

We Are All Here

JEAN SHIN



Portrait of JEAN SHIN. Photo by Daniel Terna. Courtesy the artist.

In a portrait taken for *The New York Times* several years ago, artist Jean Shin stands in front of a huge hemlock tree wrapped in patches of colorful leather, looking firmly forward with an antique-looking metal spear—a bark spud, or peeling iron—in her hand. This site-specific sculpture of hers, *Fallen* (2021), was commissioned by the Olana State Historic Site in Hudson, New York, in response to the death of a 140-year-old hemlock tree. But this was not only a memorial for one tree. Millions of hemlocks in the region were felled in the 19th century when rich tannins in their bark were essential to the local leather-production industry. To acknowledge the historical context and ecological loss of the site, Shin salvaged the 12-meter-long trunk and stump of the tree, removed its outer bark, and gave it a protective layer of leather, a second skin.

What once killed the tree now protects it.

Shin's large-scale public art commissions—and both her indoor and outdoor sculptures—always engage with the community and raise civic questions, such as the awareness of sustainability in relation to issues of ecological environment, labor, and consumerism. With a career spanning more than two decades, the Brooklyn- and Hudson Valley-based artist has

become known for her

focused attention to material and for her transformational ability to utilize everyday objects and repurpose discarded objects.

Over the years, Shin would discover discarded objects and store them for long periods of time until she knew what to do with them. She doesn't treat these castoffs as undesirable or without value. Instead, she has continued to care about them. For Shin, every object has a life and a story to tell. She embraces the personal histories of objects by passing on those stories, and not letting them be lost without a sound.

Last year, Shin's installation *Freshwater* (2022), a living laboratory installed on a pier, shed light on the ecology of freshwater mussels. Today, they are a critically endangered aquatic species due to water pollution and the construction of dams. Commissioned by the arts organization Philadelphia Contemporary, Shin built a fountain using polluted water from the Delaware River, in which live mussels were

encased within 30 glass orbs. Like a natural filtration system, the mussels cleaned the water, which then trickled back into the basin. In the fountain, Shin also included shimmering pearl buttons that she had originally discovered in a warehouse in New Jersey and then stored away. Made from shells, pearl buttons were very popular in the 19th century, and amid a fashion craze mussels were harvested by the millions; pearl buttons were then replaced by plastic ones and were soon no longer deemed desirable.

The cultural norms of consumption have done great harm to ecological systems. Hemlock trees were left to die after their outer layers were removed; leather sheets were discarded once the best portions had been cut out. To expose the waste that results from the processes of creating luxury goods, Shin has long worked with castoffs from the fashion industry. "It's about value," the artist told me when I visited her studio this year. "It's about the shifting lens of what we value." In one of her projects, a series of a wall-based sculptures titled *Spring Collection* (2016), she repurposed leather offcut donations from fashion brands Marc Jacobs and Chloé, mounting them on the wall to show off the negative shapes that were removed, in honor of the disposable "body."

So-called "deadstock" also exists in the tech industry, with its endless product upgrading that in turn produces massive e-waste. In *Huddled Masses* (2020), which will be shown in Platform section at the 2023 Armory Show in New York, Shin visualizes our technological utopia-turned-dystopia by creating three scholar-rock sculptures out of obsolete cell phones, surrounded by miles of old computer cables.

Naturally, Shin maintains her own practice in a very sustainable way, as she even transforms materials from her own past projects. In her 2023 solo show, "Second Skin," at Praise Shadows Art Gallery in Boston, Shin reprised both *Fallen* and *Freshwater* as indoor sculptures. The artist sewed the leather pieces that had encased *Fallen* into large swatches, which she then hung from branches of the original tree. She also adhered piles of pearl buttons from the *Freshwater* project onto fabric, which she then draped over small wooden armatures so that they appeared to flow like the current of a river. With these sculptures the artist was able to give them a second life, as they carry traces of the past and remind us of what was lost and what was forgotten.

Looking at Shin's practice over time, one begins to recognize recurring materials and objects: salvaged wood, leather remnants, mother-of-pearl buttons, and plastic bottles. When one reencounters these objects across various works, it feels like meeting an old

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Installation view of JEAN SHIN's *Freshwater*, 2022, freshwater mussels, glass vessels, sand, water pumped from the Delaware River, vintage mother-of-pearl shell buttons, metal basin, plexi mirror, cables, dimensions variable, at Philadelphia Contemporary. Photo by David Evan McDowell. Courtesy the artist.



Detail of JEAN SHIN's *Fallen*, 2021, salvaged Eastern Hemlock tree, leather remnants, upholstery tacks, boulders (gneiss, quartzite), 1.1 × 12.2 × 0.8 m, at Olana State Historic Site, Greenport, New York. Photo by Peter Aaron. Courtesy the artist.



