



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Jean Shin: Common Threads

May 1, 2009 – July 26, 2009

Exhibition Wall Text

Jean Shin was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1971, and immigrated to suburban Maryland with her family at the age of six. In 1990, she moved to Brooklyn to study painting at Pratt Institute and has since made New York her home, finding inspiration in the city's crowded streets and commercial districts. Over the past decade, Shin has created a diverse body of work using ordinary items accumulated through a lengthy process of social exchange with friends, relatives, and various communities. Her materials bear the mark of age and excessive wear, evoking the pace and density of urban life. Broken umbrellas, empty wine bottles, old record albums, and used clothing are just a few of the objects that Shin has collected in massive quantities and reconfigured into sculptural installations. In her hands, these humble items become new again, revealing the potential in things we seldom give a second glance.

Jean Shin: Common Threads brings together eight works that reflect the diversity of materials, techniques, and themes the artist regularly employs. Among the installations on view are *Chemical Balance*, a towering arrangement of empty pill bottles that speaks to our dependency on prescription medications; *Chance City*, a sprawling landscape of scratch-and-win lottery tickets, whose inevitable collapse serves as a metaphor for the illusory promise of fast money; and *Unraveling*, a dense web of woolen threads that visualizes the network of relationships within the Asian American arts community.

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Untied

2000

neckties knotted on chain-link fence

Courtesy of the Artist and the Artist Pension Trust

This compelling installation of thrift-store neckties was first shown in New Haven, Connecticut, under the title *Fringe*. The original installation was presented on the edge of a vacant lot owned by area real-estate developers. Shin fashioned the project 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 it by removing the ties for personal use and also pulling them through the mesh barrier to face the street instead of the lot. This process of reclamation was a gesture of optimism, 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 separates property and people as it did in New Haven, but instead suggests the accessibility of art to all socioeconomic groups.

Chance City

2001/2009

\$32,404 worth of discarded losing lottery tickets

Courtesy of the Artist and the Artist Pension Trust

Chance City is the quintessential monument to urban life. Neither stable nor permanent, it replicates the unpredictable nature of contemporary existence. 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 that Shin collected from East Coast cities over three years. Each ticket is painstakingly stacked on top of another 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 money. *Chance City* assumes even greater significance when considered in light of the current financial crisis, with its precarious arrangement suggesting the inherent vulnerability of our global economy and our very way of life.

Penumbra

2003

single-channel video with sound, 5 minutes, 13 seconds

Courtesy of the Artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Penumbra documents an installation of the same name created on the grounds of Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York. Using the fabric from lost and broken umbrellas, Shin fashioned an immense canopy that enlivened the surrounding landscape. The assorted fabrics were sewn together and strung from cable wires to form a passageway between the trees. Once used to provide shelter from the rain and snow, the repurposed umbrella fabric became a welcome source of shade on sunny days. In Shin's video, the subtle play of wind and light across the deconstructed umbrellas conveys the aesthetic potential of these seemingly useless objects.

ARMED

2005/2009

cut fabric (U.S. military uniforms), starch, thread

Courtesy of the Artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

This vast mural of American military uniforms was made possible by the generosity of servicemen and women from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. The different types of camouflage reflect the varied landscape in which American troops have served, from the jungle to the desert. For this artwork Shin disassembled and reconfigured each garment, removing seams, cuffs, and collars to create a canopy, while starching larger pieces flat for application to the wall. The fabric mosaic reflects the regimented culture of military service, in which individual identity is subsumed in favor of the group. However, each garment in *ARMED* carries a personal history of the former owner that remains embedded in the fabric.

TEXTile

2006

22,528 recycled computer keycaps and 192 custom keycaps, high-performance laminate fabric and Spectra Fibers, customized active keyboard, interactive software, and painted aluminum armature
The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

Shin extracted thousands of keys from discarded computer keyboards to create this interactive sculpture. 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. The sculpture literally documents the process of its own making. Visitors are invited to type their own messages on the active keys that comprise the first three rows of text, creating a virtual extension of the conversation. However, the traditional QWERTY keyboard layout has been scrambled, forcing participants to search for individual letters within the existing words. *TEXTile* calls attention to an object that we use every day, but seldom consider beyond its basic function. For Shin, the tactile immediacy of typing on a keyboard reminds us that the process of communicating remains inextricably linked to the body.

Unraveling

2006–2009

sweaters collected from Asian American art communities in New York, Houston, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Washington, D.C.

Courtesy of the Artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Unraveling examines the networks of Asian Americans in the art world. The project was originally presented in New York City and has subsequently traveled to museums in five U.S. cities. Every time the work is shown, Shin invites a small group of community members to donate sweaters. The project now comprises nearly two hundred participants, each represented by a sweater. New participants receive a full list of previous donors and are asked to identify acquaintances. The collected sweaters are then unraveled and added to the installation, creating an intricate skein that gives literal form to the complex network of social relationships.

Chemical Balance III

2009

prescription pill bottles, acrylic mirrors, epoxy, fluorescent lights
Courtesy of the Artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Chemical Balance III deals with the production, commodification, and consumption of prescription medications. Thousands of empty prescription pill bottles, which Shin collected from nursing homes, pharmacies, and friends, are stacked into towering arrangements that resemble natural forms such as stalactites and stalagmites. This massive accumulation of containers speaks to the growing cultural dependency on pharmaceuticals to correct or alter our internal chemical balance. The work is not, however, a wholesale indictment of such practices. The inclusion of artificial lighting elements inside each structure provides an ambient glow that suggests the restorative power of prescription drugs and the emotional relief that comes from renewed health.

Everyday Monuments

2009

sports trophies, cast and sculpted resins, digital projections
Courtesy of the Artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

Nearly two thousand trophies were donated by Washington, D.C.-area residents for Shin's newest project, *Everyday Monuments*, created especially for this exhibition. Inspired by the historic monuments and heroic statuary that adorn our nation's capital, this sprawling installation venerates the accomplishments of ordinary Americans—stay-at-home moms, waitresses, janitors, postal carriers—and any individual whose everyday labors go unrecognized. Shin transforms each figurine to represent these tasks. The altered trophies are arranged according to a scale plan of the National Mall, symbolically filling the expanse of Washington's signature public space.