



Interview

Interview with Jean Shin

AAA's Enoch Cheng speaks to the Korean American artist Jean Shin about her experiences working with everyday items collected from communities and the challenges of carrying out long-term projects...

Asia Art Archive: Let us begin this interview a little differently. I will give you three keywords or phrases and you can let your mind run freely and see what it brings us.

"People"

Jean Shin: My current art practice involves a kind of social exchange. Through the process of acquiring and transforming everyday objects, I directly engage people by asking them to participate in the creation of the work. The donated objects reflect the lives of their former owners, becoming their surrogates in a way. I think of my projects as abstract group portraits of society, initiating dialogue between different people from various backgrounds by focusing on a common object that connects them. In *Unraveling*, the installation of sweaters not only reflects their individual owners, but also maps the larger social network within the Asian American arts community. By reattaching the spools of unravelled yarn to other sweaters, it makes visible the bonds and connections between people.

AAA: "Pieces of memory"

JS: The objects in my installations have traces of memory embedded in them - they communicate people's lives, histories and identities. Everyday objects trigger very specific memories; they have the capacity to capture both the profound and mundane things that occupy our experience. Seen collectively, these transformed objects weave individual personal narratives into a reflection on the larger society we are a part of.

AAA: "Gleaners" (Have you seen the movie *Gleaners and I*, which is about how people "pick up" unwanted things, such as discarded large, strange shaped potatoes, food, and images of strangers?)

JS: I watched the movie and became fascinated by the resourcefulness employed by "Gleaners" to live off the land. Although I recognize the link with *Gleaners* to my early work, it seems less connected to my current practice. My recent projects have less to do with a kind of "foraging" of found and leftover

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Chance City, 2001-09, \$32,404 worth of discarded "Scratch & Win" losing lottery tickets (no adhesive), installation at Smithsonian American Art Museum, photography by Seong Kwon, courtesy of the artist



Detailed view of *Chance City*



Everyday Monuments, 2009, sports trophies, painted cast and sculpted resins,

materials. Instead, I'm engaged with researching, soliciting and negotiating with individuals and communities who collaborate in an object exchange with me. Often, these objects, such as trophies or old keys, are not seen as playing an active role in people's lives, but nevertheless are held onto because they carry some non-material value or meaning.

AAA: You are often referred to as an Korean American artist, sometimes even "female". How do you find these titles? Do they matter to you?

JS: I am many things: an artist, American, Korean, female... I am also a New Yorker, an educator, a mother, and a number of other specific identifies that inform my experience, but do not exclusively define who I am and what I'm capable of doing. No one wants to be labelled. If these titles are used to limit the context and reading of my work, then it is best to avoid these cultural stereotypes.

AAA: Participation and everyday life have been large themes for contemporary art, especially in the past decade. How did you get involved? Did any artist inspire you to do this in the first place? Or are there any artists you admire who are working with a similar theme?

JS: In my early pieces, I was working with clothing as a material and dealing more closely with issues of the body. At the time, I looked at Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois and Janine Antoni. As I began creating larger installations out of common objects, the concerns of everyday life generated the content for my work. Participation also became more important to me as I began making more site-specific projects. The work engages not only specific architecture and places, but also the communities and people that will ultimately encounter and interact with it. There are so many artists that have inspired this kind of strategy for me: from the artists of Arte Povera, and Yoko Ono, to Felix Gonzalez-Torres and many other contemporaries.

AAA: Your works transform the meaning of objects. How do you become connected to the hundreds and thousands of similar objects in front of you - such as a mountain of used tickets or pill bottles - and give them a second life?

JS: The process of acquiring these materials from the community is both elaborate and time-consuming. I'll often try to find resources (such as museums, schools, restaurants and stores) and bring on collaborators that agree to help collect the objects with me. In the case of the used lotto tickets for *Chance City*, I convinced nearby convenience stores to save used tickets for me, from their customers over the course of a year. In another project, I worked with nursing homes to collect prescription pill bottles from their residents. Often times, the exhibition venue will be instrumental in brainstorming the best way to reach out to their audiences and connecting them to the making of the artwork. My friends, family and colleagues are always great resources - they have all contributed many items over the years - and, thankfully, they forward my requests to their social networks. It's getting easier to reach a broad audience through email, Facebook, and other online forums to request participation, but word of mouth is always best.

projections, commissioned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. for the exhibition 'Jean Shin: Common Threads', photography by: Seong Kwon, courtesy of the artist



Detailed view of *Everyday Monuments*



Dress Code, 2008, cut fabric (military uniforms and citizens' clothes), Beva adhesive on 18 painted aluminum composite panels, installation in the lobby of the George H. Fallon Federal Building, Baltimore, MD, commissioned for the United States Government by the General Services Administration Art in Architecture Program, photography by: Seong Kwon, courtesy of the artist



Detailed view of *Dress Code*

Reaching out to these various communities, people come back with not only hundreds of objects, but all the stories that ultimately shape the content of the final work.

