

ARTFORUM

Sterling Ruby: Marc Foxx.

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"From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction." Thus begins Roger Caillois's "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," an essay published in 1935 in *Minotaure* magazine that interweaves issues of personality, biological camouflage, and spatial assimilation. Lurking in the back gallery of Marc Foxx, Sterling Ruby's eight-minute video *Dihedral, 2006*--the title refers to the interaction of a vertical body and a horizontal plane--begins with the same quote, appropriating and adapting Caillois's text as its distorted voice-over. As the narration unfolds, drops of brilliantly colored liquid--blood red, indigo, pink, green--enter the frame from the top and disperse in slow motion, gradually intermixing to a murky, indistinct brown. The narrator intones, "Space seems to be a devouring force," and in this sense *Dihedral* provides a useful point of entry for the remainder of the densely installed show.

Entitled "Interior Designer," this confident exhibition found Ruby already frustrating expectations attendant upon his early reputation as an artist given to goopy, grotesque sculpture, transgressive imagery, and traumatic themes ranging from imprisonment to suicide. Rather self-consciously, Ruby has dialed down the shock level to a low hum, foregrounding his gifts as a formalist. Four evenly spaced volumes, each slightly larger than human scale and covered in Formica in tawdry "designer" colors such as "alabaster" and "puma," dominate the floor of the gallery. Though they initially evoke the "unitary forms" of Robert Morris, these works, each titled *Inscribed Monolith* (all 2006), are sporadically soiled by smudges and carved with the "found" initials and symbols (DOUG 77, JOSIE) of an otherwise anonymous public body, disrupting idealistic purity and dismissing any possibility of gestalt.

Deeper in the gallery and blocked from immediate view were three lower Formica-covered boxes, also incised, that here served as pedestals for smaller cubic forms in which skeins of colored liquid are encased in clear urethane. Ruby's more familiar viscous, bodily forms have been deeply sublimated here into the repressive, orthogonal shapes of historical Minimalism. Playing off the exhibition's title, the blocks simultaneously evoke kitschy "designer" art (and a parallel art economy) and, more subtly, the interior fluids of the human body (slyly updating Paul Thek).

On the walls, Ruby alternated between two series of eight works each, both of which obliquely follow from his video *Transient Trilogy, 2005*, in which the artist adopts the persona of a drifter. In the "Mapping" series (all 2006), made with nail polish (Maybelline's Express Finish Racy Red or Wet Shine Cherry Rain) on large, seductive, candy-colored Plexiglas grounds, Ruby draws spindly polyhedral forms by connecting a seemingly random assortment of drips and splatters with studiously applied lines. The second series, "Trans Compositional," 2005-2006, features looser applications of nail polish on foil or fluorescent paper; each of these frames a single found image of one of various transgender subjects in full drag, posed in a wooded setting or a generic middle-class interior.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Adjacent to the large, Formica-covered volumes, the collaged images of trannies further Ruby's ongoing interest in mutability--transience, transgression, transference--and suggest a perverse twist on Michael Fried's negative definition of (Minimalist or "Literalist") theatricality as "what lies between." Here, the double entendre in the show's title fully engages Caillois's text about mimicry, adaptation, and assimilation, providing the show a systematic, if circular, logic. Given this logic, however, it would be difficult for Ruby to refine his approach without risking slickness or mannerism. Fortunately, his willingness to disrupt expectations suggests that his mutable practice is likely to remain just that.