







# AN ARTIST, DEFINED

With two new exhibitions this spring, **Helmut Lang** continues to carve out his place in the art world. Katy Diamond Hamer enjoys a visit at his East Hampton studio.

**PORTRAITS BY DANIEL TRESE**



# Helmut Lang

made a visible entrance into the New York art world in the winter of 2015 with a solo exhibition at Sperone Westwater, following gallery and institutional exhibitions worldwide. This month, he returns to Sperone Westwater, who represents him, with a show titled, "New Works," and in May, a large two-venue exhibition in Austria titled "var-i-ous conditions" shown at Sammlung Friedrichshof in Burgenland and Stadtraum in Vienna, through mid-November. An unknown fact to many is that he's been working solely as a fine artist for more than a decade, having had his first official exhibition in 1996, at the Biennale di Firenze, collaborating with Jenny Holzer on a piece appropriately titled *I Smell You On My Clothes*. Catering to the olfactory sensations of the viewer, his contribution was an invisible, lingering scent in the air, similar to that of former lover. As a foray into contemporary art, this piece, one of his oldest, gives us a true peek into the mind of a man who is sensitive and passionately driven.

Known for his eponymous brand and fashion line, Lang retired from the world of design in 2005, choosing instead to pursue full-time art making. The Austrian-born artist has been living and working in East Hampton for many years after acquiring and restoring a farm there in 1999. Along with an expansive home, Lang also has a studio on the property, a space that was formerly a barn. Entering the studio, the ground level is in full operation, streaming with daylight and designated for a rigorous, process-heavy practice, while the subterranean level is used for storage and display intended for studio visits.

His work is unique, dark and sexy. Beyond his

collaboration with Holzer, Lang also worked with Louise Bourgeois. The two were friends and it's impossible not to see her influence (specifically from the *Janus* series, 1968) in a few of his sculptural forms. When inquiring if some of the works were an homage to the late artist, he replied, "We might have some similar emotional issues," says Lang, laughing quietly. "I'm just dealing with them from a different perspective" He was referencing two untitled works best described as black canvases covered by a coated black T-shirt and a three-dimensional phallic shape emerging from the flat surface. The form, sexy and unassuming, peeks out of the armhole of the shirt, which isn't just a T-shirt but a replica of one designed by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren in 1971. "The works can have sexual implications in the end, but that is not where the ideas come from," says Lang. "I do like that the shapes are not that obvious and while at first appearing to be familiar, they are actually something else." This is an important description of Lang's work and something that is required of the viewer, because nearly all of his work holds secrets that are not initially evident.

"Reactions to the work are different for every person—it's not something you foresee or implement while making it," he says. "There are two different factors: making the work and then getting it out of the studio and handing it over to the public. The feedback is often quite interesting to me because it relates to things I was unconsciously thinking. Other times, the response will be something I haven't thought about at all but makes complete sense. I find a certain amount of interaction necessary. Art has many implications.

One is that it makes you either love it or hate it while also allowing for fascination or emotional investment."

Lang delves deeply into process and isn't afraid to allow for personal vulnerability to emerge in the end results. When making art, he moves between several different series and has at least two or three bodies of work happening at the same time. As some might note, the devil is in the details. One of his most striking, if understated, bodies of work consists of a series of thin, mixed media totems, all of them which were on view in his 2015 Sperone Westwater exhibition. They appear to be innocuous, textured and fairly monochromatic. However, upon closer inspection zippers, torn fabric and other ephemera peek out from each surface the evidence of a past life. There is no doubt that the art that emerges from a body is often also about a body, a physical presence or physical absence. Using familiar materials, Lang often works with paint, fabric, paper, memory foam and rubber but in an unusual and unexpected way. In several 2016 sculptures hanging from the studio ceiling, twisted and layered, shellacked brown paper can easily appear to be tobacco leaves or even meat. The story of "The Golden Fleece" from Greek mythology has been important to him as of late, along with the symbolism of the sacrificial lamb, which manifests in unconventional lines in the sculptures. On view now with Sperone Westwater, these works and the allegorical decoding is a gift given to the viewer without didactic evidence. He explains, "I start with the material, not knowing what the outcome will be. As Louise said once to me; 'Materials are just materials, they are here to serve you.'"



Helmut Lang in front of one of his wall-reliefs at his studio in Long Island.

