

# ARTINFO

## WEEKEND PICKS

### Sterling Ruby in New York



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NEW YORK— In his latest show, *Sterling Ruby* — the Los Angeles-based artist best known for ceramic assemblages, effervescent collages, and installations that tweak minimalism's sacred forms — shifts his attention to pornography. For "The Masturbators," he asked male porn stars to take turns in front of a camera and masturbate to climax, and has collected nine of the resulting videos in a show that is smarter and less sensational than its title would suggest.

Despite its scandalous premise, Ruby's project tackles one of art's oldest subjects — the naked, male form — and portrays it here in young men with a muscular, shaven masculinity that falls somewhere between the ideals of the ancient Greeks and Tom of Finland. The nine videos projected on the walls of Foxy Production also nod toward more radical reference points, specifically an art-pornography trend that Jeff Koons, Andrea Fraser, Bruce LaBruce, and others have explored for the past two decades.

Those artists have wielded pornography as a shock tactic, perhaps the last one available in today's culture. When Koons shows himself in bed with La Cicciolina, he stares directly at the camera, thrilled that someone is watching. The portraits here are more complicated. Ruby appears at the beginning of each video, snaps a photograph, sometimes talks briefly to the model on display, and then leaves, gestures that strip some of the erotic charge from the works and nudge them toward a documentary mode.

The camera's deadpan gaze also suggests early video works. However, when Bruce Nauman stomped around his studio or Vito Acconci pointed at the center of a screen for an extended period in those videos, they framed and dominated their works. These models, left alone in a white-walled room that suggests a dilapidated studio, are involved in more complex negotiations of power. Surely aware they will one day appear on the wall of a gallery or collectors home, they nevertheless choose to perform.

Some of the models moan or mumble as they masturbate — the audio tracks create an unsettling murmur in the space — but they don't seem to be acting. Many even appear to be indifferent to the camera in front of them. One picks up a magazine and lays on the ground, barely visible. They retreat into private fantasies, which completely resist the camera's demands, guided not by the whims of a director but the duration of their own pleasure: When they climax, the video ends.

Rendering a supposedly abject act with stark public confidence, the work aspires to a state of total freedom and a complete absence of shame, essential conditions for the creation of great art. *— Sterling Ruby's "The Masturbators" is at Foxy Production, 623 West 27th Street, New York, NY, through November 21, 2009.*

**Below, Sterling Ruby recommends five current and upcoming shows in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago:**

**1. "Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield"** *— Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, Oct. 4 - January 3, 2010* *—* Curated by Robert Gober, this wide-ranging exhibition features sketches, notebooks, wallpaper productions and large paintings from 1916 to the mid-1960s. My favorite work in the exhibition is *The Sphinx and the Milky Way* (1946). *Sphinx* is a large-scale painting made out of several small watercolors showing a Death's-head Hawkmoth pulsating under a hypnotic night scene.

**2. "Paul Sietsema"** *— Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sept. 30, 2009–Feb. 15, 2010* *—* Sietsema's exhibition at MOMA is extremely elegant, while at the same time representing a kind of archaeological ugliness. Pre-colonial ethnographic objects were collected by Sietsema, and then obsessed-over via drawings and a film. The results seem to confirm our society's present loss of utilitarian focus, and our current fixation on things symbolizing the past.

**3. Armand Vaillancourt, Québec libre!** *— Embarcadero Center, San Francisco, permanent public sculpture* *—* Vaillancourt's large concrete fountain can be found at the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco. I love this public work by this Canadian political artist. Vaillancourt and his San Francisco fountain have somewhat of a checkered past due to his promotion of graffiti on public art.

**4. "Collection: MOCA's First 30 Years"**

*— Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Nov. 15th – May 3, 2010*

MOCA is one of the best museums in the world, and this display of works from its permanent collection should not be missed. Works like Anselm Kiefer's *Departure From Egypt* (1984) are finally being taken out of the MOCA crypt.

**5. "Production Site: The Artist's Studio Inside-Out"** *— Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Feb. 6 - May 30, 2010* *—* Curated by Dominic Molon, this exhibition sounds like it will give public view to a private place. I like to think about the studio as a site of retreat, a place where I can "hole up." Whereas many artists, in contrast, see the studio as a work of art in and of itself. This show may shed light on how and where artists do what they do.