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A Seamless Transition From Fashion to Art



By Charles McGrath
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In 2004 the fashion designer Helmut Lang, at the peak of his fame, sold the remaining shares of his label to Prada, which already owned the rest, and a few months later quit the fashion business altogether. He spent the following year at his house in the Hamptons, deliberately doing nothing.

“This is very hard to do,” Mr. Lang said recently. “The first half of the year was kind of easy. The second half, I had to force myself.”

He then set about reinventing himself as a visual artist, a process that his friend Mark Fletcher, a private art dealer and adviser, likens to slow food, something that can’t be hurried.

Mr. Lang’s first New York show, organized by Mr. Fletcher; Neville Wakefield, an independent curator; and Sadie Coles, a London gallerist, opens on Friday in a Greenwich Village space that is a sort of halfway house, somewhere between a real gallery and a private viewing room. The space, in one of the grand, old Edith Whartonish town houses fronting Washington Square, used to resemble an LSD den, with shag carpeting and purple walls, according to Mr. Fletcher, who

refurbished it. Now it's a pair of elegant, high-ceilinged rooms, furnished for the moment with Mr. Lang's art: matted black sheepskins on the walls and black stalagmites sprouting from the floor.

In the strange logic of the art world, this is actually a low-profile New York debut for someone in Mr. Lang's position.

"That's the good thing about Mark's space," Mr. Wakefield said in an interview. "He's not wheeling this work out in a Gagosian-style showcase, which probably was an option."

"It's as if Helmut were a young artist," he added. "He hasn't been making work for very long."

When he was making clothes, Mr. Lang was known for designs that were minimalist, frequently androgynous and often made from unusual, even unwearable materials. He made silk blouses that looked like transparent plastic trash bags, shirts that changed color when they touched the skin and coats with collars that looked like inflatable airline pillows. His most famous design was probably a sleeveless rubber dress that required the wearer to douse herself with talcum powder before trying it on.

Most of the pieces in the show — aside from the sheepskin, some foam wall reliefs and a pair of what appear once to have been industrial scrub brushes — are made of rubber as well: big chunks and disks of it, some of which Mr. Lang, 56, scavenged himself and some he paid a helper to find. He declined to specify exactly what these objects were in their previous lives.

"That takes away from possibility," he said, explaining that it was up to the viewer to interpret the shapes. The round slabs might well have been the rock-hopper discs commercial fishermen use to keep their nets from snagging on the sea bottom. Stacked one on top of another, they suggest totem poles or hoodoos, those odd, thin rock formations, or maybe giant, unearthly kebabs. A couple, with dome-shaped tops, make you work hard not to think of a penis.

In person Mr. Lang is disarmingly modest. The other day, overseeing the installation of the exhibition, he was wearing a grayish sweater over a dark T-shirt and jeans that appeared to be authentically threadbare (unlike the \$270 pairs he used to sell that were pre-splattered to look like artist's pants).

"I have always been interested in materials and in transforming them," he said in fluent, German-accented English. "When I was making clothes, we sometimes used recycled stuff — we made clothes from older clothes." The difference, he explained, is that as a fashion designer, he was "building around a body" and now he is building the body itself.

He added that he saw his present career less as a break with his past than as a return to the kind of artistic impulse he felt when he was 18 and living alone in Vienna, after cutting ties with his father and stepmother, who insisted that art was what lazy people did for a living.

"When you're young, you're fearless and more creative, more of an outsider," he said, explaining that he became a fashion designer by accident. "I had no money but I wanted some clothes, so I had a seamstress make some for me. I can't remember now what they were — some trousers

and a top — but my friends liked them and asked if I could make some for them. I had no formal training,” he said and laughed. “My sketches looked like doctors’ handwriting.”

“But I knew I wouldn’t want to be in fashion my entire life,” he went on. “I’m hungry now for having the most time I can have for my creativity and less time for managing fame and success. In the fashion world if you’re successful, everyone loves you, and you have available every service. It’s hard to walk away, except it wasn’t hard for me. I had my mind completely made up.”

Mr. Fletcher said he became convinced of Mr. Lang’s commitment in 2010, after a fire in Mr. Lang’s Spring Street studio destroyed much of his fashion archive. Mr. Lang spent the better part of a year sorting through what remained and then called in the shredders. The resulting scraps, mixed with resin and pigment, he fashioned into slender, tree-trunk-like sculptures that he showed on Long Island in 2011: synthetic birches with every now and then the trace of a “Helmut Lang” label peeping through.

“It was a complete break with his past,” Mr. Fletcher said. “That’s when I knew this guy was completely serious, and not just looking for something to occupy his days.”

But even for someone as rich and famous and well connected as Mr. Lang, who is friends with Jenny Holzer and was with Louise Bourgeois (who died in 2010), breaking into the art world isn’t easy.

“I think it’s changing, but there’s still a kind of odd Berlin Wall between fashion and art,” Mr. Fletcher said, “a barricade between what’s perceived as a higher art and a lesser one.”

Mr. Wakefield said: “I think it’s very difficult, very brave for someone who has had such acclaim in one realm to stick his neck out in another and run all the risks that success shields you from. I think he’s approaching this with humility. It’s written into the work, whether consciously or not.”

He added, talking about his hopes for the show, “No one is going to throw down their head in despair if some of it sells. But the real thing is just putting the work out there and starting a discourse and seeing whether it can be taken for what it is, divorced from all the preconceptions and baggage that people attach to the fact that he had a career in fashion.”

Looking past his sculptures and out into Washington Square, Mr. Lang said: “I have a lot of insecurities, but you learn from your failures. I think right now I cannot do better. The process takes a very long time. I wait until something is strong enough to fight me as a piece and then I let it go.”

He paused and added: “Art is just another medium, in a way. I try to remember what Louise Bourgeois once told me: ‘Materials are just materials. They’re here to serve you.’ ”

Photography: Todd Heisler/The New York Times