

CRAFT

ROSS SIMONINI

A SELF-DESCRIBED PACK RAT, RUBY IS DEEPLY ENGAGED WITH THE ETHICS, TRADITION AND SKILL OF HANDMAKING, WORKING AT THE CROSSOVER OF FORM AND FUNCTION.

Craft is ethic. It's discipline, how a person spends their time, what her principles are. This is how Sterling Ruby describes it. It's something the Amish taught him. He grew up among them, in Southern Pennsylvania, near the Mason-Dixon line. He saw them live deeply and produce deep craftsmanship. He had Amish friends and saw them build an exemplary skate ramp, a seminal moment for a young skater like Ruby. He saw objects of beauty emerge out of a quiet, sober domestic lifestyle.

Thankfully, this environment didn't yield quiet, sober work. Connections between life and work aren't always so explicit. The Amish may have a monochromatic dress code and live in modest beige farms, but their quilting is as flamboyant and vibrant as Pop art. The spinning geometries and patterned recursions hit the eyes like Sierpinski gaskets, like psychedelic fractals, everything buzzing with divinity. In contrast, the Shakers, another influence for Ruby, and a sect named after their ecstatic seizures of worship, carve spare, gentle furniture, as austere as the hard lines of modernism, a celebration of simplicity.

Craft is elemental. The art of basal needs. Clothing, blankets, shelter, tools. Things we can't live without.

It is also the things we won't live without: dishware, chairs, furniture, rugs, vessels—those objects with enough purpose to exist without explanation, and enough form to accommodate decoration.

Ruby collects all of these pieces and has an especial fondness for side cabinets. In his art, he inhabits them, working in ongoing series of basins, cups, flags, mortar and pestles, troughs, pillows. But he rarely allows an item to fulfill its purpose, as if wanting to point

at utility while simultaneously ignoring it. His punk adaptation of craft: stealing the form, rejecting the function.

According to Sterling, craft has to be utilitarian. It has to have "use value." Where fine art demands that it is useless, its only purpose to be seen, craft is an instrument with which we actively interact. In Amish homes, a quilt is used as a quilt until it becomes too worn out to keep anyone warm, at which point it becomes useless, and is hung on the wall for aesthetic purposes. It reincarnates as art.

At Hauser and Wirth in Chelsea a few years back, Ruby showed a series of framed cardboard sheets, stained and tarnished, speckled with patches of color, an *advil* box, an errant word—just enough discordant material to evoke the gesture of collage. The pieces came from Ruby's use of the sheets in the studio. As he poured his urethane works, the massive purple and pink polymer monuments for which he is best known, the cardboard caught the spillage like a tarp. He titled the collages "EXHM," an abbreviation of "exhume," which suggests archaeology, the practice of digging up the earth for relics (i.e., crafts) from ancient cultures. Ruby has often said that he thinks of his studio as an archaeological site, and the artworks as artifacts. The cardboard works look like trash, which is what a lot of relics were, and bear some resemblance to Rauschenberg's folded boxes from the '70s, but they function like the newest contributions to the tradition of drop cloth painting, a resourceful (i.e., crafty) process in which two artworks are made from a single action, which about as efficient as artmaking gets.

Craft is economical. Ruby is a self-described pack rat. He saves all his work. His studio is an

archive of failed fragments from past experiments, "shrapnel" of exploded ceramic firings, some of them fifteen years old, which he reimagines into new art. His mobiles, constructed from the detritus of other art, serve as samplers for his vastly diverse body of work. To his ceramic basins, he'll continue to add recycled odds and ends for months, firing them repeatedly until he stops seeing the work as fragments and starts to see it as something new.

Ruby often mentions the influence of Japanese *boro* (translation: "rag"), a folk textile movement in which denim and hemp and other sturdy fabrics are scavenged from ruined, vintage clothing—some of which is up to 100 years old—and stitched into jackets or quilts. The influence of *boro* on Ruby isn't subtle. You can see it in his patchwork collagist sensibilities, in his flags, in his freedom with material. Unlike the Amish, *boro* is disinterested in pattern, its method looser, less predictable.

Craft is skill, the demonstration of a technique in its most refined and sophisticated modes. Patterns that seem infinite in their complexity. Forms that can only be realized through repetition.

Craft contains the abstract, but abstraction is not its subject.

Craft is labor. It's testament to character and endurance. The ritual of knitting on the porch. Ruby has said he "holds labor very high." He started working a sewing machine at thirteen. He went into construction after high school. Now, he spends forty hours a week in a warehouse buzzing with assistants, forklifts and toxic materials that require multiple people to negotiate. He puts in solid hours Monday through Friday, breaks on the weekend and treats







artmarking as what everyone in the art world likes to call it: work.

Craft is folk. Not pop. Not mass-produced. It expresses the individual hand, and yet, it rarely seems to function as individualistic expression. Traditionally, quilting is a group effort, arising out of community, which is what Ruby likes about it. He looks at the work of Gee's Bend, a tiny village in Alabama, hugged by the river, where the communal tradition of quilting has produced hundreds of America's finest craft objects of the most elegant asymmetry, pulsing with color.

Craft is, as Ruby sees it, nonhierarchical, a philosophy he shares with the Bauhaus movement, which vehemently dismissed boundaries between high and low.

Craft is rural, which is how Ruby grew up—on a farm, attending Agricultural high school, where the only art classes available were drafting and calligraphy, for which he made wedding invitations. Even now, while living in Los Angeles, he lives in the Sunland-Tujunga neighborhood, a small town-ish, out-of-the-way nook of the city, tucked into the base of the San Gabriel Mountains.

