

Forbes

Helmut Lang's Gallery Debut As Artist



By Glenda Toma
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Helmut Lang is back—only this time, as an artist. His current solo show at New York's Sperone Westwater proves that the former fashion designer has successfully made the transition from runway to gallery. Think of it less as a reinvention and more of an evolution.

When Lang, best known for his narrow, minimalist silhouettes and palette, retired in 2005, he decided to shift his focus to art. That was always the plan but the Austrian designer fell into fashion first. He designed a couple of T-shirts for himself; his friends then asked for their own and Lang launched his first studio in the late '70s. As the epitome of cool—simple T's, low rise jeans, effortless drapery—it didn't take long for the label to take off. Lang had a way of designing pieces that made you look good without seeming like you were trying too hard. But he never rested on that

notion. Lang's artistry was in materials more than anything else: There was a shirt that changed color when it touched skin and a dress made completely of rubber. Fabric was his way of making ready-to-wear avant-garde.

That idea—seeing what material can become—is also what drives the show. It features sculptures from three different series, each comprised of one piece duplicated over and over again. Color is the only real visible difference at first but up close, the subtle changes in surface and structure emerge. Each work can stand on its own yet still remain a part of the collection, emulating the same essence of a fashion show.

While appearing deceptively simple, the most striking of Lang's sculptures are the tall, thin pillars on the first floor. Measuring 10 to 12 feet with neutral tones grouped together on the left, singular columns of red on the right, they look like rolls of fabric from afar. That impression might not be far off: Five years ago, a fire destroyed parts of Lang's personal fashion archive stored in his Manhattan studio. Instead of salvaging the remaining 6,000 pieces of clothing, Lang chose to shred them all, knowing he would find a way to incorporate the fragments into his art. The result (mixed with resin and pigment), the aforementioned pillars.

Being one of the earlier series in the show, the connection here to Lang's former fashion life is easier to pick up on. Instead of using materials typically reserved for art to construct clothes, he does the reverse. It is a smart tactic for the untrained artist—starting with what he knows.

As we move into more recent collections, the departure for Lang looks greater than it really is. There are a number of textured wall sculptures made from thin sheets of resin and pigment. It is as though a piece of glass exploded—and Lang caught it in freeze-frame. Also on view is a group of smoother, monochromatic reliefs using, you guessed it, resin and pigment. But here, Lang's materials of choice are cardboard and tape. He layers one on top of the other and binds them tightly together, a sense of closeness that you can feel.

Trial and error instills no fear in Lang because he doesn't quite know what he's looking for. But it is that openness, even at 58, that keeps Lang inspired. In a booklet accompanying the show, independent curator Philip Larratt-Smith acutely describes Lang's sculptures "as a form of scar tissue." The crux of this show is less about who Lang is than as an Artist but how he is getting there. It would have been much easier to accomplish the former; audiences are used to the unveiling of an established new "persona," rather than one still in progress. But Lang is too self-aware. Take the pillars: The takeaway shouldn't be the destruction of his archive but that Lang was able to recognize that he could still repurpose that part of his life. Lang is on a journey and we are his witnesses.

All images courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York