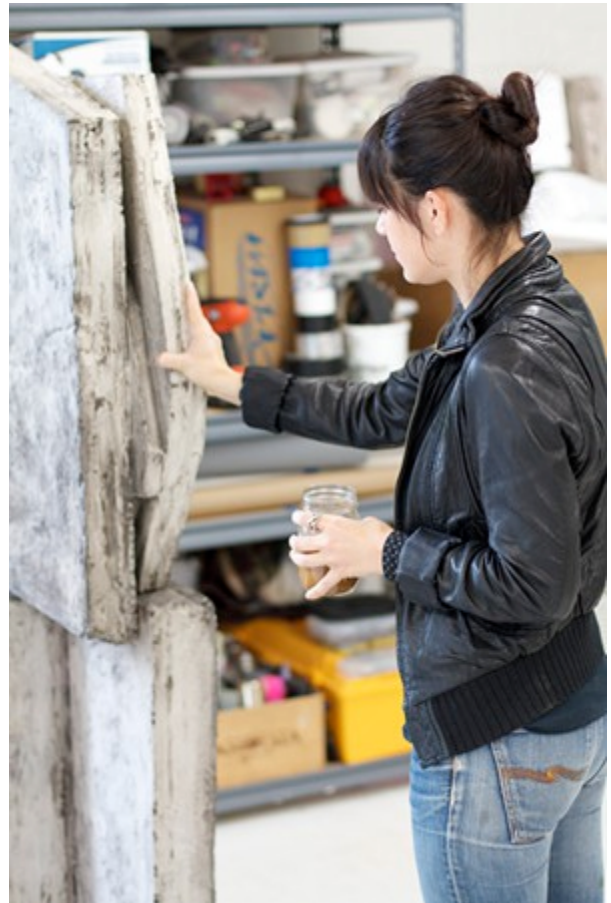




◀THE L MAGAZINE▶

Inside the Artist's Studio: Ruby Sky Stiler in Gowanus

by Benjamin Sutton



The L: What are you working on for your two exhibitions this winter?

Ruby Sky Stiler: These sculptures are made of foam and acrylic resin, so they look heavy but they're actually made of Home Depot materials and contemporary art supplies. The space that I originally had in mind when I was working on this project was this big, more spacious exhibition space in Portland (at the [Portland Institute for Contemporary Art](#)), where there's a lot of room to walk around each sculpture and have a one-on-one relationship with that object. But in [Nicelle \(Beauchene\)'s gallery](#), I have to think about the site and prepare the work, and think about how that site affects the sculptures. This is actually the size of the gallery (points at black tape on floor, which divides the studio in half)—she doesn't have a mini-fridge and all my books and art supplies and stuff obviously. But there's not really space, without it feeling cluttered, to have a meditative, circular relationship with these sculptures.

My impulse was to really honor that situation, so I'm building this platform for sculptures to sit on together so I can arrange this intentionally cluttered vibe. It's a really shallow platform that creates this kind of performative space for these figures, as opposed to a more traditionally sculptural installation, which is the way that I'd installed them previously. But I also like the way that movement around this platform really forces you to accept these as sculptures in the round, which is the way that I think about them even though they really assert a very conventional front and back. But I think that these chunky, abstract, more masculine

shapes in the other views of the pieces are really important to me in terms of the way you view the work. So I'm excited about the way that you see this as one whole work and individual works from different views at the same time. The other elements of this show are the collages—and I'm not sure how many of them will hang.

The work at [Derek \(Eller\)'s gallery](#) is really related to that, and I'm really excited for the emotional and physical overlapping, and the fact that it spans the city. When you see the show at Derek's and then you see the show at Nicelle's there's maybe a memory that happens that influences the way that you approach the next show.

Do you start each new piece with the same idea or interest in mind, or are you always responding to something new?