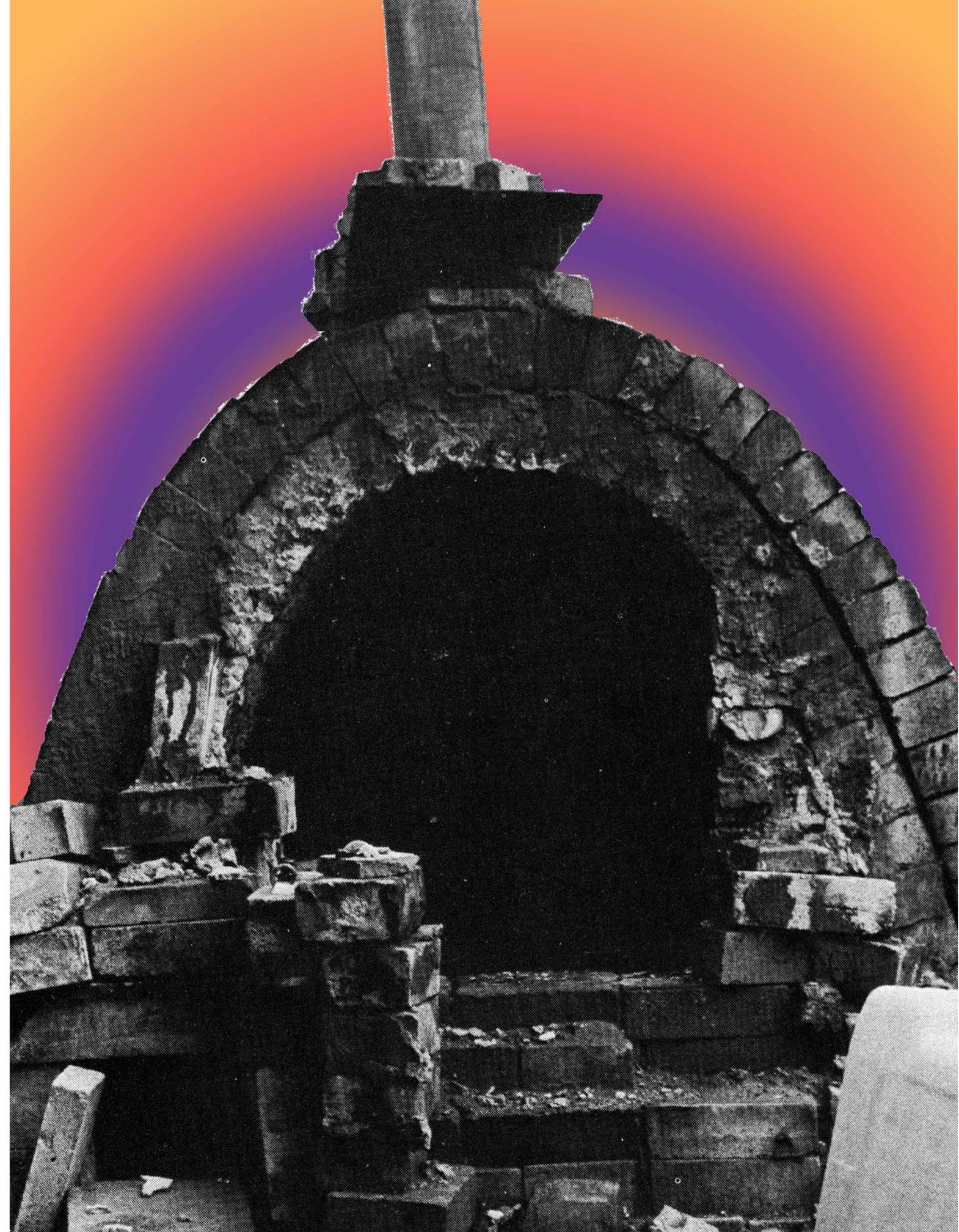
Craft is regional, and Ruby considers California a particularly important (and unheralded) place for establishing craft as a fine art. Specifically ceramics. More specifically, Peter Voulkos, the ceramist who led the California Clay movement, a raw, abstract sensibility toward a material that had not yet escaped its history.

Craft is not transgressive—not for Ruby, though it was for Mike Kelley, Ruby's teacher at Art Institute and a master of evoking vague perversions from the handmade: stitched stuffed animal

quilts, psychologically unstable birdhouses, gaudy memory wares. But for Ruby, craft is authentic. It's tradition, family and marriage, childhood.

Craft is a lifelong hobby, and Ruby's relationship with it grows more complex as time goes on. In 2014, he installed functional stoves at the Gwangju Biennale, puffing nostalgic symbols of a youth spent chopping wood on the homestead. That same year, Ruby started a label with one of the great, controversial designers of contemporary fashion, Raf Simons, to create a line of menswear: boots, parkas, sweaters, shirts, pants. For Ruby, haute couture seems like the ideal playing field for his games with utility, but for many people, this game is what makes high fashion so conflicted. They don't want to mess with their fundamentals. They get uncomfortable when clothing, the most essential of all crafts, is denied its utility simply because of a designer's financial, aesthetic or logistical antics. The garment transforms into an unresolved object that cannot be reconciled as necessary or decorative—because, of course, the decorative is necessary. It always has been. The mind divides, and the fantasy of art begins.

Ross Simonini is an American artist, writer and musician. He shows internationally, edits *The Believer* magazine and performs with the band NewVillager.



Images in order of appearance:

Basin Theology/The Pipe, 2013
Basin Theology/2-FMA, 2014

FLAG (5561), 2015

Stove 3, 2013
Stove 1, 2013

Kiln #2, 2005

Courtesy of Sterling Ruby Studio
Photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer