



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Jean Shin: Common Threads

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Brochure Text

Jean Shin has gained national recognition for her transformative installations that give new life to the castoff items of consumer society. Her inventory of scavenged and obsolete materials includes worn shoes, lost socks, broken umbrellas, discarded lottery tickets, and prescription pill bottles, all of which she accumulates in massive quantities. Shin then transmutes her humble finds through a meticulous process of deconstruction, alteration, and restoration. The resulting sculptures and installations consist of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of seemingly identical objects, each of which carries a multitude of potential meanings that inspire both personal and collective associations. The effect is both seductive and arresting. The pieces are at once rigorously formal and emotionally resonant, mass-produced yet insistently handmade. They reference a wide range of art historical precedents, from minimalism, with its unyielding repetition of singular forms, to feminism, with its focus on traditional craft techniques, and Arte Povera, with its connection to everyday life.

Shin is equally indebted to the legacy of twentieth-century assemblage art, in particular the experiments of Louise Nevelson, whose dense arrangements of scavenged objects possess a striking visual unity, but also emphasize the astonishing variety of constituent parts. This duality is a signature feature of Shin's work, as is her exuberant use of color. Shin, however, departs from her predecessors by expanding assemblage into the realm of the participatory. She not only focuses on the power of the objects themselves but also their relationship to the environment and the viewer. This emphasis on the actual circumstances in which one encounters a work of art—the space of lived experience—recalls the work of postminimalist artists, such as Eva Hesse and Félix González-Torres, who championed a type of sculptural viewing predicated on process, participation, and the body. The notion of an embodied viewing is elegantly articulated in Shin's "site-responsive" sculptures and installations, which draw the viewer into a close visual and physical encounter.

The body is a central metaphor in Shin's work, born from her study of anatomy, life drawing, and figurative painting at the Pratt Institute, and expanded at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She frequently gathers material from friends, relatives, colleagues, and community

members. The donated items serve as surrogates for their original owners by referencing the body both physically and metaphorically. This relationship is particularly evident in Shin's early sculptures and installations, comprising clothing and related accessories.

One such work, *Untied* (2000), consists of hundreds of thrift-store neckties cascading over a freestanding chain-link fence. Shin first showed the work on a city street in New Haven, Connecticut, under the title *Fringe* (2000). The installation was subsequently adapted for gallery exhibition. In both versions, the neckties are knotted row upon row in a spectrum of colors and patterns; however, their interpretations differ markedly. The installation of *Fringe* was presented along a twenty-foot stretch of fence on the edge of a vacant lot owned by area real-estate developers. Shin fashioned the silky array as a commentary on the radical divide between wealth and poverty in the city. Unexpectedly, pedestrians waiting at the nearby bus stop began taking ownership of the ties, literally and figuratively. Some were taken for personal use—job interviews and Sunday church services—while the remaining ties were pulled through the mesh barrier to face the street rather than the vacant lot. This process of reclamation became a powerful gesture of optimism and transcendence, as the community attempted to better its sartorial and municipal appearance. Not surprisingly, when the installation is removed (or untied) from its urban environment and presented in a gallery setting, the connotations change. The fence no longer acts as an impassable barrier separating property and people as it did in New Haven. In the gallery, visitors can circumnavigate the installation, literally viewing it from “both sides of the fence.”

Chance City (2001/2009) also comments on the experience of urban life. The project was first installed at Art in General in New York, and since then has been exhibited in a variety of different locations and configurations. The work comprises thousands of discarded instant lottery tickets, which Shin collected in New York City and Washington, D.C., over three years. Each ticket is painstakingly balanced on top of the other to create a sprawling city of cards without supplementary support. The inevitable collapse of Shin's structure serves as a metaphor for the lottery ticket's illusory promise of fast cash and the inherent vulnerability of a society built on the precarious pillars of money and chance. However, despite the overwhelming sense of failure generated by thousands of losing lottery tickets, *Chance City* reverberates with a palpable sense of optimism.

Although the materials for *Fringe/Untied* and *Chance City* were amassed from anonymous donors, the idea of community engagement played a significant role in the conception of these early projects. Recently the practice of soliciting donations from a specific group has become increasingly

important, as she cites here: “The process of accumulating hundreds of a particular discarded object for my installations becomes an informal survey that reflects our identity as a society—ultimately creating a ‘collective portrait’ of our immediate community.”¹ This aspect of collaboration is an integral part of Shin’s process, and many of her recent projects emerge from a close dialogue with a particular organization.

For *ARMED* (2005), Shin contacted the Harbor Defense Museum at Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, to identify local servicemen and women who would be willing to donate their uniforms. Soldiers from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard all participated in the project to create a vast mural of American military uniforms. The different types of camouflage reflect the varied landscape in which American troops have historically served, from the jungle to the desert. As in similar works, Shin disassembled each garment. Seams, cuffs, and collars were removed to create a canopy, while the larger pieces were starched flat for application to the wall. The fabric mosaic reflects the regimented culture of military service, which demands that individual identity be abandoned in favor of the group. However, each fragment in *ARMED* carries a personal history of the former owner.

