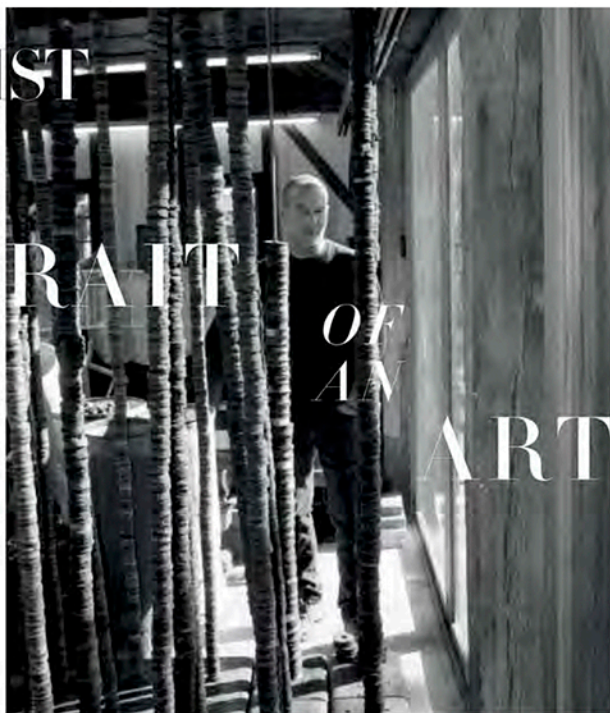


Bazaar **HOT LIST**

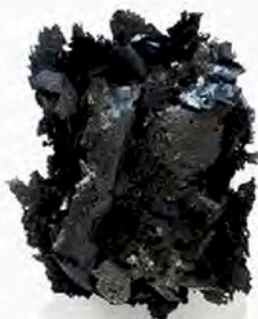
PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST



ART

In a rare interview, Helmut Lang opens up about his experiments in art and finding meaning in ordinary materials

By Esha Mahajan



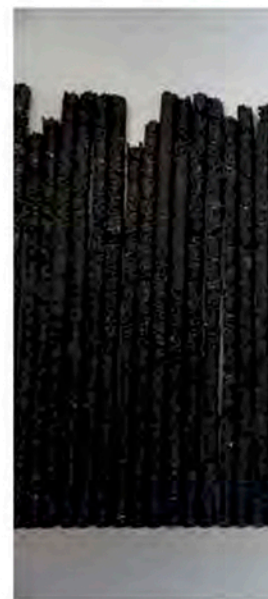
THE INCIDENT OF A FIRE IN 2010 at Helmut Lang's space in SoHo, New York City, where he stored his archive of clothing designs, is a good starting point to understand his oeuvre. Lang, who stopped designing in 2005 to focus on art, destroyed whatever the fire didn't claim, in an industrial shredder. He then mixed the resultant scraps with resin and white pigment, and fashioned them into pillar-like sculptures. The end of fashion, a beginning in art. The transformation of material into something that bears no resemblance to its original form. It is this thought that informs Lang's work today.

"I don't have a preference of the materials I use. Some are found when I am interested in their scars from a previous life, which I want to implement in my work. My starting point is most often the material itself. I start quite brutally with the idea that I have nothing to lose, and that recklessness often works," says Lang. Later this month, he opens an exhibition at Sperone Westwater in New York City, followed by key shows at museums Sammlung Friedrichshof and Stadtraum in Austria in May.

He is reticent about the nature of his new work, created over the past two years. But what's certain is his approach: Dramatic alteration of non-traditional materials. "It is my practice to push them as far as I can. The unfamiliar makes it interesting," he says. It's a style that has characterised Lang right from his avant-garde experiments in fashion—the way he used sterling silver fabrics in 1999, and nylon and metal bomber jackets in 2003. This is a man who has created silk blouses that looked strikingly similar to plastic trash bags. And who can forget that latex rubber dress from 1994, so form-fitting one would have to liberally apply talcum powder to wear it.

His process in art is much the same, to entirely new results. "I approach the piece with the perception of the outcome, which is then condensed and layered, broken up

(Clockwise from top)
Helmut Lang, Long Island, 2016;
installation views from the Helmut Lang exhibition at Sperone Westwater, New York, 2015;
Untitled, 2012, also from the exhibition at Sperone Westwater, 2015.

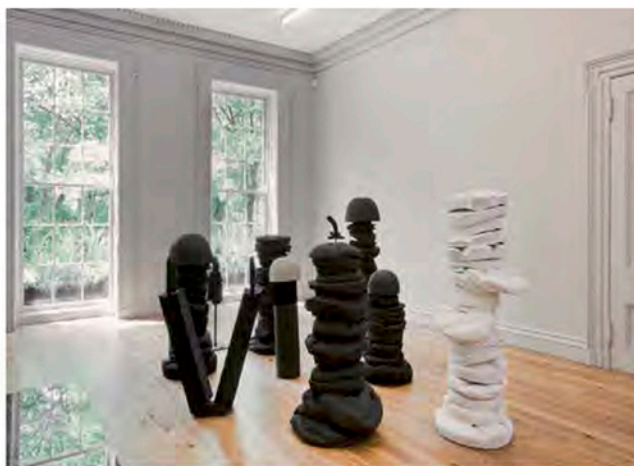


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and again collected. I overwork every piece numerous times to push it further. It is that effort that eventually leads to something new. I have no explanation as to how I decide on the treatment for my work—that process is intuitive, instinctive, impulsive, and emotional,” says Lang, who has exhibited at galleries and museums in Vienna, New York, Moscow, Athens, and Hanover, where he held his first solo show in 2008.

Consider an ongoing project, *Selective Memory Series*, in which he alters letters and notes from friends like Carine Roitfeld, Bruce Weber, Madonna, and Quentin Tarantino, dating to 1986, the year he began showing at Paris Fashion Week. “To Helmut who sends me beautiful flowers Love Louise” says one, in artist Louise Bourgeois’s childlike handwriting. And yet the pieces aren’t so much about the original messages as they are about the treatment Lang gives them—from superimposing letters to scribbling upon them. *Burry*, his 2016 solo show at the Dallas Contemporary, featured bed-like planks of sheepskin, the soft fleeces hardened with a thick coating of tar. They’re predominantly black, like many of his earlier works—a Himalayan wool and silk hand-knotted rug (*Untitled*, 2013), and a textured cushion (*Art Pillow*, 2015). “Black has so many different shades, and is also the sum of all colours put together. So, in a way, it’s all colours in one.”

It’s hard to talk about Lang without recalling his contribution to fashion (the low-rise jean, anyone?), but even then, art remained integral. In 1996, he collaborated with artist Jenny Holzer for *I Smell You on my Clothes* at the Firenze Biennale. He created a “human scent” for the pavilion, while she made an LED installation with the words ‘You Are The One. You Are The One Who Did This To Me. You Are My Own’. Later in 2000, when his brand launched a fragrance, the advertisements simply featured Holzer’s words—‘I Bite Your Lip’, ‘I Breathe Your Breath’, among others. “I grew more fond of the idea of working beyond fashion and focus on art, as it seemed to be a bigger challenge at that point in my life. I did not think that, for me, fashion and art could coexist with equal measure, as each discipline demands everything one has to give.” ■



(From top) An installation view of Helmut Lang: *Sculptures* at Mark Fletcher, New York, 2012; *Untitled*, 2012, made with resin and pigment; an installation view of Helmut Lang.

