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In the galleries: A former pillar of the fashion world crafts compelling art

First as a fashion designer and now as an artist, Helmut Lang creates. Yet his Von Ammon Co. show, “63,” is grounded in destruction. The Austria-bred New Yorker is showing an array of rounded columns — mostly black, but some white — assembled from remnants of his fashion archive. The craggy pillars consist primarily of shredded clothing held together by pigmented resin. They’re interlaced with the space’s actual support posts, which are whitewashed wood and (with one exception) rectangular.

Lang’s decision to construct art from traces of his former career was not as calculated as it might seem. The bits of clothing he used to make “63” were damaged in an accidental fire at his studio, he explained in an interview with *AnOther* magazine. The garments became useless as design examples but could still have purpose as building materials. If there’s anything symbolic about the installation, it’s not the columns’ ingredients but their number: Lang is 63 years old.

The pillars are arranged in two tidy grids, with an open corridor between the groupings that suggests a promenade through two groves of trees in a European-style garden. The layout suits the columned room and is as orderly as the sculptures themselves are messy: A closer look reveals clumps, bulges, gaps and bits of brightly colored trash. Monochromatic only from a distance, the posts appear both deliberate and haphazard.

A glance toward the ceiling discloses another contrast between regularity and randomness. The columns, which are held in place by discreet wires, are not exactly the same height. Of course, real trees are not identical either, even when planted and cultivated for the most formal of gardens. “63” may invoke the factory and the junkyard, but there’s a hint of a real forest in Lang’s vision.

Helmut Lang Through Nov. 2 at Von Ammon Co., 3330 Cady’s Alley NW.

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