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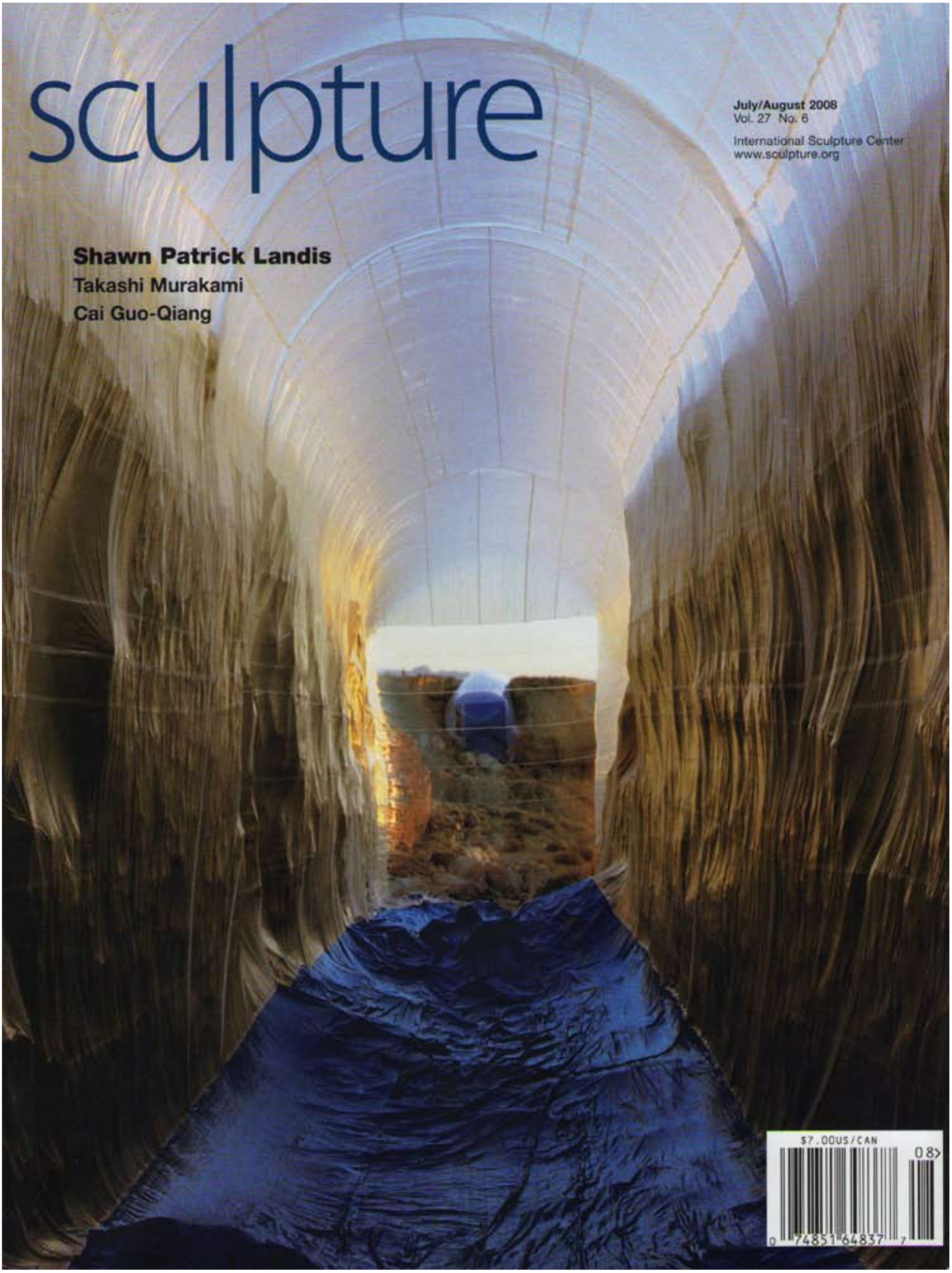

