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Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents Monumental Installations by Jean Shin

Jean Shin is nationally recognized for her monumental installations that transform castoff materials into elegant expressions of identity and community. The exhibition “Jean Shin: Common Threads” will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum May 1 through July 26. It features eight works created since 2000, including the new site-specific installation “Everyday Monuments” commissioned by the museum. The museum is the only venue for the exhibition.

“For the past decade, the Smithsonian American Art Museum has focused on strengthening its commitment to contemporary art and artists through exhibitions, awards and commissions, such as Jean Shin’s new work ‘Everyday Monuments,’” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the museum. “I am delighted that the museum is not only celebrating Jean Shin and her thoughtful work that explores issues of community and identity in the galleries this spring, but also Washingtonians who contributed to making ‘Everyday Monuments’ a success.”

Shin employs a meticulous process of dismantling and alteration to create evocative sculptural installations that are composed of everything from broken umbrellas and losing lottery tickets to computer key caps and old music records. The resulting assemblages consist of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of seemingly identical objects culled from the remnants of daily life.

“Shin’s artworks are at once rigorously formal and emotionally resonant, mass-produced yet insistently handmade,” said Joanna Marsh, The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art at the museum, who organized the exhibition. “Shin departs from her predecessors, like Louise Nevelson, 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.”

Shin’s most recent project, “Everyday Monuments,” debuts in the exhibition. This major work was commissioned by the museum in 2008. The sprawling installation consists of nearly 2,000 trophies donated by Washington, D.C.-area residents and projected images of the altered trophies. Inspired by the well-known historic monuments and heroic statuary displayed throughout

Washington's public spaces, "Everyday Monuments" venerates the accomplishments of ordinary Americans—stay-at-home moms, waitresses, janitors, postal carriers—whose everyday labors go unrecognized. Shin transformed each figurine to represent these tasks. The trophies are arranged according to a scale plan of the National Mall, symbolically filling the expanse of Washington's signature public space.

"'Everyday Monuments' epitomizes Shin's art of the past decade," said Marsh. "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 in Shin's work. By giving new life and restored purpose to forgotten objects, Shin shows us that value and beauty can be found in the most unexpected places."

"Jean Shin: Common Threads" brings together works that reflect the diversity of materials and techniques that Shin employed during the last decade. "Chemical Balance III" (2009) is a towering arrangement of empty prescription pill bottles that speaks to American's dependency on prescription medications. "Chance City" (2001/2009) is a towering cityscape of scratch-and-win lottery tickets, whose inevitable collapse serves as a metaphor for the illusory promise of fast money. "TEXTile" (2006) is an interactive sculpture made from thousands of discarded computer keys that calls attention to the physicality of communicating via e-mail. In "Unraveling" (2006-2009), Shin visualizes the network of relationships within the Asian American arts community, creating a dense tapestry of woolen sweaters that are unraveled to form a colorful web of interconnecting threads. Shin gathered the sweaters from Asian Americans in each city there the work has been shown to date—New York City, Houston, Berkeley, Calif., Los Angeles, Honolulu and Washington, D.C. The other works in the exhibition are "Untied" (2000), a single-channel video piece titled "Penumbra" (2003) and "ARMED" (2005/2009).

Shin's work evokes 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, to Arte Povera, with its interest in common, everyday materials. Shin is interested not only in the objects themselves, but also in the actual circumstances in which a visitor in the galleries encounters the work of art. This emphasis on 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 public can follow the exhibition-installation progress online through the museum's blog Eye Level, and social media sites Facebook, Flickr and Twitter. Installation images will be posted on Flickr along with stories about the artworks, and an interview with the artist will be available in May on the museum's Web site, as well as on ArtBabble and YouTube. The public is invited to add images of works made from found objects to the museum's Flickr group, flickr.com/groups/jeanshincommonthreads.

About the Artist

Jean Shin was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1971, and immigrated to the United States with her family at the age of six. She grew up in Bethesda, Md. and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y. Shin earned a bachelor's degree in 1994 and a master's degree in 1996 from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She attended the summer residency program at the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine in 1999.

Her work has been widely exhibited in major national and international museums, including a solo project at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2004) and the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (2006). Shin has been commissioned to create a number of site-specific permanent installations, including from the U.S. government through the General Services Administration Art in Architecture Program, and in New York City through its Percent for Art program and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit. Her two most recent commissions were "Dress Code" for the lobby of the George H. Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore, Md., and "Celadon Remnants" at the Long Island Rail Road's Broadway Station in Queens, N.Y.

She has received numerous awards, including New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Awards in 2003 and 2008, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2006-2007), the New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship Award in Sculpture (2003) and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Art Award (2001). In 1990, Shin was selected as a U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Visual Arts, and her work was exhibited at the American Art Museum as part of this program.

Shin is represented by the Frederieke Taylor Gallery in New York City.

Free Public Programs

Shin talks about her work Friday, May 1, at 7 p.m., in the museum's McEvoy Auditorium. Marsh leads a tour of the exhibition Thursday, June 25, at 6 p.m. Shin returns to Washington Tuesday, July 7, at 6 p.m., to talk about her installations and the challenges of preserving artworks made from ephemeral materials with Marsh and Hugh Shockey, an object conservator at the museum; this program is sponsored by the Lunder Conservation Center.

A family festival, co-sponsored by the museum and VSA arts, will take place in the Kogod Courtyard Friday, June 5, and Saturday, June 6, from 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Activities include musical performances, storytelling and making crafts from found objects. Family tours of the exhibition will be offered at 1 p.m. Saturday, May 16, Saturday, June 20, and Saturday, July 18.

Details and complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Credit

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About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Follow the museum on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, ArtBabble, iTunes and YouTube. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: americanart.si.edu.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum's online press room at americanart.si.edu/pr.