

ON **Exhibit**

# 'Common Threads': A Celebration of Castoffs

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN  
Washington Post Staff Writer

It's tempting to lump Jean Shin in with all the other contemporary artists — and there are a lot these days — who are turning everyday objects into sculpture. Her installations, several of which are on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in a show called "Common Threads," include towers of used prescription pill bottles, a web of yarn pulled from cast-off sweaters and a house-of-cards cityscape, made from \$32,404 worth of losing lottery tickets.

Sounds a little bit like Dan Steinhilber, doesn't it? His show six years ago at the



"Armed," detail above, features cut fabric from U.S. military uniforms.



Jean Shin used sports trophies donated by Washington area residents to create "Everyday Monuments" for the "Common Threads" exhibit.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden featured installations made from hundreds of plastic soda bottles and the kind of paper-wrapped clothes hangers you get from the dry cleaner. Like Steinhilber, Shin makes work that is visually arresting. It finds uncommon beauty in the common object, in the accumulation and repurposing of stuff that would otherwise get thrown away, or ignored.

There is, however, one vital distinction. Whereas Steinhilber typically goes out and buys his materials (his art supply store is the corner carry-out, the hardware store), Shin acquires her raw material through transactions that are far more personal. Those prescription bottles that make up "Chemical Balance III"? They weren't just acquired from some anonymous supplier of plastic containers, but from nursing homes, pharmacies and friends. Although identifying information has often been blacked out, each one has a history behind it. Over here is a bottle that used to contain Plavix. Over there, hydrochlorothiazide, folic acid, Urosemide. In other words, there's a face — a real person with a real medical condition and aspirations of perfect health — behind each one.

Similarly, Shin's "Armed" is a wall-size array of worn military uniforms, donated by current and former members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard. Although disassembled by the artist into jigsaw-puzzle-like pieces, you can still occasionally see the name of the donor: Kurzman

## The Story Behind the Work

Jean Shin's work is labor intensive, involving the collection, assembly — and, in some cases, disassembly — of hundreds or thousands of individual objects. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "Chance City," a structure made from thousands of losing lottery tickets laid atop and against one another without the use of glue or any adhesive. The largest version of the installation Shin has created so far, it took two weeks to build it, with the artist working with two assistants.

But the effort that went into its construction pales in comparison to the sweat equity of all those losers — er, dreamers — who scratched the silver film off those cards, hoping, against all odds, for a big win.

Their failed aspirations can be seen, quite literally, in the sculpture itself. Already it's beginning to fall apart, by design, thanks to the vibrations of visitors' feet on the floor

here; Holshek there. When you join the military, you submerge part of your individual identity into the larger whole. That is, after all, the purpose of uniforms. Shin reminds us that troops aren't just statistics, but people.

"Everyday Monuments" works that same theme. The installation, created specifically for this show, is made from almost 2,000



"Chance City," detail above, is made of \$32,404 worth of losing lottery tickets.

and subtle air currents in the gallery. Don't wait to see it. By the end of the show a few months hence, this house of cards should have collapsed significantly, much like the current economy.

— Michael O'Sullivan

## Jean Shin: Common Threads

Through July 26 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Eighth and F streets NW (Metro: Gallery Place)

Contact: 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). www.americanart.si.edu

Hours: Open daily 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Admission: Free.

operates a cash register.

Does it matter that Shin works with objects that have a past? That have been touched, again and again, and that she collects in time-consuming fashion, from real people? Look at the thrift-store neckties hanging from a chain link fence in "Untied." Closely examine the recycled computer key caps in "TEXTile." Shin's "Penumbra" is an outdoor canopy made by sewing together the cloth from old umbrellas. Its 2003 installation in a Queens, N.Y., park is documented here in a short video that evokes Christo and Jeanne-Claude's famous 2003 "Gates" project in New York's Central Park. But what, in the end, is the difference between old nylon fabric and new nylon fabric?

Not very much, to the naked eye. Which is why Shin's work, much like the pile of shoes on display at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, operates not just through our retinas, but on our hearts and minds.

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