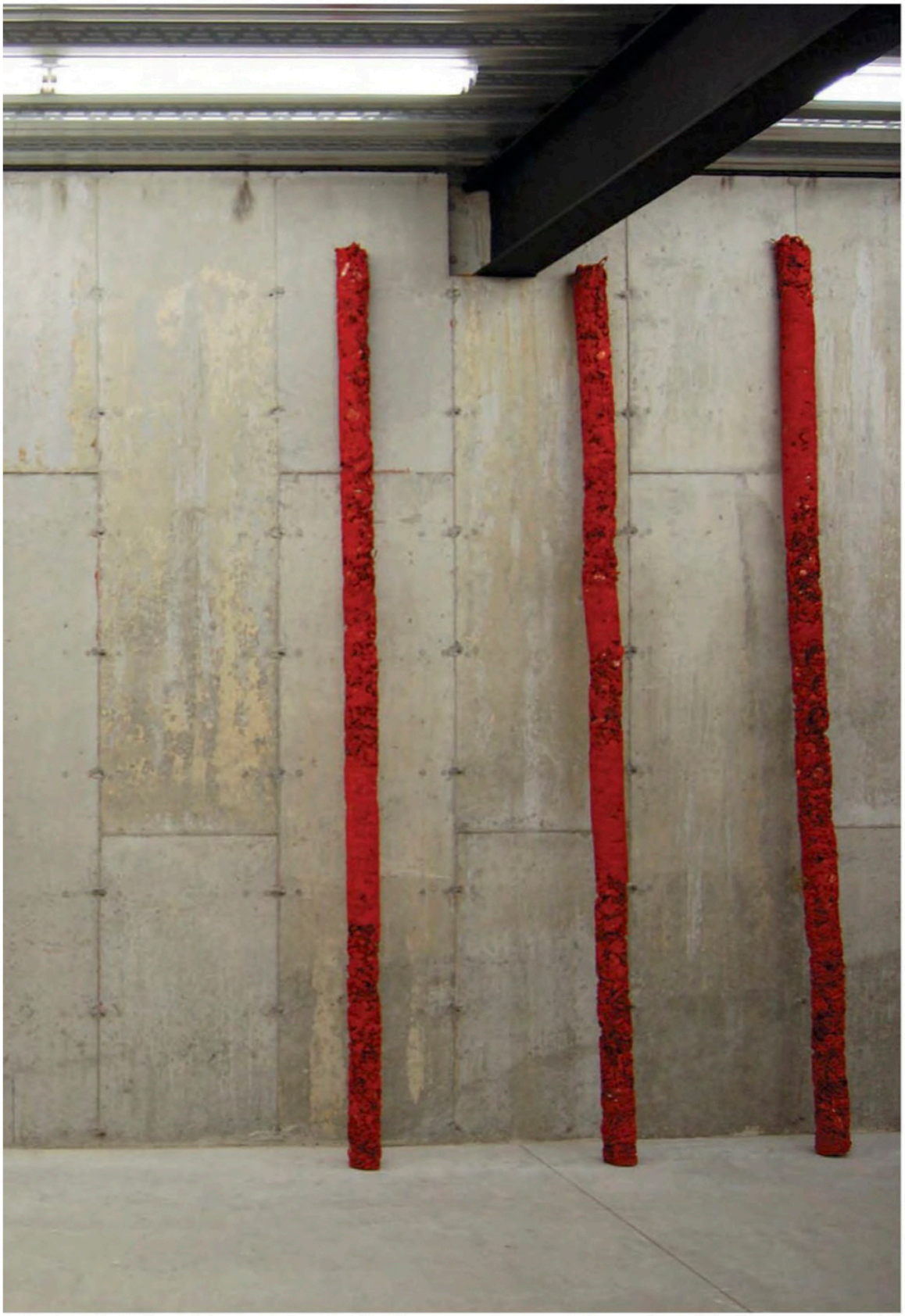
HELMUT LANG, TAKE TWO

In 2005, the innovative designer walked away from fashion. Now, after quietly working for years on highly personal sculptures in the studio of his Long Island estate, he is making his debut at New York's Sperone Westwater Gallery.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE



POLE POSITION
This page: A series of Lang's sculptures—which are made from resin, pigment and shredded pieces of his fashion archive—rest against the wall of his studio. Previous page: *Untitled*, a 2012 wall-mounted sculpture.

