

VOGUE

A New Exhibition of Helmut Lang's Artwork Opens Downtown on the Eve of NYFW



By Laird Borrelli-Persson
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It's pure coincidence that Helmut Lang's new exhibition, "Network," is opening at The Journal Gallery on the eve of New York Fashion Week. Still, the timing has a poignant resonance. It's been 15 years since the Viennese designer walked away from his label—and from fashion—but fashion will not let him go. It's not just that there's a brand bearing his name; there are endless, recurring nods to his work on the catwalks. The references speak both to the visionary quality of Lang's designs, and to a seeming societal nostalgia for the 1990s and 2000s. Lang, for his part, is no sentimental lingerer.

"I am always interested in the human condition, and for me, that is an ongoing occupation and naturally implies change going forward," he told me in a chat about his new work. "Both disciplines [art and fashion]," he said, "require full attention. Creating art full-time is entirely different from when you do it as a parallel practice and on occasion, as I did during my former occupation when I collaborated with other artists. The main occupation can only be one or the other."

Lang's preoccupation in this exhibition is connections. His networks are built up from the mesh of cotton canvas, which he laid on the floor and applied viscous resin and tar to "in a rather uncontrolled but accumulative way." These are strong, textural, and complex works that require time to absorb. The artist describes them as records of "direction, flow, intensity, and interaction of fluid materials." Lang, says gallery co-owner Michael Nevin, "could both control and not control what happened to these works as they were produced. If you look at each one of them, they're presenting a unique network."

Lang approaches his work from an intellectual standpoint that stands apart from geography, politics, and reference. When I suggested that the burnt quality of the tar he used recalled the work he did using the charred remains of his fashion archive, he strongly disagreed. "I wanted to share different records of interactions and consequences," he said. "I want the viewer to make their own association and be able to relate them to their personal views and experiences."

Intentionally or not, these works are resonant with current issues prevalent in the digital age, such as surveillance, information access, and connectivity. "We are, in one or another way, all directly or indirectly dealing with most networks, independent of if you are aware of them or not, or even if you have the possibility or not to have a choice in the matter," said Lang. With this exhibition, he reveals some of the ties that bind us to art, material existence, and the abstract.

"Network" is on view from September 7 - 20 at Tennis Elbow at The Journal Gallery, 45 White Street, New York City.

Photography: Thomas Mueller

All images courtesy of The Journal Gallery and the artist