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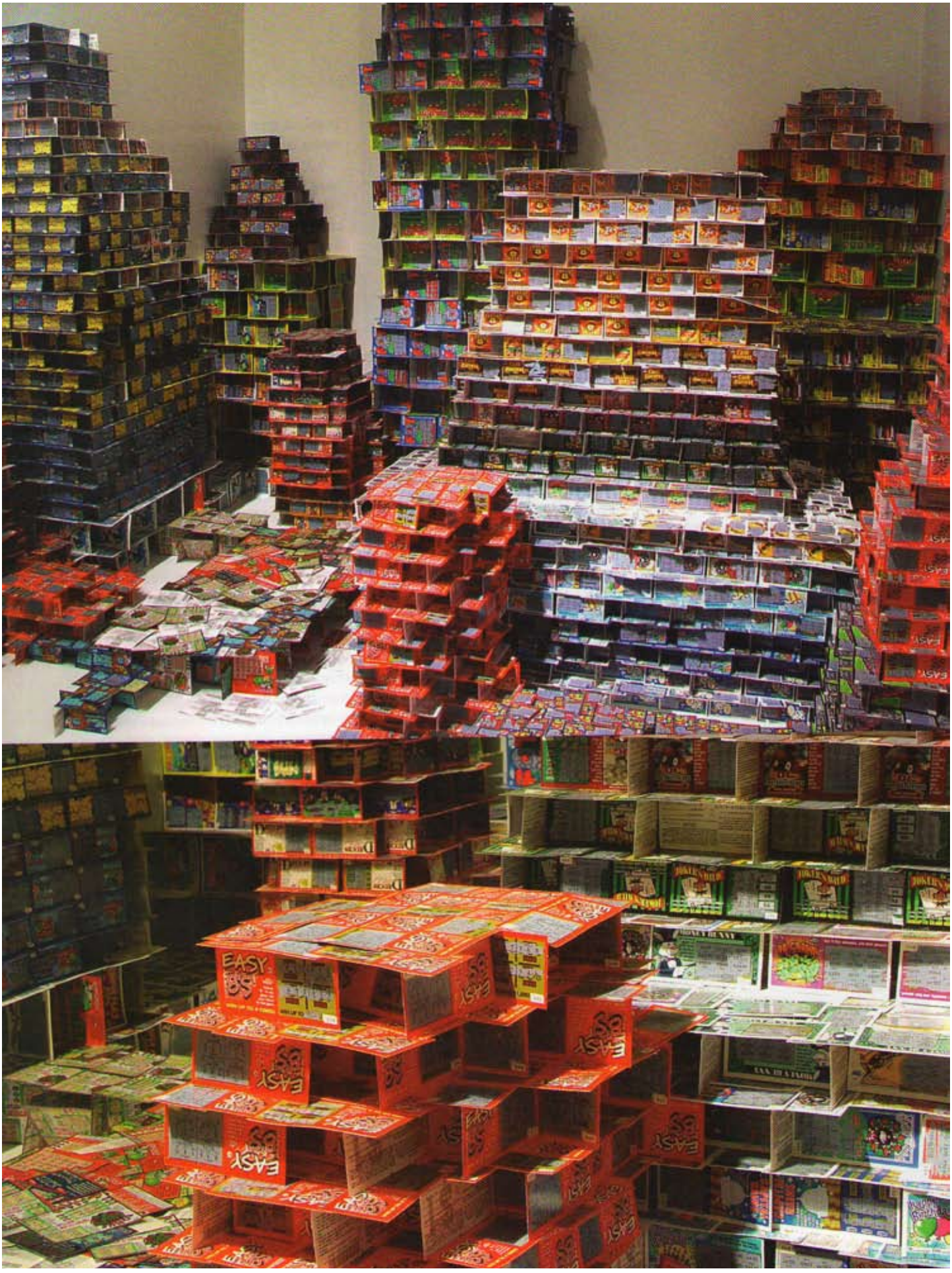

EASY BAKE

Jean Shin's Accumulations of Ephemera

BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

Jean Shin is a collector, but not of high-end art or antique furniture. Instead, she combs the streets of New York City for objects culled from the detritus of daily life. She claimed curbside refuse—the metal frames and synthetic fabric hoods of cheap umbrellas—to create *Umbrella Stripped Bare*, a 2001 installation at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus, and *Penumbra* (2003), a soaring project at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. In *Glass Block* (2003), she built a wall of emptied wine bottles whose shades of green created a mosaic. And she hoarded thousands of dollars worth of lottery tickets to construct a geometric metropolis in her 2004 Brooklyn Museum project, *Chance City*. Shin has also solicited clothing donations: pant cuffs, ties, shoe soles, and shirt seams have all found a place in her roster of materials. More recently, she has turned to consumer surplus such as computer key caps and eyeglasses. *Sound Wave* (2007), at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, uses hundreds of old records to form a black wave cresting over the lobby floor. Duplication of form—vast numbers of umbrella skins, layers of neckties, myriad trouser legs, stacks of tired LPs—distinguishes Shin's works from others employing quotidian supplies. Through repetition, Shin straddles Minimalism, feminism, and installation to create surprisingly, stridently formal sculpture imbued with personal recollection.