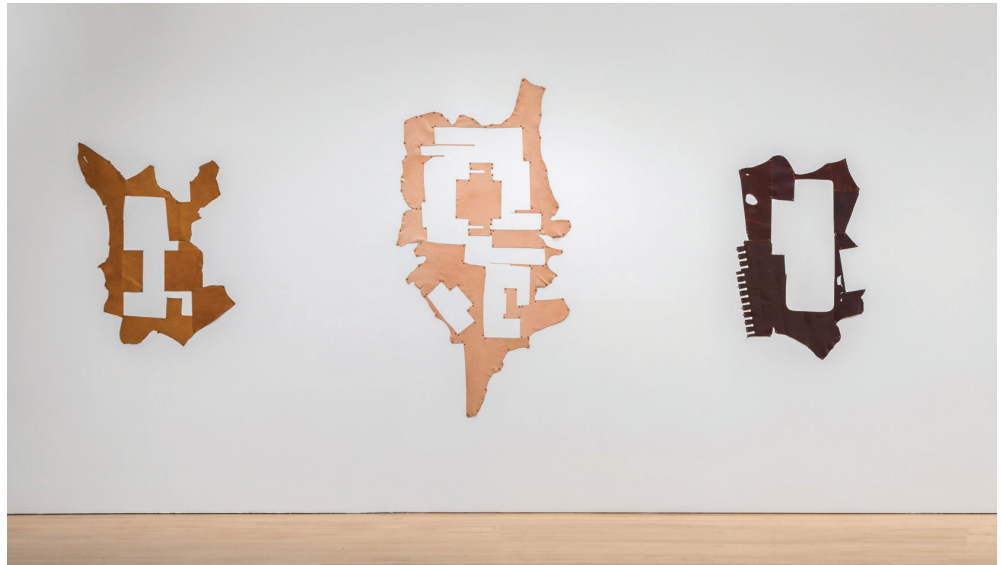
Installation view of JEAN SHIN's *Sea Change*, 2023, 7,000-plus plastic water bottles, zip ties, painted armature, in Diani, Kenya. Photo by Moko Fukuyama. Courtesy of the artist and HERI-Kenya.

friend, as if one were developing a personal relationship with the object. In this way, Shin invites us into a shared experience through her work.

One such communal space, *Allée Gathering* (2019), is a 12-meter-long table, commissioned by the Storm King Art Center outside of New York. The founder of the sculpture park had favored allées: pairs of trees planted in parallel lines that created an open corridor. Over the past 50 years, the trees have matured and also begun to decline due to the effects of climate change, with some needing to be cut down. Using salvaged pieces from the dead maple trees, Shin made a long table, which she placed next to the allée, mirroring the path. The timber cuts reveal the trees' inner cores; sitting there you feel as if you are encountering the inside of the tree.

When I visited Shin's studio in a converted three-story barn in Hudson Valley, she let me sample maple syrup tapped from trees in various states of health. I tasted one from a healthy tree from the Green Mountain variety, which was lightly sweet, warm, and aromatic, but also slightly unfamiliar; in contrast, stressed trees produce bitter maple syrup and children greatly dislike it. In this way, Shin enables us to experience trees through multiple sensations. By making syrup from maple trees in various states of health, she demonstrates to us how they were quietly asking for help.

While discussing *S.O.S.* (2021–22), made from salvaged hemlock branches, during an artist talk with curator Eva Respini at Praise Shadows Art Gallery, she explained: "Arms



Installation view of JEAN SHIN's *Spring Collection #1, #2, #3*, 2016, leather scraps from Marc Jacobs spring 2015 collection and T pins, 2.4 × 1.2 m each, at Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

are wailing, moving, and signaling for help. But do we even understand how to read the signs anymore?" Much like the question of whether a tree makes a sound when it falls in a forest when no one is around, Shin investigates the possibility of unperceived existence, of a world humans disregard because it is unobserved by us.

For Shin, contemporary art serves as an access point through which to explore and visualize the climate crisis. This mission is visible not only in the materiality of her artworks but also through the community she creates around her works.

As the Denning Visiting Artist at Stanford University in 2023, Shin worked with Desiree LaBeaud, a pediatric infectious disease physician to highlight the global problem of plastic waste. As Shin put it: "My role as a catalyst is to mobilize specialists from different fields working in the same cause." In Diani, Kenya, Shin worked with local community members on constructing *Sea Change* (2023), a site-specific sculpture composed of more than 7,000 single-use plastic water bottles, drawing attention to the planetary plastic crisis and global health. As Shin responded to Respini's question about creating a community around her work: "Oftentimes people ask who am I reaching out to? And I'm like, we are all here. You just don't acknowledge them as part of the community." She further explained, "It is really about this kind of access point of who you think is here and part of that belonging."

I was struck by this response and thought about it for weeks after. In her two decades-long career, Shin has made works rooted in communities and in collective collaboration. Her art reaches all who are here and goes beyond as well, addressing a larger ecosystem than that of human life.

We are all here. We are all part of this world. Shin is envisioning an ecosystem for the future, with a nostalgic vision of a more sustainable past now lost. She wants to hold us accountable, and by taking a tiny step forward she hopes to make a wave that will one day make a difference.

So, if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Shin will tell us it does, and she is laboriously making works that make sure we all hear it too.



View of JEAN SHIN's *Allée Gathering*, 2019, salvaged maple wood and steel, 0.8 × 14.3 × 1.3 m, at Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York. Photo by Jerry Thompson. Courtesy of the artist.