

Amuse

Helmut Lang Doesn't Want to Beautify Art.



By Stuart Brumfitt

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Whilst he's shown at galleries and biennales in Florence, Vienna, Athens, Moscow and New York, Helmut Lang's current show at the Dallas Contemporary is his first US institutional exhibition. It's part of a trio from curator Peter Doroshenko, along with fellow artists Dan Colen and Paola Pivi. "Doroshenko had seen some work of mine in Europe and came for a studio visit, and offered me a show right away," Lang explains. "He liked that the work had its own force and voice and was not trying to cater to the art market."

The sculptures on show in Dallas play with form, volume, material and light and centre around the transformation of sheepskin – normally something soft and used for warmth, it is turned into thick, unforgiving planks under Lang's manipulation. The works also incorporate plywood, steel and tar and appear in black, gold and white. As the writer and the show's installer, Neville Wakefield says, "The distress of found objects becomes the starting point for a larger meditation on acts of creative destruction and the gestures of reassembly and renewal that attend them."

Since his shock departure from the fashion world in 2005, Lang has devoted himself entirely to art, but he was actually collaborating with artists Louise Bourgeois and Jenny Holzer and exhibiting his own work since the mid '90s. In a rare interview, Amuse finds out his current feelings on art and how he's in it for the long haul.

Can you talk about your use of tarred and charcoal black materials in your art-work? They can feel like aliens attacked with flame-throwers in a sci-fi film. What's your take?

I actually don't start out that way. The procedure of making a sculpture is often raw in itself and I finish them that way if it feels right. I do use colour where it's needed for me, but I don't want to beautify art just for the sake of it. There is enough pleasant art available.

What do you find most fascinating about changing the use of material? It's something children are all fascinated by – like watching crisp packets shrink on the fire – but many adults start to forget about the joy of.

That is a practice I have always been interested in – it explores the other side of the expected. Art is supposed to transform the familiar into something new.

The press release talks of “alluring textured surfaces.” Would you say that's always been your main preoccupation, pre-fashion, during fashion and now in art?

Texture is always important. It can be raw or sleek. It depends on what it is supposed to express.

I hear that you loved Louise Bourgeois's statement, “Materials are just materials. They're here to serve you.” What else did you learn from working with her?

Not to lose time with anything one is not interested in, in order to please others.

What did you learn by working with Jenny Holzer?

That it is normal to be reclusive before you are ready to go public.

You acquire your materials from diverse sources and repurpose them. What's the fascination with found objects for you?

I use a diverse range of materials. Some are everyday materials, sometimes organic and sometimes industrial. Some are found, where I am interested in the scars of a former life they bring with them.

Why do you find “the space between abstraction and figuration” so fertile?

Because it is not pre-categorised and ready to be explored.

There is reference to the ancient symbolism of Jason and the Golden Fleece in this work. Can you explain that a little more?

After the sheepskin planes were made and I showed them to friends in my studio, they all made a spiritual connection in their comments, which surprised me. So I looked into mythologies and completed that body of sculptures with some related thoughts.

Which other contemporary artists do you admire, and why?

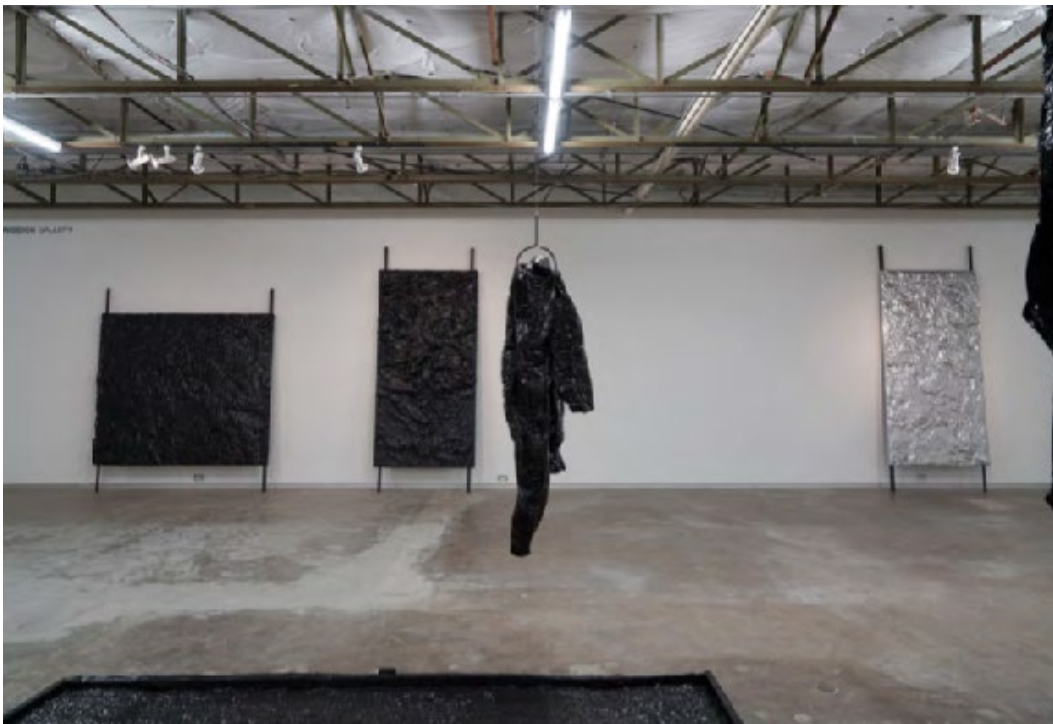
There are a few I find very interesting, but I don't like to comment on other artists' work in general.

What do you make of Dallas? Most people won't think of it as a big art city, but can you challenge that prejudice through your experience of it?

I actually did not go to Dallas. Neville Wakefield and my assistant Kiyoto installed it and I worked with them via the internet. Not a bad way to work, and new.

Are there any other fields that you're interested in getting involved with? Obviously you moved from fashion into art. Are you tempted to do something else, like filmmaking, writing or farming?

No, that's it. I am committed.



All images courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York