Formal means were standard practice for many Pratt Institute faculty members in the mid-1990s when Shin received her bachelor's and master's degrees. Pratt's ethos appealed to her because it was "based on the Bauhaus tradition" of a non-hierarchical mingling in the community of artists, graphic designers, and architects.[1] Following her graduate studies, Shin worked in the curatorial department at the Whitney Museum and was exposed to a range of modern and contemporary art movements. She took Minimalism, post-Minimalism, process art, and Arte Povera into consideration for her own work. In 1999, she studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and credits other participants and faculty there—Polly Apfelbaum, Tom Friedman, Byron Kim, Suzanne McClelland, and Lisa Segal—as formative influences. Today, Shin maintains a studio in Brooklyn.

Shin's work is also informed by her upbringing and memories of her youth.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: KAZAHIRO NOGUCHI

Opposite and detail: *Chance City*, 2004. Discarded lottery tickets (value $21,496), 6 x 8 x 8 ft. This page: *Penumbra*, 2003. Broken umbrellas and thread, 75 x 45 ft.

Alterations, 1999. Fabric and wax, 2 x 22 x 12 ft.

She was born in Seoul, South Korea, and immigrated to the Maryland suburbs with her parents and brother in 1978. She calls their move to America a classic immigration story, spun from the large influx of Asians following President Lyndon Johnson's signing of the Immigration Act of 1965. Her parents enrolled their children in the Bethesda public schools and opened a supermarket in nearby Washington, DC.

In her work, Shin mines the memory of her parents' intense labor. She recently reminisced about how unrelenting hours of minding the store trickled down to her practice as an artist. She also recalled how much her parents "valued hard work and how their endless labor and commitment to work transformed our existence. They worked nonstop to provide for us." Shin helped out on weekends unpacking boxes and placing food cans in row upon row in perfect order. That process of repetition and of stacking object on object continues to inform her work as she collects and then deconstructs objects of like form. "When I left school," Shin mused, "I was trying to figure out my own voice... The notion of doing installation art appealed to me because it meant the freedom of [using] materials from the everyday. At the same time, these societal cast-offs would be transformed by my attention and labor."

By 1999, Shin was creating work that united these childhood rituals with the formal concerns of her student years. She forged an independent visual language, largely in installation art, in which accumulations of ephemera became her signature style. *Alterations* (1999) culls the ends of pant legs snipped off by tailors and seamstresses. Shin gathered discarded cuffs from blue jeans, gray flannels, and khakis and dipped them in wax to form a floor piece composed of stiff cylinders. Clearly beholden to Eva Hesse's seminal work of fiberglass and polyester resin, *Repetition Nineteen III* (1968), Shin summons the Minimalist ethos.[2] In *Alterations*, Shin sought to instill her work with a personal story. She has commented that hacking inches off the bottom of those pant legs relates to her own experience with clothes: she is a petite woman, physically at odds with a fashion industry standard of tallness. Through repetition of form, the piece—and much of Shin's other work—also alludes to pile-ups of clothing, summoning the excesses of American consumerism.

Shin prefers to describe her work in terms of "accumulation" rather than excess. Critics have noted that other young female artists, including Tara Donovan and Phoebe Washburn, also use countless numbers of like objects to produce spare, abstract sculpture. In Shin's work, this surfeit of sameness appears in different ways depending on whether her pieces are installed in a gallery or out on the street. In 2000, she purchased hundreds of ties from a used clothing store in Brooklyn. That purchase resulted in *Fringe* and *Untied*, two works that demonstrate how context can determine interpretation. Shin first showed the work on a city street and then presented a variation in a Manhattan gallery. In both settings, row upon row of neckties were draped or tied to a fence. Installed within the confines of Exit Art in New York in 2000, *Untied* riffed on Minimalist painting, with swaths of red rep, blue paisley, and maroon college insignia ties. The gallery became an old-boy networking club gone awry, as an acre of club ties slummed with the most quotidian of street furniture, the mass-produced chain-link fence.

