

i-D

helmut lang on the art life and his ambitious new show



By Rory Satran

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In a 1982 Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of Louise Bourgeois, the legendary sculptor looks proud and determined while holding a large phallic sculpture. The image was reused in a 1999 fashion campaign from Helmut Lang's previous incarnation as the designer of his eponymous line. At the height of his iconic tenure in fashion, he was already thinking about the same sculptural concerns that appear in his latest show at Sperone Westwater, with new work from 2015 to this year. Louise Bourgeois, like Helmut Lang, spent much of her life thinking about the body, abstraction, and the seduction of materials. And she provided a strong model for the dogged pursuit of the art life. In 2004, Lang told Peter Halley of *Index* magazine that he found Bourgeois "incredibly strong and focused at the same time." Lang has that focus too. The kind of focus that allowed him to make three new bodies of work in as many years to create an extensive New York show that includes hanging sculptures, wall reliefs (in memory foam), and floor sculptures. The colors range from amber to bodily brown to black, which Lang posits are beautiful colors. More so if you have the time to think about the theory of beauty from a remote studio in Long Island, without the pressures of the relentless fashion cycle. ("My surroundings matter," he says.) Lang, understandably, doesn't want to answer my questions about fashion; that part of his creative life is over. And in walking through this dense, complicated show, I feel so lucky that that is the case.

Your sculptures feel very intuitive. Describe your process.

I work with found objects and readily available materials to create sculptures in various forms. I explore physical forms that evoke the human body and condition, while essentially remaining abstract. Sometimes you start with an idea and see where you get. Most of the time I do start with the material and see where that material leads me. If I do so, I feel that I don't limit myself in any capacity towards where I can arrive. That procedure for me keeps it completely open and has proved that something new can happen in between. As my work is process-oriented and experimental, it is also visible in the final product.



How do you decide which materials to incorporate?

That depends on what I want to achieve. It is all very hands on. It's the interaction that makes it interesting.

Do you ever throw out art experiments that didn't work?

Yes, naturally. It is not a straight route to the end result most of the time.

The color palette for this body of work is not classically beautiful. How did you come to it?

Personally, I actually find all the shades of amber quite beautiful. I'm not convinced that achieving something classically beautiful is new enough. Maybe that idea is too traditional.

What is your daily art life like? Talk me through a typical day for you.

Every day is a bit different. There is not a typical day so to speak. One of the advantages of an artist's life is that it does not have to be structured according to typical rules. Sometimes it is very efficient in terms of actual creation of artwork, and other times it is just a matter of studying the

sculptures I am working on, and trying to figure out where I want to go with them. The time when physically nothing is happening is equally important.

Do you think about the public reception of your work?

I do from time to time, but actually mostly when the work leaves the studio to go to an exhibition — then that question comes naturally. I don't ask myself while I am working on a piece because during the work process it is not about the public perception.

What's next for you?

I have two solo exhibitions in Vienna opening in May at Sammlung Friedrichshof, where I will be unveiling new works. I am also taking part in a group exhibition organized by Todd von Ammon at Ellis King Gallery in Dublin opening in July.

What is art's role?

Art has many roles and equally it has not to have a defined one. It is really the viewer / audience who decides in the interaction with art which role it takes on for them.



Helmut Lang: new work is on view at Sperone Westwater, New York through April 29.
speronewestwater.com

Photography: Daniel Trese

All images courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York