The notion of communal versus individual identity is similarly articulated in *Unraveling* (2006). Here again, Shin gives visual form to a unique population. The sweaters belong to members of the Asian American arts communities in New York, Houston, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Washington, D.C., where the piece has been shown. Shin has painstakingly unraveled the sweaters and connected the yarns in a brightly colored web that reflects the dynamic social network of artists, curators, collectors, and dealers, among others. A label bearing the name of each participant is sewn onto the edge of the owner’s deconstructed garment. *Unraveling* is an extraordinary testament to the artist’s agile hand and tenacious work ethic. Shin attributes her labor-intensive practice to the example set by her parents, who immigrated from Seoul, South Korea, to the suburbs of Maryland in 1978 when Jean was six. Their emphatic commitment to hard work at the family grocery store remains a source of pride and inspiration.² The experience of stocking shelves, rearranging inventory and bonding with neighborhood customers has not only informed Shin’s process but also the formal and conceptual thrust of her work.

Chemical Balance III (2009) deals more directly with the production, commodification, and consumption of commercial goods. Thousands of empty prescription pill bottles are stacked into

towering arrangements that resemble natural forms such as stalactites and stalagmites. The installation speaks to our culture's overconsumption of prescription drugs and our dependency on these medications to correct or alter our internal chemical balance. The containers were collected from nursing homes, pharmacies, friends, and family of the artist. This new version of *Chemical Balance* incorporates lighting elements inside each structure. The addition of artificial illumination functions as a metaphor for the relief and renewed optimism that comes from restored health after an illness.

Shin's intimate reference to the human body in *Chemical Balance III* is also evident in *TEXTile* (2006). Commissioned by the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) in Philadelphia, *TEXTile* consists of thousands of discarded computer keys that Shin extracted from keyboards and re-contextualized. The key caps are attached to a continuous textile, which, when read from left to right, spells out a line-by-line transcript of the email correspondence between Shin and the project staff. Thus, the custom-made keyboard documents the process of its own making during Shin's residency at FWM. The first three rows of the textile are "active" keys on which viewers are invited to type. Their text instantly appears on the projections at the end of the textile, creating a virtual extension of the conversation within the key-encrusted cloth. In a surprising twist, visitors will discover that the traditional QWERTY layout of the keyboard has been scrambled, forcing them to search for individual letters within existing words in order to compose their own text. The work calls attention to objects that most of us touch every day as a means of communication between co-workers, friends, and family. For Shin, the act of typing on a keyboard has a physical immediacy that not only relates to the body but also to the construction of language in a technology-driven society.

In her newest work, commissioned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Shin celebrates the unsung heroes of our society whose everyday labors go unnoticed and unrecognized. *Everyday Monuments* (2009) grew out of Shin's interest in the site of Washington, D.C., as a city planned and built around monuments "that remind and reassure us of permanence and stability as they embody our society's heroic ideals."³ Shin chose an equally symbolic, everyday object to represent the multitude of occupations in the United States: the sports trophy. According to the artist: "These modest versions of public monuments mark our personal achievements as well as our past. They showcase idealized figures . . . however this grandeur fades . . . Like monuments in ruin, the trophies' worn surfaces and chipped bases recall bittersweet memories of glory days now past."⁴

Nearly two thousand trophies were donated by Washington-area residents and transformed in Shin's Brooklyn studio to modify idealized sports poses with the unsensational gestures of everyday

tasks. In the completed installation, the altered trophies are arranged on the gallery floor in a pattern suggesting the layout of the National Mall. Thus, the hundreds of shimmering figurines symbolically fill the expanse of Washington's signature public space, just like the crowd of millions that gathered to witness the recent inauguration. Shin explains that "metaphorically, the mass of trophies represents an overall collective desire; while . . . the projections appear impermanent, fragmented, and vulnerable, thus calling into question our perception of societal ideals and realities."⁵

Everyday Monuments epitomizes Shin's art of the past decade. This stunning evocation of the nation's capital and the American work force touches on ideas of community, memory, and the body, all recurring themes. By giving new life and restored purpose to forgotten objects, Shin shows us that value and beauty can be found in the most unanticipated places.

Joanna Marsh

The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

1. Jean Shin, "An Interview with Jean Shin," *Accumulations*, exhibition brochure, University Art Museum, Albany, New York, 2005.
2. Brooke Kamin Rapaport, "Jean Shin's Accumulations of Ephemera," *Sculpture*, July/August 2008, p. 33-4.
3. Megan Gambino, "Calling All Trophy Holders," *Around the Mall: Scenes and Sightings from the Smithsonian Museums and Beyond*, December 9, 2008, <http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/aroundthemall/2008/12/calling-all-trophy-holders-artist-wants-yours/>
4. Unpublished Shin interview via email with Megan Gambino in preparation for "Calling All Trophy Holders," *Around the Mall: Scenes and Sightings from the Smithsonian Museums and Beyond*, December 9, 2008.
5. Ibid.