Shin initially installed the work in a gritty urban setting, using a street fence to sup-

Sound Wave, 2007. Record albums and wood, 5.2 x 6.66 x 8 ft.

port the ties. *Fringe* presented a different rationale than its indoor variant. The "art" label rapidly evaporated as daily life invaded the project. Passersby helped themselves to the ties at the corner of Orange and Chapel Streets in New Haven, perhaps not realizing that this was a public artwork. Did the excess signal free giveaway? Were they stealing? Once the buzz circulated, the ties were largely gone. Shin was nonplussed by the reaction: "Working outdoors and in the public realm, there are chance encounters and variables you cannot always anticipate. The ties were a commodity of need. People took ownership of the ties and the fence that separated the public from the vacant lot." The following week, she returned to the site to assess the situation, adding ties and tying tighter knots. Still, pedestrians waiting at the bus stop found the plethora of silk tough to resist.

Julie H. Reiss, in the introduction to her book *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (1999), affirms the viewer's role in validating works like *Fringe*: "The essence of installation art is spectator participation, but the definition of participation varies greatly from one artist to another, and even from one work to another by the same artist. Participation can mean offering the viewer specific activities. It can also mean demanding that the viewer walk through the space and simply confront what is there."[3] While Shin had not anticipated the active participation of bystanders in New Haven, she ultimately welcomed it. Visitors unknowingly worked in concert with the artist not only to enliven the outdoor display of *Fringe*, but also to corroborate the piece's presence as an installation.

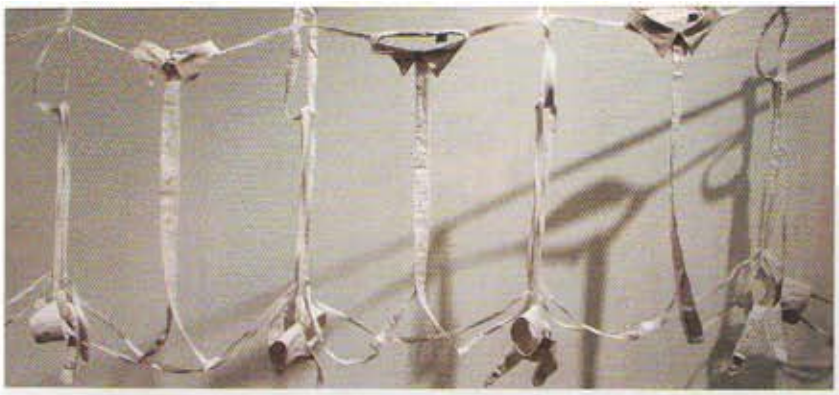
Of course, other artists have used profusions of material from everyday life. Félix Gonzáles-Torres's installations of wrapped candy were intended to be collaborations with an audience: the sweets existed for people to take. By contrast, Shin's denuded fence ultimately became a larger part of the work than expected. When the public acted as participant, the changed context formally and conceptually altered *Fringe*'s presentation.

In a 2001 installation at the Rotunda Gallery in Brooklyn and then at the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Washington, DC, Shin employed another process of gathering and recycling apparel. In *Worn Soles*, she amassed hundreds of used shoes—from stylish ladies' heels to men's cordovans, to slip-on sandals—to create floor patterns, swirling pathways that brought the eye to ground level even as they led nowhere. Many viewers perceived a connection between *Worn Soles* and photographs depicting piles of shoes once belonging to Holocaust victims. This link was not part of Shin's original conception: "I didn't want to address the larger issues of the Holocaust, but everyday loss." She explained that every step a person takes is a loss of time or of past experience. By gathering the implements of walking, *Worn Soles* bears witness to the everyday. The soles literally came from known and unknown souls. (Shin found them at used clothing shops and on city streets and asked family and friends for donations.)

She similarly relied on the kindness of strangers for her next work, also created from street cast-offs. Shin gathered used lottery tickets for *Chance City*, a project first installed in 2001 at Art in General and re-created in 2002 at Caren Golden Fine Art and in 2004 for "Open House" at the Brooklyn Museum. Embedded in the purchase of a lottery ticket is the emotional roller coaster that makes the buyer gamble with his money and his dreams—the keyed-up anticipation of the purchase, the burning hope for a win, and the abrupt letdown of a loss. Reminiscent of the artist's youth when she stacked cans on shelves, *Chance City* consists of second-hand "scratch and win" tickets painstakingly stacked in a geometric assembly. *Chance City* is a metaphor on a platform: it is a house of cards, a Potemkin village, its structure as fragile as the psyche of the optimist hoping to land millions. It sanctifies the loser's lot by turning his vulnerable fate into a tower of hope that will ultimately collapse.