The origin of all of this work came out of a really haphazard moment. It seems like I'm really obsessed with classical iconography, but I'm not at all. I was in a show in Naples a few years ago and we spent a day at Pompeii and stayed with an archaeologist from the museum there. And we encountered this really interesting, random development that was happening in terms of the frescoes there—and I never followed-up on this, I'm not a follower-upper, I'm just interested in the gesture—which involved the accuracy of that really iconic color, the Pompeii red, that terra cotta color. That's the way that they restored the entire site of Pompeii and all the art and architecture there. And so apparently that may have been a mistake. And they've slathered the entire site with that color. And I was really inspired by and interested in how there's so much fiction in our sense of authoritative history.

I think that idea—although I'm really interested in and excited by the forms themselves—was really inspiring for me, and I think that's how I ended up adopting the iconography at hand. But my interpretation and treatment of those forms is where I grow in my work, more so than that initial idea. That's like a starting point, but more exciting for me is the progress that can be achieved here. I think my body is much more intelligent than my mind, and that's where the potential for development happens for me. But if I'd gone to, you know, fucking Disney World on that day I'd probably be making much different work now. I think that those themes have been floating through the work that I've been doing for a really long time. I fully assert myself as a very uneducated amateur in this realm—I'm not an art historian.

Right. You even seem to almost be parodying art history.

The kitsch aspect of this work is something I'm very interested in. It's humiliating, but there's also something engaging about it. There's obviously a copying of a canon of art history, which is really kitschy, like it could almost be in a tacky Italian restaurant or something. It's a very simple, relatively un-investigated appropriation of these masterful pieces, but at the same time I think that there's a genuine exploration of the forms, really a singular interest in making something that's expressive and original and new. So I think those two things exist together. That's the sensation that I'm curious about in work that I made in the last couple years: creating something that has an initial presence and then kind of evolves into something else.

Are the foam and resin in these new works intended to suggest any specific material?

Well I think it really overtly mimics marble, but it's obviously a really loose simulation. Some of my earlier pieces, like from my show at Nicelle (Beauchene)'s in 2009, feature a more overwrought rendering of those materials to represent another material. It's kind of like drawing: when you're drawing or representing something for the first time it's really overwrought, and then you get more comfortable with those materials, and then a gesture or a loose line can mean the thing. So I liked the really liberal usage of materials here; like you can see my paw-print. There's a much more gestural and unusual application of those materials than just the effort of simulating something else. So I think it does come further away and that it could be interpreted as different things—is it wood, is it marble? It's supposed to suggest a more expensive material. I'm just trying to make things look expensive. (*Laughs.*) But the sculptures are really made in the way that they kind of look like they would be: by making giant chunks and then cobbling them together to bring a creature to life.

Both your new and previous exhibitions at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery have elements of architecture or installation; is that something you're consciously trying to explore, or just something you incorporate as it pertains to sculpture?

I don't know if there's a particular reference to architecture. I do find that I become really preoccupied with the site. I'm interested in eking out a particular relationship of the more conventional sculptures in the room to the space itself. I do feel like looking at a sculpture—particularly versus a painting, although a painting is an object but you're looking at it so differently—really invites you to acknowledge the space surrounding that thing. I feel pretty preoccupied with that. When I was thinking about showing this work at Nicelle's I knew I had to think about how to really make it feel like a relationship as opposed to plopping this thing down.

When I made that [show in 2009](#) it was such an awkward time to do a show of for sale objects, and I was really thinking about how the gallery is this really fancy retail space and this long-term interest of mine has been an

investigation of what makes something valuable, emotionally or monetarily. And I think the work that I've made, regardless of whatever form it's taken, has been shifting between states of worth and value. I was interested in cultivating a space that would speak to those issues, and so that was how I came to the decision to make that sculpture of the attic floor. It's a bit of a self-conscious gesture, too. Because the idea of what makes something successful in an environment like a gallery versus a studio is so bound to the sales aspect. So I was subverting that aspect of its potential. Plus making giant sculptures is a different endeavor than making more sellable things. So this is my way of saying that I'm rich. (*Laughs.*)

I have a big concrete sculpture at Socrates Sculpture Park [right now](#). Working there this summer, it was like the furthest place to get to from Gowanus. It's fucking cool though, like a scene from the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. That's a very different gallery. When I make things in my own studio and think about an indoor space that has the qualities that an indoor space has I use the human body as a point of reference for scale. But when you make a sculpture that size and place it on the horizon of that sculpture park it looks like Stonehenge in [Spinal Tap](#).