"[THE CLOTHING ARCHIVE] GOT SHREDDED.... I WAS VERY SERIOUS ABOUT ART, AND I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE GOALKEEPER OF MY FORMER LEGACY. SO THEY HAD TO GO."
—HELMUT LANG

ZIPPING HIS JACKET against the late fall wind, Helmut Lang crosses his broad yard to a gray barn, a gift from the heiress and photographer Adelaide de Menil back when Lang was a fashion designer renowned for his iconoclastic modernity. He transported the barn from her Long Island property to his East Hampton estate. Here, it became the obvious home for his studio a decade ago when Lang, having transformed how people dress, walked away from his namesake fashion house to devote himself to what he wanted to do all along: make art.

The ground floor serves as his working studio. Unfinished sculptures clutter the space; in the center a semitranslucent, multilimbed thing hangs from the rafter like a hunk of meat in a slaughterhouse. Lang resists lingering—he doesn't like anyone seeing works in progress—and quickly ushers me down a flight of paint-splattered stairs to a second room, where some 200 tall, thin poles lean against the walls. From a distance they resemble a forest of birch trees. Most are blackish or whitish, while some are bright red, blue or yellow. Up close, their mottled surfaces reveal themselves to be resin and pigment mixed with bits of colorful yet indecipherable textures—in truth, shredded remnants of Lang's clothing designs. "Every single one is handmade," he says with a soft Austrian accent. Elsewhere in the room are other sculptures, some looking like lacquered, minimalist shields, others like giant quartz crystals or stalagmites that have been split open. "Everybody sees something else, which I think is how it should be—if something is interesting," says Lang, dressed in jeans and a navy pullover, his once long, slick hair now shorn just this side of shaved. All are part of Lang's first major gallery show, on view now at New York's Sperone Westwater. Lang, a wunderkind when he started his fashion business 38 years ago, may now, at 58, hold the distinction of being one of the oldest emerging artists in the game.

Outside, plump, black chickens cluster near the front door of the main house, not far from a vegetable garden. Inside the exquisitely simple home, the clean scent of raw wood permeates the air. So stripped down are the interiors that a large knot in the wood at one end of the dining table stands out as decoration, as do the cabinet hinges, which subtly take the shape of Lang's initials. In the comfortable living room, one of Lang's black poles stands fully vertical, just grazing the ceiling. He points out an aluminum sculpture, a small gray house—a dollhouse motif representing family—lit like a lamp, with the words WE LOVE HELMUT on the facade. "Louise made it for me," Lang says, referring to the late, legendary artist Louise Bourgeois. "It goes with me everywhere. I think she worked two years on it until it was right."

Most of the art in his house is his own or gifts from friends. "I am not a collector; I'm an artist," he says. Asked when he came to think of himself that way, he replies, "I actually never said it—I just said it right now to you." Then Lang, who is self-taught, adds, "The definition means nothing. There are many writers, but only a few are good. There are many architects, but a few are good. Just because someone is a doctor doesn't mean he's a good doctor."

Bourgeois, who died in 2010 at the age of 98, was among Lang's few intimates. "Louise was seduced by Helmut," says Jerry Gorovoy, her longtime assistant who now heads her foundation. "He's very sensitive, very gentle, reticent. He's mysterious, in a way." In Lang they saw an inventive sculptor whose form happened to be clothing. "To me, he's just switching mediums. It's the same sensibility."

And Lang revered Bourgeois for weaving her personal history into her emotionally intense sculptures. He credits her with teaching him not to be afraid. "The most important thing she said to me is that materials are just materials," he recalls. "They're here to serve you. The subject is what you want to express. We both use elements from our past and integrate them in our work if it makes sense. We both don't like to throw things away and find a way we can use them." Lang lets out a knowing laugh: The house is pristine, with nary a stray piece of paper to be seen. "If you saw the mess in the studio upstairs...and the other barn is the same too," he insists.

Late in her life, Bourgeois began incorporating her old clothes and fabric she'd saved from her parents' tapestry workshop in her artworks, like a visual memoir. In what was perhaps a cathartic exercise, Lang found an artistic use for his own fashion trove. After a 2010 fire in the SoHo space where he stored his remaining archive, he systematically destroyed the 6,000 to 8,000 items of clothing that survived. "That all got shredded with an industrial shredder," he says, "without hierarchy." Confronted now with the charge that he had wrought every fashion devotee's worst nightmare, he chuckles and responds, "Well, I was very serious about art, and I didn't want to be the goalkeeper of my former legacy. So they had to go." He is not sentimental about stuff. "I don't like to throw things away, but I also have the ability to end chapters of my life," he explains. "I'm schlepping my life around, which is a good thing, but I'm not schlepping all my possessions."