***Fringe*, 2000. Neckties and existing chain link fence, 6 x 20 ft.**

***Cut Outs and Suspended Seams*, 2004. Fabric, thread, and starch, 19 x 60 x 15 ft.**



Above: *Clothesline (White Oxford Shirts)*, 2003. Fabric and thread, 4 x 12.5 in. Below: *Armed*, 2005. Fabric, thread, and starch, (wall) 24 x 14 ft; (ceiling) 2 x 24 x 6 ft.

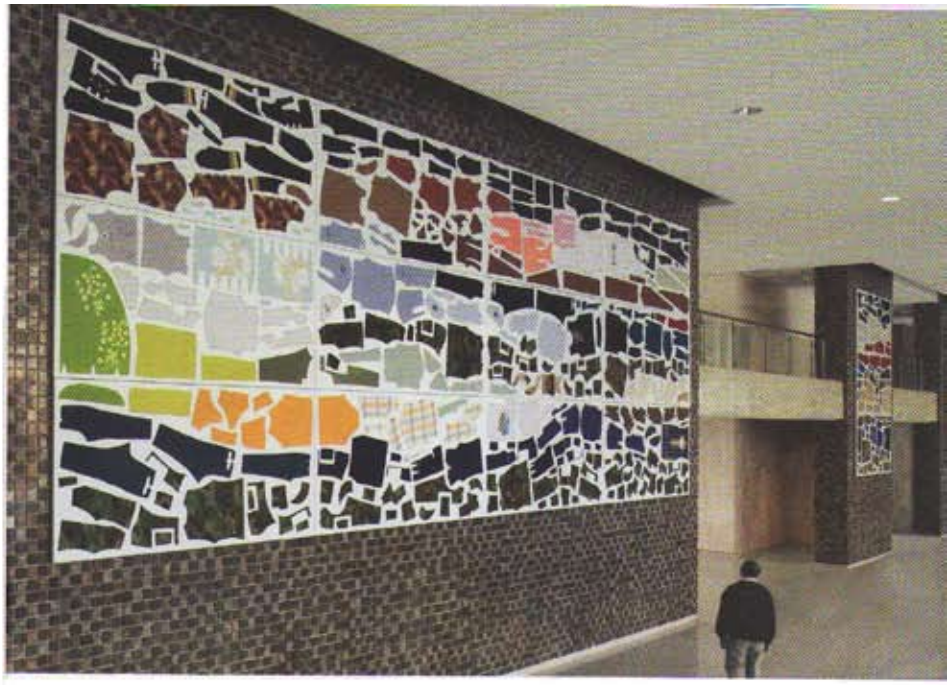
Below and detail: *TEXTile*, 2006. Recycled and custom-made computer keys, customized keyboard, software, video, and aluminum, 2.6 x 4 x 25 ft. Created in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

Although Shin did not know the individual ticket buyers in *Chance City*, a 2004 work in the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art gave her the opportunity to interact directly with MoMA staffers by codifying their community through clothing. Installed in the lobby of MoMA QNS during the renovation of the museum's Manhattan site, *Cut Outs and Suspended Seams* was constructed from items of work clothing donated by MoMA staff. Shin received a uniform from a museum guard, a pair of trousers from a curator, and an Oxford shirt from the director.[4] She was fascinated by the understated palette of all the clothes, which reflected a "professional dress code of MoMA." She brought the garments back to her studio and "deconstructed and starched them so that they would appear flat." At the museum, she created two long walls of abstract forms, a mosaic that simultaneously alluded to clothing and to Minimalism and the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s. Shin also cut the seams, collars, and cuffs (the architecture of the garment), stitching them together to form a canopy in the museum lobby.

The structural elements of clothing appear again in the strikingly white *Clothesline (White Oxford Shirts)* (2003). This spare project suggested a choreographed dance across the whitewashed corner of New York's Frederieke Taylor Gallery. As in *Cut Outs and Suspended Seams*, Shin liberated the mainstays of the shirt vocabulary—collar, cuffs, rows of buttons—and removed the material that covers the body. Her choice of form and color purposefully conjured an apparition in this eerie work, in addition to summoning other works of art. *Clothesline* took on the white paintings of Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin, but its usually overlooked materials diverted attention from an art history lesson.

