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Taka Ishii

Gallery

Sterling Ruby “OCEAN”

Dates: Nov 4 – Dec 12, 2026

Location: Taka Ishii Gallery Roppongi & Kyobashi

Opening reception: Wednesday, Nov 4, 17:00 – 19:00 (Roppongi)

Taka Ishii Gallery is pleased to present “OCEAN,” a solo exhibition of the work of Sterling Ruby, on view from Wednesday, November 4 to Saturday, December 12. This is Ruby’s first solo show in Japan since his monumental installation, *SPECTERS* (2023), at Sogetsu Kaikan, and marks his fifth with the gallery. While the Roppongi venue will present his latest works on paper together with ceramics, the Kyobashi gallery will feature recent “SP” paintings—the first exhibition of new spray paintings in nearly a decade.

Over the past year, Sterling Ruby has focused on an intimate suite of plein air paintings of the Hawai’i and California coasts. Made with a sketchpad and travel watercolor kit, a noted departure from the production of large-scale studio works, these small works on paper, filled with wide skies, dense fog, and tumultuous oceans, evoke a sensibility similar to that of the famed seascapes of the first half of the nineteenth century: the sublime. Artists have long sought to represent the ocean’s awe and terror, but the Romanticists’ renditions hold particular significance, marking a broader turn away from neoclassicism and toward emotional and individual experience by being present in the landscape.

The ocean became such an integral subject of the movement that painters like J.M.W. Turner spent the last decades of his life transfixed by the coast’s ever-changing atmospheres. At the same time, on the other side of the globe, Hokusai was creating some of the most iconic images of the ocean, including *The Great Wave*. Like Turner and Hokusai, Ruby repeatedly reaches to capture the ocean and its fleeting aura through painting in its presence, using puddled greys for still waters, milky whites to reflect the clouds, and tumbling streaks to mimic the cresting waves.

These encompassing gestures also extend into new ceramics and spray paintings. Scraping clay into long, arched peaks, Ruby then encrusts each ceramic form with blue, purple, and gold luster glazes, producing a range of reflections akin to the sun and sky glistening on the water. The weight of the marine layer, however, is most strongly felt in the revived “SP” (spray painting) series. With a new sense of spatiality, these paintings (all titled *SP. H.*) directly reference the horizon both in their titles and through a distinct compositional split running across the bottom of each canvas. Each work centers on two illuminated zones, reminiscent of glowing eyes, where the sky meets the earth. Together, they create an internal sense of light, while drips descending from above suggest tears or rain. The sweeping skies, fully engaged in dialog with the seascapes, convey a commonly felt reality: that the ocean horizon is endless.

The immense Pacific not only connects Japan and California but also the countless cultures of the Rim and

its islands, whose people have long paid homage to the ocean. From ancient Japanese, Polynesian, and coastal American tribal religions to contemporary surf culture, the ocean's mythologies have been revered and its patterns followed as a way of life. Across cultures, it is understood as the Mother of Life—*Umi wa Inochi no Haha*—a sacred source, a cosmological gateway, and a uniquely balanced element: not only a giver, but also a taker of life; at times an uncontrollable force and at others a serene expanse. For Ruby, painting and sculpting the ocean cannot avoid this meditative aspect—its lapping waves embodying the universal sound of the ocean's breath—but it is the contemporary act of painting from a place, and the attempt to envelop oneself in a subject, that prompts a reconsideration of regionalism.

Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, Ruby's formative art education in the early 1990s was rooted in the Brandywine tradition, led by N.C. and Andrew Wyeth, who defined regionalism through an intimate characterization of American life. Their portraits revealed affects and personalities unlike those of the traditional portraits of their time, while their landscapes captured a vast, chilling atmosphere, often reflecting the austere realities of rural farm life. They too spent significant time studying the coast at the family's summer home and studio in Port Clyde, Maine.

To a degree, Regionalism and Romanticism go hand in hand, in that both reject movements centered on progress and instead embrace individual perception and expression. The Wyeths strove to capture the emotional presence of their subjects and surroundings, while Turner and Hokusai repeatedly turned to the sea to channel its ever-changing skies and crashing waves; each committed to the inescapable life sources of their respective regions. Though long past these historical moments, Ruby's own repeated engagement with the ocean retains a radical charge. In these sustained acts of wrestling with its elusive form, Ruby ultimately gives himself over to the ocean's scale and volatility, allowing for homage. By acknowledging that the ocean's presence cannot be mastered, the continued return becomes an act of stewardship, inseparable from awe.

Born in 1972, Sterling Ruby works with a wide range of aesthetic and material strategies from sculptures made of saturated, glossy, poured polyurethane, bronze, and steel, to drawings, collages, richly glazed ceramics, paintings, photography, and video, as well as textile works that include quilts, tapestries, garments, and soft sculptures. His work is a balancing act, maintaining a constant tension between a multitude of elements. It deals with issues related to the violence and pressures within society, and art history, even as it also reflects his personal history. In all of his work, he vacillates between the fluid and static, the minimalist and expressionistic, the pristine and the defaced.

Ruby's solo exhibitions include MAMO Centre d'arte de la Cité radieuse de Marseille, France (2025); Sogetsu Kaikan, Tokyo (2023); Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome (2021); Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens (2021); the ICA Miami (2019) which traveled to the ICA Boston (2020); Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2018); Winterpalais, Belvedere Museum, Vienna (2016); FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims (2012) which traveled to Centre D'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2012) and to Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome (2013); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2008). In 2014 he participated in the Gwangju Biennale, Taipei Triennale, and Whitney Biennial.

Ruby's sculpture DOUBLE CANDLE (2018) is in the permanent collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC. The work will be included in the reopening of the museum's Sculpture Garden and Plaza this fall. His works are included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Tate Modern, London; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, among others.

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Sterling Ruby

"Ocean (9210)", 2026

Watercolor and pen on paper

30.5 x 45.7 cm

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Photo: Sterling Ruby Studio



Sterling Ruby

"SP. H. Creation Myth.", 2026

Spray paint on synthetic canvas

243.8 x 243.8 cm

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