



SCULPTURE JEAN SHIN



Jean Shin, *Armed*, 2005
Fabric (military uniforms from US soldiers), thread and starch
Wall 24 x 14 feet, Hanging piece 24 x 6 x 2 feet
Installation view in exhibition Fear Gear at Roebbling Hall, New York City
Courtesy the artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

John LeKay: The scale of your piece entitled "Armed" is very striking. It's approximately 24ft by 14ft high. The accompanying hanging sculptural piece is also of the same scale length wise, more or less. There seems to be a

methodical element to this piece as well as your other work. How important is the process of finding materials to make your work and how do you usually go about doing this?

Jean Shin: The process of accumulating my materials is an extremely significant part of my work. In each project, I'm bringing together diverse individuals within a community that are connected by a common material they all have in their lives.

In the piece *Armed*, I worked with the director of Harbor Defense Museum at Fort Hamilton, Paul Morando to find soldiers who would be interested in donating their uniforms for my project. It was extremely helpful to have a member of the community support the project and become an informal collaborator. In many cases, I traveled all over the New York area to pick up the uniforms. This process gave me the opportunity to personally meet many of the soldiers and hear their stories. The conversations I had with soldiers in the Army, Airforce, Navy, Coast Guard, Reserves and Vets were interesting parts of my research. They told me what wearing their uniforms means to them and shared their experiences of serving in the military.

JL: What was the experience like of meeting all the soldiers and hearing their stories; and what were their responses to seeing the finished piece?

JS. I was pleasantly surprised by my encounters with the many individuals who have served in the military. Many older vets were very emotional when describing their experiences, especially if they remembered a close buddy whom they had lost during combat. Some of the military personnel I spoke with wear their uniforms with great pride; yet at the same time they are extremely critical of the current administration's role in Iraq. Several reserves who were in Iraq on peace-keeping missions felt a great sense of purpose and yet struggled with the complex reality of their military presence there.

The notion of camouflage in relationship to today's military fascinates me. In most situations today, the United States' so-called 'military presence' is about visibility—the exact opposite function that camouflage was designed for. And yet the uniforms still bear the camouflage pattern—one meant to hide, blend in and obscure. Military uniforms have a “dehumanizing” quality to them as well. On the one hand, they take away a person's individuality, but on the other they also function as a blank canvas onto which individuals can project their different, and even contradictory, beliefs and opinions. For example, many Americans may view military uniforms as positive symbols of patriotism, leadership, and sacrifice. The same uniforms may evoke negative connotations of power, fear, and terror for others.

I think those soldiers who were willing to take the time to donate their uniforms to an art project are a select group of very open-minded and generous individuals. Overall they were very touched that I took an interest in them and excited that there was a place where their old uniforms would have a second purpose. The soldiers who saw the installation were enthusiastic as they tried to identify which pieces came from their own uniforms—it was a very personal experience for them. They responded very positively and felt proud to have contributed to an art work.

JL. I sense something else about this piece - the way the uniforms are cut and pasted like camouflaged wall paper.

Also, the way the hanging sculptural piece resembles a hovering helicopter made out of camouflaged shreds. It is as if you have deliberately stripped the uniforms of their symbolism and power by re-contextualizing the camouflaged costumes in an artistic and conspicuous way. Was this a part of your intention and does it relate to when you said, "so-called 'military

presence' is about visibility--the exact opposite function that camouflage was designed for...yet the uniforms still bear the camouflage pattern—one meant to hide, blend in and obscure."

JS. I'm definitely thinking about wallpaper. Both wallpaper and camouflage address issues of visibility—creating an environment in which a figure becomes integral to and even sometimes indistinguishable from its surroundings. I was also fascinated by the close historic relationship between camouflage and landscape that seems to be inherent in the colors. My installation moves from greens (jungle and vegetation) to dark blues (water), to beiges and browns (desert and earth), then to pale blue and grey (sky)—the piece as a whole suggests the various striations of a military landscape.

For me, the hanging piece brings to mind military nets or tents. But I'm always interested to hear the different associations that viewers have with my work--each interpretation bringing something new to it, creating a personal experience for each individual.



Jean Shin, *Chemical Balance*, 2005
Prescription bottles, mirror and epoxy
Dimensions Variable
Courtesy the artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

JL. How did you collect all the bottles to make "Chemical Balance"?

