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Asked & Answered | Helmut Lang



By Alix Browne
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Back in 2008, when Helmut Lang installed a busted up disco ball on the floor of the Journal Gallery in Brooklyn, he explained that, in his mind anyway, the piece related to the Janus mythology — looking back and moving forward. “It’s also about transitions and new beginnings, representing time as one half respects the past and the other one looks into the future,” he said. But with his new installation at the Fireplace Project in East Hampton, N.Y., it appears that the past is no longer an issue for the designer who took what turned out to be a permanent hiatus from fashion in 2005 and has been working full time as an artist pretty much ever since. “Make It Hard,” as the show is called, comprises about 20 pillar-like sculptures, which Lang created after he shredded the thousands of pieces that remained in his archive. Sad as it may be to think about all of those wasted moleskin coats, lace and rubber dresses and motocross pants, “Make It Hard” is a poignant realization of Lang’s long-held conviction that fashion and art have become one. On the eve of the opening, Lang talked to *The Moment* about art, the passage of time and why there will never be another Helmut Lang sample sale ever again.

Q. I think that your longtime fans must have been vaguely devastated to learn that you had destroyed your archive to make the work in this show. But was the experience a cathartic one for you? And how did you find yourself at a place where you felt you could do this?

A. In 2009-2010, I donated a large volume of my body of work in fashion to the most important fashion, design and contemporary art collections worldwide. After a fire in the building where our studio in New York is located, which could have destroyed the rest of the archive, and after going for months through the pieces to see in which condition they are, I slowly became intrigued by the idea of destroying it myself and using it as raw material for my art. Also, rather than further spending time dealing with the past, I wanted to dedicate my entire time to create something new. It was a cathartic experience leading to an interesting and positive energy.

Louise Bourgeois, who was a friend and an inspiration, often used clothing and textiles in her work. Is there any of her to be recognized in these pieces?

One of the things we have in common is that both of us sometimes integrate our personal possessions in our work to a lesser or bigger degree. Louise had fabrics and clothing from her past coming from a tapestry family, and I logically have clothes that I created in the past myself. The way that I used the fabrics is very different from how Louise used hers.



How much of the labor of making these works is conceptual and how much is physical? And what are some of the processes involved in making them? In other words how do you get from a moleskin coat and a lace and rubber dress to a pillar?

The conceptual part is finding one good idea and eliminating all the bad ones. Once it gets physical, there is a more seamless flow, as there is already a direction to strive towards, so it is less torturous in a way. How did I get to the columnar form? About 6,000 shredded pieces that span over 25 years of work, pigment and resin.

I guess what I was trying to get at is how much of the physical labor — shredding, mixing, sculpting, erecting — do you do yourself? And how much is done by assistants?

The shredding was done by a shredding truck. Otherwise I work with one assistant, and I get involved wherever and whenever it is necessary.

In Neville Wakefield's text about the show, he talks of the geological slowness of stalactites. Now that you are running with the seasons of nature rather than the seasons of fashion, what has been the effect on your sense of time? And how is that reflected here — or not?

I think Neville on one hand is referring to the form of the sculptures and on the other to the long time span of the materials used. My personal sense of time has not been affected.

But it must feel good to be liberated from the creative, forced march of fashion. Do you create work these days only when you feel ready or inspired? Or maybe I am simply romanticizing the life of the artist.

You are romanticizing the life of an artist. I work every day as much as I can. Either conceptually or physically. There is more solitude than working in fashion, which I don't mind.

What of the title of the show, "Make It Hard" I suppose you could interpret that literally, in the sense that you used soft materials to make something solid. But would I be wrong in thinking there is more to the title than that?

"Make It Hard" is basically what you think it is, literally the transition from soft to solid, but you are right that there is also a sexual reference implied.

You contributed a video piece to Wakefield's "Commercial Break" project at the Venice Biennale this year. And then there are projects like Front Row, the meditation on fashion you created for the DesteFashionCollection, or Next Ever After, the mirrored sculpture you installed at the Journal Gallery in 2008. Do you feel like you will eventually gravitate to a particular medium over all others? Or does each successive project naturally demand its own form?

I work mostly in sculpture, but also video and paintings and installations, so you are right that each successive project demands its own form. I think it is good to have different ways to express what one wants to say.

"Make It Hard" is at The Fireplace Project in East Hampton through Aug. 8. Go to thefireplaceproject.com.

All images courtesy the artist