He was sure he would recycle the bits of clothing into his art. The question was, how? For months he toyed with the "very personal raw material," Lang says. "I made it flat; I made it transparent." Finally, he mixed the fabric confetti with resin and white pigment, poured the stew into an aluminum tube and let it bake in the sun for a day. Lang made cuts, allowing escape routes for the oozing resin, which had also cracked the aluminum on its own, an element of chance that pleased him. "It was really a collaboration between the object and myself."

When he removed the tube, the finished piece was minimal in its cylindrical shape and industrial materials, but its fossilized fabric, feathers and leather commanded closer viewing. It immediately appealed to him. Lang followed the white with black, then made a few in red, green, yellow and blue. "I did two light pink ones for Louise," he says. "She used a

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lot of blue and red and rose in her drawings."

Lang's daily approach to art making is experimental and intuitive. "You have a starting point but you don't know the outcome—at least, I don't," he says. In his art as in his clothes, the appearance of simplicity can belie the complexity of thought and engineering that goes into it. Concerned with the "intersections of surface and texture, abstraction and figuration, personal memory and the abstract, and the natural and artificial," Lang says he often begins with "an imaginary idea," which he allows to play itself out. "When the work matures and gets strong enough to fight you back, then you know it is a good idea to stop."

For another series that is on view at Sperone Westwater, he says his inspiration was an accident, though it might be more accurate to credit his eye for detail. When making the poles, Lang mixed the resin and pigments in large plastic tubs. "When completely empty, there would be a tiny, tiny film left on the plastic. I thought, this is worth exploring." Carefully—the lacy resin sheets were extremely fragile—Lang arranged them in what he describes as a "very complicated procedure." "Don't ask. I was just thinking I can never make one of these again." The resulting pieces, which protrude from the wall, suggest black coral reefs or blooming flowers.

The most recently completed series that he is showing was made last year from run-of-the-mill cardboard boxes sitting around the studio. Lang collapsed them, stacked them, belted them with twine or tape—representing, he says, "the embracement of the body"—and doused them in a thick coat of resin and pigment. Smooth and geometric, the boxes demonstrate his ability to make the prosaic poetic. "I wanted to make something out of common materials," he says. "I didn't want it to be overproduced. There's a rawness and an organic quality."

That both the filmy resin works and the cardboard box pieces involve layering is no coincidence. Lang says the habit comes from trial and error, "where you do one version and it doesn't look right, you paint over it, and the next one over it and over it." He gestures to a wrinkly, white piece hanging on the dining room wall, from one of the first series he made, about eight years ago. "It's 200 sheets of 50-year-old paper. I like that there's content within, which is unknown, and the end result is only what you see. It's also a way to create volume out of lightness. You can see that underneath there are all kinds of different colors."

In Lang's view, his lack of formal artistic training is an asset. "It's actually liberating because you are not defined by the restrictions being taught, so you are just more free," he says. Then too, he had no fashion training but became one of the most influential designers in the world, making minimalism the dominant sartorial direction of the 1990s. His dark, low-rise jeans and snug, sexy T-shirts were copied by virtually every clothing maker, and endure as wardrobe staples. He experimented with high-tech and unorthodox materials, from rubber to a fabric that changed color on contact with skin. Even his advertising methods were unconventional, including a campaign atop New York City taxis, at the time the preferred real estate of strip clubs. His power was such that when he boldly decided to stage his fashion show in New York ahead of Milan and Paris, American designers followed him en masse, permanently upending the previously rigid fashion calendar.

LANG NEVER INTENDED to be a fashion designer. After his parents divorced when he was an infant, he spent his early childhood with his maternal grandfather, who was a shoemaker, and grandmother in the Austrian Alps. The family didn't have a TV, and he can't remember whether they had a telephone or used the one at the bakery next door. "I grew up in a very remote mountain village in really simple circumstances," he says. "My grandparents just said, 'Go out and entertain yourself.'" Lang's solution was to "make stuff" using whatever he could find, primarily from nature. At 10 he was sent to live with his father and stepmother in Vienna. That home's misery was pronounced: Lang moved out on his 18th birthday and never again saw his father, who since died. (His mother died when he was in his late teens.)