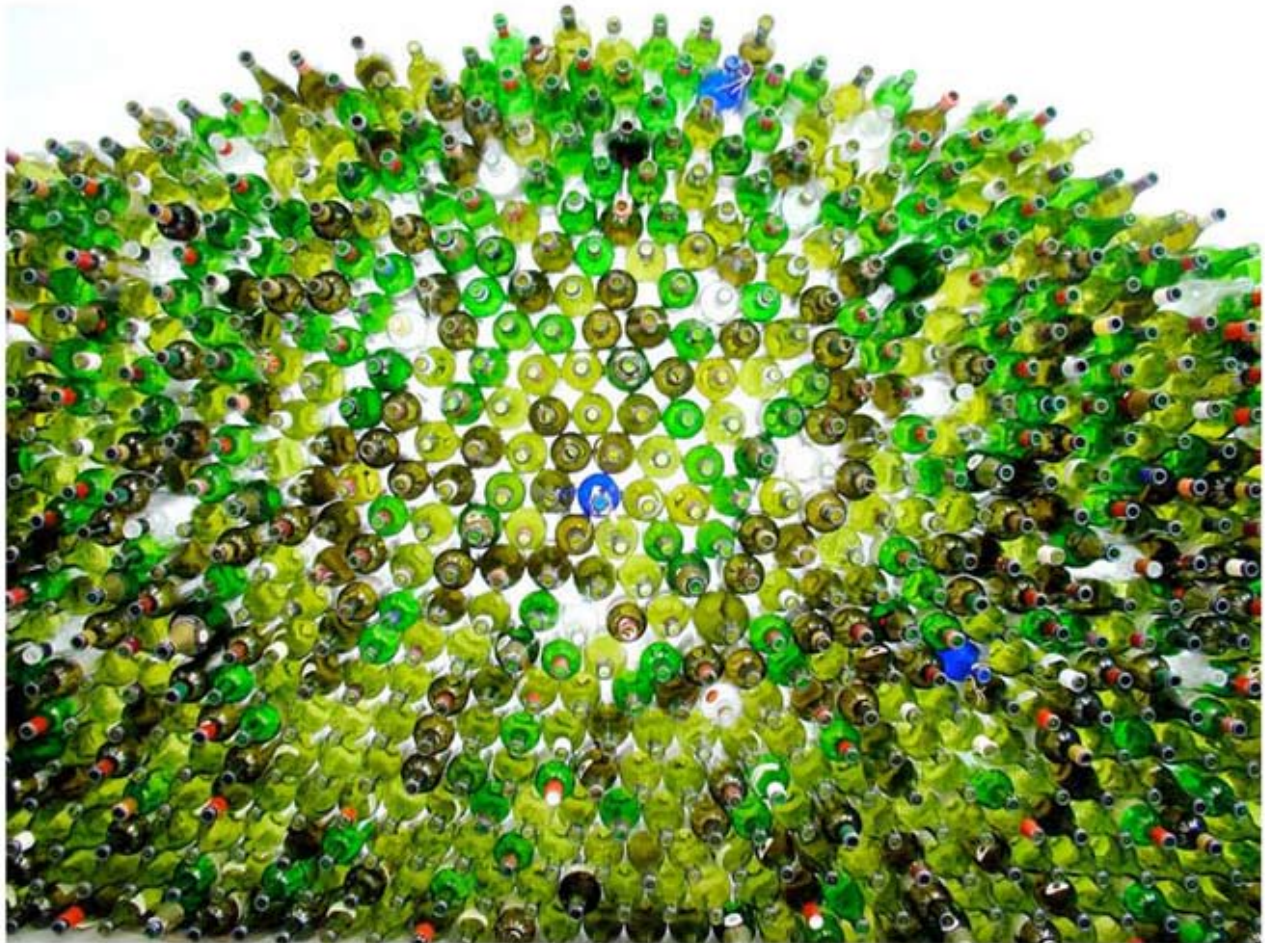
When I was working on *Chemical Balance*, I sent out emails to everyone I knew asking them to participate in the project by donating their emptied prescription pill bottles. In the beginning of the collection process, I found it difficult to convince people to participate because of the sensitivity of the information on these Rx pill bottles. I encouraged people to cross out any personal data or remove the labels to get around this problem. My New York gallery Frederieke Taylor and venues where the work would be shown (Sculpture Center and the University Art Museum in Albany) helped to spread the word and both served as drop off points for several months. I also received hundreds of Rx vials from local pharmacies and nursing homes. Everyday at the studio I would get packages from individuals sending me their emptied pill vials. Throughout the process, it was amazing to have so many conversations with people about their health and their dependency, temporary or long term, on prescription drugs

JL. Like your other work, there are many interpretations and associations that one can make. In the case of *Chemical Balance*, could one of them be a social commentary on our culture's dependency, excessive use of pharmaceuticals and magic bullet mentality?

JS. That's a great interpretation of *Chemical Balance*. I'm amazed by the effectiveness of pharmaceutical drugs to alter the chemical balance of our body, whether for temporary relief or lifelong dependencies. Perhaps we live in a consumer society that is over medicated, always in search of the instant cure. At the same time, for many whose well-beings are chemically dependent on these drugs, it's a love-hate relationship of dependency--a constant battle between gratitude and resentment.



