

# VOGUE

## An Exhibition in Dallas Completes the Reinvention of Helmut Lang



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Earlier this month at Dallas Contemporary, a Long Island-based artist from Austria opened his first solo American museum show, called “Burry.” The installation consists of sculptures made of sheepskin treated with tar and painted over in gold, white, and black. Some are stretched on sticks, others hang from the ceiling over dark and narrow beds, and some stand, trunklike, on the concrete floors. The elegant arrangement of these somewhat primitive-looking sculptures in the quiet, spare gallery space lends them dignity. Looking more closely, one is drawn in by their dense, viscous-looking surfaces and the stories they might be spinning. “Burry,” explains their creator, Helmut Lang, “is exploring memories and cover-ups, protection and the simple and opulent side of life forms.”

One needn't be a dedicated follower of fashion to have memories of Lang, one of the most forward-thinking designers to ever work in the industry. Lang became a household name in the 1990s and was known for his minimal yet romantic aesthetic—jeans, fragrances, collaborations with Jenny



Holzer and the estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, and a much-ballyhooed acquisition by Prada. Lang said goodbye to all that in 2005. And if there was any doubt that he meant it, in 2010, after a fire destroyed most of his archive, he completed the job, using the remains as material for his mostly abstract art.

Still, the extent of his fame as a designer was, and is, such that we posed the question to Neville Wakefield, the independent curator who helped install the show, and “Burry” curator and Dallas Contemporary executive director Peter Doroshenko: Can Helmut Lang ever escape fashion?

Doroshenko says yes. He first encountered Lang’s art in a magazine and was drawn to it, he says, “because it just was so different and fresh compared to a lot of other art being made today. And I think it had do with Helmut not worried about what others are doing or what others are talking about, but what passion and drive he has.” What excites Doroshenko about “Burry” is its preoccupation with “creating a personal narrative,” and one that challenges. “The wonderful part about Helmut’s exhibition,” he says, “is that it is always pulling and tugging at your intellect when you are in the gallery.”

And what of Lang's past? "Every time I mention that we have an exhibition of Helmut Lang's new artwork to anybody," explains Doroshenko, "I don't think they are fully surprised, because they know the man was extremely creative and talented, and if he's now engaged in a studio practice, it makes sense. I think it's just a mental transition for a lot of individuals, but I think it's an easy one, because, be it 20 years ago or 20 minutes ago, [Lang's] full of energy and full of ideas, and I think that's what people gravitate to."

Wakefield sees continuity between both of Lang's incarnations. "I think that Helmut has always been an artist," he says. "I think the discomforts that he had within the fashion world, if you could call them that, were about his artistic integrity. And I think that many of the issues that you see recurring in the work were also present in his approach to fashion." Wakefield adds of "Burry," "These are pieces that are made of sheepskin. They invoke all sorts of stuff to do with the Golden Fleece and other mythological traditions, but at the same time, their primary purpose, at least on the animal, is about creation, protection, and display. I think Helmut has always thought about the body in those terms, and as fashion as a sort of sentient skin and not as just a style semaphore."

There's a figurative aspect to Lang's sculptures, Wakefield says: "They really are about the way that surface and the topography of surface works, and how the sort of mythological undercurrents move beneath the surface."

Reinvention, in other words, is possible. Viva Lang!