

HOW DID HELMUT LANG COME TO DC?



By Kaylee Dugan
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Wander into the Von Ammon Co. art gallery right off of Georgetown's quiet and sun-drenched Cady's Alley and you'll find yourself in a forest. The cracked black and white columns that make up the gallery's newest exhibition resemble gnarled and blackened tree trunks. They're ghostly, spindly, husks of something that once was. Before you can get a sense of exactly what they are (construction components? Giger-esque alien technology? Salvage from some unknown urban blight?), there's a sense of metamorphoses. Surely these columns weren't created from nothing, they feel like the imprint of a much larger beast. They look like survivors.

The fragile, yet dangerous looking pieces come straight from the mind of Helmut Lang, an Austrian artist who dominated fashion in the 90's with his minimalist, yet resonant designs. Lang, who was self taught, opened a made-to-measure studio in 1977. In 1996 he was awarded Best International Designer of the Year by Council of Fashion Designers of America and by 1999 his brand was acquired by Prada. His clothes were worn by super models like Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell, while Helmut Lang stores popped up in Paris, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

And then he gave it all up. After leaving the fashion world behind in 2005 (his label is currently owned and operated by Link Theory Holdings), Lang dove headfirst into the art world, collaborating with Louise Bourgeois and Jenny Holzer (to name a few) and exhibiting his art in New York, Venice, Paris and Berlin (to name a few more). His work is largely sculptural with frayed, fractured and intensely textured components. His work is organic, yet architectural. Substantial, yet fragile.



“They’re basically the entire contents of the fashion studio...” gallery owner Todd von Ammon says as we stand among the columns, “This is thousands of objects that have been turned into this non-hierarchical material.”⁶³ the exhibition that opened at Von Ammon Co. on September 14, is one sliver of a larger series of works Lang debuted as apart of his Make It Hard show at The Fireplace Project in 2011. After a fire broke out in his studio in New York that almost destroyed his fashion archives, Lang became inspired by the idea of destroying his old work. He donated a portion of his fashion archive to art collections around the world and then shredded the rest.

“These were cast with resin inside of these big ribbed tubes.” von Ammon explains, “The material was shredded and mixed up and then kind of rammed into these molds, then the molds were cut off and the resin continued to distort itself over the next couple of days as it cured.”

The result is that haunting, striking forest. From further away, it’s a ghost town, but up close the columns give you hints about their past lives. “You can see some pretty descriptive stuff,” von Ammon explains as he points out what looks like the sole of a shoe. The black columns are more ambiguous, it’s harder to see distinct swatches of fabric or other materials, but looking at the white columns makes you feel like you’re playing an artsy version of Where’s Waldo.

“They’re meant to be looked at really closely and in my opinion, one by one,” says von Ammon. “That’s the most interesting way to approach them, and to look all the way around.” He would know, Von Ammon is the reason why this deeply evocative exhibit, with its foundation in high end minimalist 90s fashion ended up in D.C.

Since opening Von Ammon Co. this past April, Von Ammon has made it his business to work with his friends. von Ammon and Lang started collaborating on writing projects and group shows while von Ammon was working at a gallery in NYC. “Helmut is someone I’ve gotten to know over the last couple of years...” says von Ammon. “Helmut and I had collaborated on so many different things, but the one thing we weren’t able to do until now is just a straight up solo show.”

63 (which is named after the number of sculptures in the exhibition) is at Von Ammon Co. until November 2, but this exhibition is not an island (or forest) unto itself. “Everybody else who shows in this gallery is totally obsessed with Helmut and his work,” explains Von Ammon. “The aesthetic codes and parameters that Helmut set up have had a huge impact on contemporary art, especially my generation of contemporary art.”

From a shop in Vienna, to runways in Paris, to a studio in New York, to a gallery in Georgetown, this is how Helmut Lang came to D.C.

Von Ammon Co. is located at 3330 Caddy’s Alley NW. 63 is open through November 2.

Photography: Clarissa Villondo