Jean Shin and Brian Ripel, *Glasscape*, 2005
Wine bottles and silicone
Dimensions Variable
Courtesy of the Artist and Eric Dupont Gallery, Paris



Detail of Glassscape

JL. What inspired the "Glasscape" piece you collaborated on with architect Brian Ripel? Also where did you get all the wine bottles from and do you have any anecdotes about the collecting or installation process?

JS. *Glassscape* was a variation on a project we did in 2003 at Smack Mellon Gallery in New York called *Glass Block*. At that particular time, the government had stopped its recycling program in New York City. Each evening after enjoying a bottle of wine during dinner, my husband Brian and I were discussing how disappointing it was that the city couldn't find a good way to re-use this material. What could we do with glass wine bottles--transforming both their purpose and properties? When Smack Mellon invited us to make a work for the exhibition, we decided to take on that challenge with this question in mind. We decided to block up the entrance of the gallery with a wall of stacked wine bottles. This gesture redirects the path of the viewers and offers them a different experience of the gallery's architectural space. When they arrive on the opposite side, the blocked opening appears more like a colorful stained glass window filled with light.

In Paris, we recognized just how integral wine is to the cultural heritage as well as the physical landscape of France. In *Glassscape* (2005), the installation reveals the underlying beauty of this familiar object when amassed, while suggesting a luminous landscape of glass. The bottles---emptied and cleaned---had been collected from neighborhood restaurants and bars in

Paris. My Paris gallery dealer Eric Dupont collected the bottles months in advance from his friends who own wine bars and restaurants. Others came from his personal consumption. The flat bottoms of the bottles became a translucent mosaic of dynamic circular patterns, transmitting various pixels of colored light into the gallery; while the protruding bottle necks, wrapped in colorful labels on the opposite side, appear as an impenetrable, opaque obstruction. The French audience was very interested in reading the labels on the bottles. Their commenting on the name, region and year of each bottle was surprising to me since this hadn't been the case in New York.



Jean Shin, *Chance City*, 2001-2004
\$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets (no adhesive)
6 x 8 x 8 feet, Installation at Brooklyn Museum
Courtesy the artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York



Chance City, 2005

\$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets (no adhesive), 6 x 8 x 8 feet
Installation at Brooklyn Museum

JL. "Chance City" looks like a very challenging installation, since you used no adhesive. Did you attain the tickets in various stacks of color and did you actually calculate the \$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets yourself?

JS. While all my work is labor-intensive, Chance City in particular is a piece that is especially so. All the lottery tickets are scratched-off tickets that I accumulated from several vendors over a couple of years. Once I had collected thousands of them in my studio, I organized them according to color and counted the exact dollar amount of each stack. During the on-site installation, it takes me several days to build the towers like a house of cards. I wanted the sculpture to have similar issues of risk and chance that are two factors integral to playing the lottery. The cards are held up by both gravity and friction, remaining vulnerable to chance and the possibility that the towers could fall. I like to think that the installation is held together by pure human desire, just as the daily ritual of playing the lotto comes out of the fantasy of winning a million dollars instantly. Unfortunately, the reality is just the opposite—hundreds and thousands of dollars lost in wishful thinking.

JL. In Penumbra, was there anything in particular that sparked the making this piece and where did you find all the umbrellas?

JS. I remember walking in New York after a heavy rain storm and seeing dozens of broken umbrellas abandoned on the street. After the storm had passed, I started to rescue these tragic objects. In New York in particular, we use an abundant amount of cheap black and dark umbrellas—it seems like they're in fact designed for this very kind of casual disposability. I wanted to re-introduce the umbrellas back to the outdoor elements, except this time to interact with the sun and gentle wind. Penumbra creates protection from the sun—welcome shade amidst the summer's heat at Socrates Sculpture Park. While the canopy of umbrellas moves gently with the breeze, it creates a mesmerizing play of shadows on the grass beneath.

JL. Is any of the creative process deliberately left to the element of chance



Jean Shin, *Penumbra*, 2003
Fabric (broken umbrellas) and thread, 72 x 45 x variable height
Installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY

in terms of the accumulation of materials, reconstruction and composition, the use of color and the execution in this piece and your other works in general?

JS. There are certainly different elements of chance in my work—some more overt than others. When I set out to accumulate certain objects inviting a certain community to save or donate objects or clothing for the next installation, it's unpredictable exactly what and how much I will end up with. This unknown variable in the collection process in turn informs my creative process and of course the final outcome. There is lots of labor intensive experimentation with these castoff materials in my studio. I've found that there's a fine balance of imposing a deliberate intention onto the objects and listening to what they want to do intrinsically or become by chance. Furthermore, once the objects have been reconfigured into a new context, the final phase of installing the work on site is again a very intuitive response to form, space, color and composition.

Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

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