Hoping to study art, Lang worked odd jobs to support himself. He stumbled into fashion when he hired a seamstress to stitch up a few things he'd designed for himself. Friends asked him to make more for them, and suddenly, at 21, he was in business. In the '80s he began splitting his time between Vienna and Paris, and in 1997 moved to New York after being enthralled by the city. "I planned to come here for three days. I stayed two weeks," he recalls. "If you fall in love with New York, it becomes your home. I had been looking all my life for a home. It kind of felt like family."

Throughout his fashion years, Lang says, "I always kept in contact with the artistic scene in Vienna and did art projects in between." Art-world insider Ingrid Sischy, then editor of *Interview* magazine, was co-curating the 1996 Florence Biennale and suggested Lang team with Jenny Holzer, best known for her wry LED signs, for an installation. The two hit it off, and when the Kunsthalle Wien invited him to do a show in 1998, he agreed on the condition that he could collaborate with Holzer and Bourgeois, whom he had never met. Bourgeois consented to a visit. "I went to her Chelsea townhouse, and she was waiting for me at the top of the little steps. She said, 'Bonjour, Helmut,' and kissed me, and our friendship started."

In 1999, Lang sold 51 percent of his business to Prada and the remainder in 2004. "I had done what I had to do [in fashion]. It was successful and a great experience," he says. "I wanted to do more [in art]. I said, If I don't do it now, let it go." Lang quit fashion in 2005, slipping away as enigmatically as he had appeared. (The brand, which Prada subsequently sold to Link Theory Holdings, now markets minimalist denim, knits and leather pieces.)

Though he kept his New York City apartment, he largely retreated to Long Island. Lang cops to a degree of reclusiveness but insists he wasn't running away from anything. It's just that he needed the space to work without distraction or neighbors disturbed by noise and fumes. "It's a kind of isolation, which I find very beneficial," he says. He works hard but doesn't stick to a regular schedule, requiring time to "free-float my brain." Here in the quiet, "I often wake up at night and in this half-sleep think about the work. In this blurred vision you develop other ideas, and then you try them out."

A few years elapsed while he tinkered, but Lang was not content to while away the time as a Sunday sculptor. The desire to share his art, he says, is implied in the act of making it. "When I feel I have done everything I could for the piece, I am ready to hand it over," he says. "I do it for myself, but it is supposed to go public." He made his New York debut with a single sculpture at Brooklyn's The Journal Gallery in 2007, then had his first solo museum show, in Hanover, Germany, the following year. In 2009 the Greek collector Dakis Joannou, intrigued by Lang's self-imposed exile, tapped him to select items for his fashion capsule project, destefashioncollection. Among Lang's picks were an Azzedine Alaïa belt favored by Michelle Obama and an old dress Bourgeois had saved. But what really captivated Joannou was the second phase of the commission, in which he asked Lang to create an artwork inspired by what he had curated. Lang's response was both conceptual and acutely personal: a resin casting of five folding chairs, the sort that had once seated the audience of his runway presentations. He titled the piece *Front Row*, a somewhat melancholy nod to fashion's ultimate—and very public—status symbol. "He makes it look easy, but you know it's not," says Joannou of Lang's practice.

Lang met Angela Westwater, whose well-regarded gallery represents Tom Sachs, Guillermo Kuitca and conceptual art icon Bruce Nauman, through their mutual friend Dennis Freedman, the creative director of Barneys New York. "I had no preconceived notions," says Westwater, who admits she had never even worn Lang's designs. "The first time I went, I was totally blown away." The cumulative power of the poles drew her in. "When you approach them, they have an intimacy. They're highly physical, very tactile, very mysterious as to their composition." As she spied what she guessed to be zipper teeth, "it caused me to reflect a little bit on a history or a memory. It triggered something."

To Lang, that history, his history, is forever churning back on itself. Sitting in his dining room, his back to the sea, he recalls the American Indian symbol of the spiral. "Your life goes up like a spiral, and from wherever you are, wherever you look, it looks different. You move forward," he says. "If you look back, you know you're dealing with the same issue but just from a completely different angle." •

MINIMAL WORK
"I wanted to make something out of common materials," says Lang of his most recent sculptures, which incorporate cardboard, string and tape.