Clearly Shin's focus is not on the art historical canon, and the legitimacy of using quotidian materials was established long ago. There is something of a neighborhood organizer in this artist who will enter a community and join individuals through some commonality. Shin has acknowledged the importance of uniting disparate people: "In each project, I'm bringing together

TOP: MARK HOLTON / MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



Dress Code, 2008. Fabric and Beva adhesive on panels, 42.75 x 58.5 ft. Work commissioned for the George H. Fallon Federal Building, Baltimore.

diverse individuals within an imaginary community who are connected by a common material they all have in their lives In a way, these selected objects take on the role of portraiture—acting as surrogates for the individuals behind them. My installations act as a group portrait of our society."[5] Involvement with individuals (whether donors or collaborators), as well as the labor-intensive process of gathering, culling, selecting, and installing, propels Shin.

Recently she created a vast canopied mural using pieces of American military uniforms. *Armed* (2005) was shown as part of the Roebling Hall exhibition "Fear Gear." Shin met with the director of the Harbor Defense Museum at Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, to identify local soldiers who would donate uniforms. Shin said of the work's development: "In many cases, I traveled all over the New York area to pick up the uniforms. This process gave me the opportunity to meet many of the soldiers and hear their stories...They told me what wearing their uniforms means to them. Ultimately, this experience humanized the war for me."[6] When she met soldiers from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard, Shin was stitching together a community through a commonality of uniform and military service. Camouflage patterning fills a wall with the remnants of uniforms. The work's lower register is crammed with shards of green and brown, and the upper layer is completed with the desert color scheme that American soldiers wear in Iraq. With the current war as a clamorous backdrop, *Armed* is particularly searing. The viewer searches for the human storyline behind each piece of military clothing affixed to the wall. While Shin has used the overhead trellis of sewn-together cuffs and seams before, its status here is raised to an allegory because the empty cover offers no protection, only a canopy of holes.

The clothing fragments in *Armed* knit together a group of strangers through the shared function of their uniform. One year later, Shin's definition of a textile veered away from the traditional. For *TEXTile*, her 2006 project at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, she used mass-produced plastic. Rows of thousands of plastic computer keyboard letters read together as an organic, cascading cloth, while, line by line, they reveal the e-mail correspondence between Shin and Fabric Workshop staffers that made *TEXTile* possible. The work turns in on itself to document the detailed process of creating an installation in a public space. Once the project was installed, viewers could join the artist and staff by sitting at a keyboard and typing. The additional text then appeared on a projection at the end of the "textile" to round out the process of participation.

Shin's already distinguished body of work continues to grow. *Dress Code* (2008), commissioned by the General Services Administration Art and Architecture program, recently debuted in the lobby of the George H. Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore. Another public commission, *Celadon Remnants* (2008), marks a departure for Shin. This mosaic for the Long Island Railroad Broadway Station in Queens, New York, is created from shards of Korean pottery. The abstracted vase silhouettes enhance the beauty of the traditional blue-green glaze, while the material itself and its fragmented state speak to the fractured cultural history of the Korean diaspora. (The station is located in the heart of a vibrant Korean-American community.) The opportunity for her work to be seen by an audience not steeped in art is an exciting prospect for Shin: "I am interested in working with communities outside of traditional art audiences... With these public commissions, my work engages a much broader audience...Since most of my work has addressed ordinary objects from everyday people who speak to a collective experience, it seems like a natural progression to bring my art to everyday spaces where the public-at-large will live with my installations." Because her work embellishes the refuse of daily life, Shin's challenge now is to reach this broader audience while retaining the simple and profound gesture of turning ephemera into art.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport is a writer and curator living in New York.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the artist are from conversations and e-mail correspondence with the author.

[2] Susette Min, "Transfiguring the Everyday: The Work of Jean Shin," in *Jean Shin: Reconstructed Remnants* (New York: Plein-Air Corp, 2004), p. 11.

[3] Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), p. xiii.

[4] Eva Respini, *Projects 82, Jean Shin*, exhibition brochure (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004).

[5] "Sculpture: Jean Shin," interview with John Le Kay, <www.heyokamagazine.com>.

[6] Ibid.