AAA: You have worked with various social communities with different degrees of intimacy; sometimes you collect material from "strangers" from a distance, I'm thinking of the soldiers in *Armed* and Asian Americans in *Unveiling*, but you have also collaborated with children in schools to come up with projects. How do you deal with these different types of "communication"?

JS: I've learned that the key to negotiation and collaboration is effective communication and timing. You have to speak differently to get your message out to different communities, each has their challenges. It takes time and persistence to earn people's trust and their willingness to part with objects that they've held onto for years. It is a mutual relationship in that they have to also respect what I do as an artist. In each project, I discover allies and individuals in the community who advocate for me - that gives me access and other resources. I am motivated by my own curiosity and want to evoke someone else's interest so they can help me realize my projects. Part of my desire in communicating through my work is creating a dialogue with new audiences. Thankfully my community has been invested in my process. At the same time, I have found total strangers to be equally generous! This only fuels my optimism to work on the next project.

AAA: You work over a long period of time for each project. Do you ever get frustrated? How do you deal with it? Or, on the contrary, do you become more excited as the process continues?

JS: All of the above. That's why it's good to have different projects happening at the same time, and at different phases of realization. Since my projects can often take years to realize and are very labour intensive, I do get very attached to them. It's extremely rewarding to see each project grow from an idea and a proposal, to an elaborate process involving many people and then resulting in the final installation.

The project *Unraveling* began as part of Asia Society's exhibition, 'One Way or Another' in New York and travelled for over two years across the country. As the exhibition toured, more participants from each new city were added to the project. We had generated an elaborate excel file mapping out each and every connection between the 180 plus participants. Additionally, each of the unravelled yarns of sweaters had to be carefully labelled as well. After months of planning for New York, we repeated and expanded it for Houston, Berkeley, L.A., Honolulu and finally Washington DC. The number of people and days to install the work also grew. At one point, I was managing a crew of 15 assistants on scaffolds and ladders weaving this temporary web of connections over a week of installation. The complexity of the project kept growing and so did the risk of knots in the participants' yarn!

Other times it is the opposite problem of having too little time during the production phase. In the case of *Everyday Monuments*, we were working on the



Chemical Balance III, 2005-09, prescription bottles, mirror and epoxy, fluorescent lights, installation at Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., photography by: Seong Kwon, courtesy of the artist

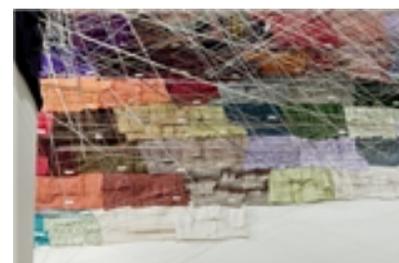


Jean Shin, detailed view of *Chemical Balance III*



Unraveling, 2006-09, yarn of sweaters collected from the Asian American art community, installation at Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., photography by: Seong Kwon, courtesy of the artist

proposal and planning the ways we would solicit participants to donate trophies over a year. In our initial collection process, we had received only several hundred trophies and I needed thousands. Under the circumstance, we kept reaching out and extending the deadline. By the time we reached our goal, we had only three months left to execute a very labour intensive fabrication of altering 2,000 trophies. There were so many technical problems to troubleshoot and the production schedule was nearly impossible. Our studio worked endlessly: long days, nights, weekends. The process was extremely stressful and we went months without much sleep.



Detailed view of *Unraveling*

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In some ways, all of my projects are realized in some extreme condition. I accept that the work doesn't come easy. Each project is a set of new challenges to overcome.

AAA: Do you ever have unrealized projects? Can you tell us some of them?

JS: Of course. The reality is that not all ideas, site visits, proposals, and materials work out for many different reasons. However, I'm always hopeful that an unrealized project will have time to incubate and eventually find the right context, venue and budget that matches its needs.

I've recently been working on this proposal, a commission for a major health organization. After seven months and the second revised proposal, they decided not to move forward. I was devastated. *Examining Comfort* is a great project working with hospital visitors and staff to consider places and objects that give people comfort. Now I'm determined to find a new site for this unrealized project.

I've had this happen in the past when a proposal that was rejected by one organization is then selected for an entirely different location years later. In the end, the new context was better for the piece. I'm keeping my fingers crossed!

AAA: What are you working on now?

JS: I am working on a solo exhibition titled 'Unlocking' at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art that will be opening October 9, 2010 - January 2, 2011 in Arizona. It's a collaborative project with architect Brian Ripel. We are collecting thousands of old keys to create a large-scale installation that hints at the lost communities that once inhabited the area and their relationship to the vast desert landscape.

In New York, my new photo edition related to the *Everyday Monuments* project will be featured at Bitforms Gallery in Chelsea (June 24 - August 6, 2010). Settings, a permanent commission by the New York City's Percent for the Art programme, will be completed for PS 276, an elementary school in Battery Park City, this fall.