Because Everyone Deserves a Trophy

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

MODELED on the protests and celebrations that erupt on the National Mall, Jean Shin's latest installation — a roiling, shoulder-to-shoulder crowd in miniature — will carpet a 45-foot-long rectangular space at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington beginning May 1. The figures will be gleaming trophies, stripped of their sports paraphernalia and refashioned with new props into janitors, cashiers, mailmen and other unsung laborers, now pushing their strollers or swinging their hammers in exalted form.

Ms. Shin, who was commissioned by the museum to create the installation, "Everyday Monuments," as part of her exhibition "Common Threads," was inspired by Washington as a city planned around its heroic monuments. "I thought of these trophies as a way to bring the monumentality to a more intimate level," said Ms. Shin, 37, an artist known for her vast accumulations of singular castoff objects — old clothing, empty prescription bottles, losing lottery tickets — which she transforms into arresting installations that loosely reflect the people who once used the items.

For "Everyday Monuments," which will be on view through July 26, she gathered donations of more than 2,000 trophies with the help of the Smithsonian and local donors who included parents of students at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., which she attended after her family moved from South Korea when she was 6. "The trophies can have a second life and be updated to represent all the people who maybe never won trophies or decided not to be sports stars but live their lives through work," she said.

When Ms. Shin first conceived of the piece a couple of years ago, she was thinking of grand moments on the National Mall like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic speech there and the Million Man March, but she could never have foreseen the flooding of people into the space for President Obama's inauguration. Joanna Marsh, curator of the exhibition, considers it serendipity. "It was wonderful to see that actualized just as the piece was coming together, and it will be so fresh in people's minds when they see the work," she said, adding that the exhibition will also include seven other large-scale installations Ms. Shin has created since 2000.

On a recent morning at her small studio in Brooklyn, filled with a team of assistants meticulously attaching tiny cast mops, paint rollers, cash registers and computers to hundreds of trophies, Ms. Shin described watching her parents, who had both been professors in Seoul, struggle with discrimination and menial jobs when they moved to the Washington area, where they eventually owned a supermarket and liquor store. For a child the adjustment was easier. In high school she was encouraged to pursue painting seriously, and in her senior year in 1990 she entered the national Presidential Scholars in the Arts competition and won a full scholarship to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, her own trophy of sorts.

After receiving her B.F.A. in painting in 1994, she went on at Pratt to get a master's degree in art history and criticism and then took a day job at the Whitney Museum as a curatorial assistant. "My studio practice really shifted by studying art history and criticism," said Ms. Shin, who began questioning her reasons for making figurative painting and struggled to find a new direction and choice of materials.

One day it occurred to the petite Ms. Shin as she was organizing her cluttered Williamsburg apartment that all the cuffs of fabric that she had trimmed from the bottom of her pants were the same size. "I didn't fit fashion's standard by exactly two-and-a-half inches," she said. "Fashion is so much about these ideals. I began to think about how using the leftover pant legs could be personal and physical as well as speak to our collective desires."

She canvassed alterations shops and found people who agreed to save their pant-leg scraps for her. Gathering hundreds of these cylindrical forms, Ms. Shin dipped them in wax to make them stiff. Then, for a group show at Gen Art in New York in 1998, she installed a roughly 12-by-12-foot cityscape of cuffs across the floor, suggesting a population that didn't measure up. Called "Alterations" and purchased by the collector Peter Norton, the piece also alluded to the largely Asian immigrant work force that does most of the tailoring jobs in New York.

DIANA PAU

"Now that's become a really important part of my work," she said of the community collaboration required for "Alterations," "going up to total strangers and somehow implicating myself in the objects of their lives. Any material I get is the beginning of a conversation and a relationship."

Ms. Shin's earlier work was defined by her use of clothing as surrogates for people. But since 2004, when she had her first solo show, at the Frederieke Taylor Gallery in New York, Ms. Shin has branched out more to nonfabric materials that still have a physical relationship to the body. For "TEXTile," made in 2006 in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, she took apart old computer keyboards to illuminate how these objects, touched by rote with our fingertips, project our thoughts out into the world. More than 22,000 key caps, spelling out all the e-mail messages between the artist and the Fabric Workshop about the making of the artwork, were embedded into a 20-foot-long fabric scroll.

top, "Everyday Monuments," her new work for the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

MASAHIRO NOGUCHI/FREDERIEKE TAYLOR GALLERY

"Chemical Balance," also part of the Smithsonian show, alludes to how we change the chemistry of our bodies through prescription drugs. Ms. Shin gathered empty orange pill bottles and assembled them into towering arrangements that appear to grow out of the floor or dangle from the ceiling. "Any organic structure that we see in nature bonds together and then falls apart for its own purposes of growth and decay," said Ms. Shin, who is interested in mirroring society's dependence on these drugs.

She has very particular criteria for the salvaged materials she uses in her work: that something is "cast off from a person's life because its desirability and usefulness are questioned, that it in some way archives a personal history but also can speak to larger issues going on in our culture."

"And then," she added, "can I deconstruct it and make it new?"

Her recently completed mosaic, "Celadon Remnants," commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit program and installed along the outdoor stairwell of a Long Island Rail Road station in a densely populated Korean-American community in Queens, was inspired by the elegance and fragility of celadon pottery commonly found in Korean homes, is her first literal mosaic. Inspired by memories of vast landscapes of broken shards of celadon pottery outside kilns that she had seen on trips back to Korea, she said, "it's a celebrated moment in history when Koreans perfected this ceramic that people take lots of pride in."

For the project Ms. Shin traveled to Icheon, just outside Seoul, and persuaded the government to donate a vast landscape of broken pottery from outside one of the major kilns.

She then used her budget for materials to ship the three tons of shards back to the United States, where she worked with a fabricator to reconstitute the fragments into large, partial silhouettes showing just enough of the curves to suggest vases but also evoking the abstract shapes of Ellsworth Kelly. Literally and metaphorically she reunited something broken in Korea in a new form in America.

"For me," she said, "the greater only happens by the accumulation of many, one piece at a time."

Above, Jean Shin's "Cut Outs and Suspended Seams," a 2004 installation at the Museum of Modern Art

Jean Shin, who has found art in severed pant legs and castoff pill bottles, is creating an installation for workaday heroes.

Multimedia

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Art in the Everyday