What makes you return to certain recurring forms and motifs like human figures, vases, columns, and so on?

This last year has been the first time that I've really fully incorporated and embraced the figure, but even though the forms I've been making have been more abstract or more utilitarian objects, they still have an anthropomorphic presence. They've always had that human scale. I made one very large vase sculpture and I always thought it had this very overripe female form, kind of demanding, with its hands on its hips. And I actually showed that piece with this very skinny stick that came directly out of the floor and had three gloves hanging off of it, and that show was really funny because I had a relationship to those sculptures that was almost like I was a stage mom, and I found myself advocating for them, the way that one would a child actor. I noticed that since this woman form was so bossy and robust, its counterpart—which was almost like a buddy movie sidekick—would get shoved in the corner, so I had to stand up for it. And it felt like a really human relationship, like empathy, that I had with it. So I had to really advocate for it. And that felt for me more like relating to an individual with human attributes than to an inanimate sculpture. So I think it's kind of a natural evolution that the more overt figurative work is coming into play. I feel like that's a really typical gesture, to relate to anything in a figurative way, like a chair or a column, you just think of ways that it relates to your body. That's just how you go about the world, just to categorize things; it's an easy way to put things away.

It almost seems like you're problematizing that with this installation because most of the sculptures you see first from the back, and then only afterwards do you realize it's a human figure.

Yeah, so that makes the process of categorizing that form and putting it away slower. It makes it more of a sustaining relationship.

Do you work with construction materials by choice, necessity, both?

I think the reason that I like these materials is a really practical response. Although I do think that their presence comes and informs the way that you relate to the work and its meaning. But those materials are really malleable, and my working process really has to be malleable. And I think the fact that they're really low-cost materials is good for me because I create a lot of waste. I do a lot of painful scrapping of entire things. I have so many graveyards of sculptures. I definitely don't have a working process where I'm like: "And now I'll make that thing." It really is an evolution that occurs. So there's a really practical aspect to that, and then also part of what's at stake there is that you're trying to figure out, as a viewer, whether they're expensive or they're cheap, so that activity is a part of their value.

Works in your exhibition from 2009 had a really distinctive palette of reds, browns, black and white, and these pieces are very much white and off-white; are you at all interested in exploring more colors?

I have had the impulse of introducing color to the palette and there is color in my collages. But I'm not sure how that's going to start. Up to this point I've been perverting and making more eccentric the inherent attributes of carved marble, and I think there's a lot of potential to elaborate on that tweaking of those basic properties, but I think I'm probably at a beginning point here.

Do you have that sense that, with these two exhibitions happening at once, you've finished a chapter or you're beginning another?

Yeah. I don't think I'm gonna start doing performance or anything, or video, starring me, but I do definitely see this as a really good culmination. Although I don't think of my process that way. I will probably start by seeing what I can glean from what I've done here and pushing forward, and what I think I can make more eccentric. I'm constantly trying to make my work weirder, and less constrained. I was really excited to bring this show to New York because the whole emotional relationship to preparing for this show has been so much

more liberating. I usually have to go into cardiac arrest before I do something like this, but it's been really nice because I've just been adapting this work. It's a lot of pressure for an artist to keep pumping out new work for two different galleries every year, it's just fucking mental, so I'm really embracing this opportunity to show this work here in New York. Especially for sculptors; we have it so hard.

Ruby Sky Stiler's exhibition at [Derek Eller Gallery](#) (615 W 27th Street) continues through February 5, and her exhibition at [Nicelle Beauchene Gallery](#) (21 Orchard Street) opens January 21 and continues through February 27. Her sculpture, "Partial Nude, in Light" is on view at [Socrates Sculpture Park](#) through March 6.