

Wallpaper*

In black and white: a duet of exhibitions reveals two sides to Helmut Lang



By Charlotte Jansen
April 27, 2017

Something strange is happening at Sammlung Friedrichshof's galleries in Vienna and Zurndorf. Step inside and you'll find the space already occupied by some monochrome monsters, towering, imposing figures clad with shreds and scraps of fabrics, coated in thick, gloopy resin.

These beguiling, 12ft high, yeti-like creations are the latest works of artist and former fashion designer Helmut Lang, part of an exhibition of sculptures and wall reliefs — 'Various Conditions' — for which he has plundered his own archives, scrap metal yards and industrial wastelands for materials. Plucked from abandonment, Lang's materials rise, phoenix-like, into this series of semi-forms in black and white, their intriguing surfaces made up of layers of intricate, anthropomorphic texture. With their corresponding relief panels hanging on the wall, it's as if the sculptures have emerged from the canvases.

One of the artist's aim with the exhibition was to explore the dualism of black and white — hence, the galleries are divided by the two colours (white at Zurndorf, black at Stadtraum). It is a simple but effective visual trick that triggers a deeper questioning about the psychological resonance of colour. It is the matter that makes up these works that really dominates here, though.

Lang says that he likes to work with materials that have 'a certain history, elements with irreplaceable presence and with scars and memories of a former purpose', which explains the curious atmosphere the artworks create, each with their own distinctive character. Since quitting fashion for art in 2005, Lang has been consistently fascinated with mass manufactured material, transforming it into something that looks organic and alien at the same time — not unlike his signature clothing designs.

The 61-year-old aligns his approach in these works with that of the avant-garde Viennese Actionists of the 1960s — the sexy, taboo-breaking performance artists — who used blood, urine, entrails and milk instead of paint to defy the borders of conventional art and confront the ugly truths about the world.



Photography: Alexander Roscoli

All images courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York