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Boston Art Review is a 501(c)(3) non-profit arts organization that facilitates contemporary arts discourse through publishing, programming, and events in Boston and beyond. We elevate diverse perspectives while bridging gaps between criticism, coverage, and community engagement.

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Land Acknowledgment

Boston Art Review covers stories about the region that occupies the unceded territory of the Massachusetts, Pawtucket, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc peoples. We honor the members of these nations who live and work here today and their ancestors who have stewarded this land and these waterways for millennia. Acknowledging this region's colonial history cannot undo harm, but we can use it as a first step and a promise to stand alongside our Indigenous neighbors in the fight for justice.

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ON THE COVER
Hong Hong, 内陆/*Inland* (detail), 2023. Photo by Julia Featheringill Photography. Courtesy of the artist.

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A PERCH WITH PURPOSE

Jean Shin's salvaged trees offer resting sites for migrating birds and human visitors at Appleton Farms

Words by
Karolina Hać

IN EARLY 2024, ARTIST JEAN SHIN BEGAN posting photos of weathered, moss-laden pieces of wood, coyly proclaiming in the caption that she was “hosting a forest” in her studio this winter. Working on her next commission, an ambitious site-specific installation titled *Perch*, Shin was reimagining wooden fence posts made from American chestnut trees on Appleton Farms, a property owned and operated by the Trustees in Ipswich, Massachusetts. A project over four years in the making, the posts will become an expansive public art installation that doubles as a temporary resting site for migrating bobolinks as they settle in for their mating and nesting season. For human visitors, Shin is creating unique sculptural interventions in the landscape out of fallen and dead trees that serve as platforms for engaging with the farm's grasslands and safely observing the bobolinks during their time at Appleton.

In March, I visited Shin, whose studio is based in the Hudson Valley, while she was working on site at Appleton Farms. I found her among twenty-one hulking segments of dead trees she and her team affectionately call “cookies.” All of the trees came from the Appleton property and were either fallen or otherwise dead and needed to be removed. As part of her process, she and her team removed the bark to reveal the sumptuous inner core of the monumental pieces of oak and maple. As she

showed me the different species she was working with, she pointed out the patches of copper procured from local salvage yards and construction sites that she has applied to “mend” certain sections like patches on ripped jeans.

She mused about the stories embedded in these trees, gesturing to a spot on one where it was struck by lightning and another that was hit with an insect infestation. It was late afternoon, and though activity on the farm was winding down, the occasional “moo” from the neighboring cows offered a reminder that Appleton is still a working farm—established in 1638, it is one of the oldest continuously run farms in the US. Throughout our conversation, Shin revealed her ability to think at both the macro and micro scale, using her work as a site to stitch the two together.

Shin's works are all incredibly labor-intensive and thoughtfully assembled: she aims to reuse materials as much as possible. Her works are also often site-specific, drawing on the characteristics inherent to a place or a collective history. This approach allows her to connect individual stories with collective narratives, to comment on our impact on the environment and each other.

At Appleton, she learned about the bobolink monitoring project led by the Trustees' agroecologist,

Jean Shin on site at the Trustees' Appleton Farms in late March 2024. Photo by Olivia Moon Photography for Boston Art Review.

Alejandro Brambila, who has been tracking the species' numbers to understand the effects of grazing and haying on the property on their habitat. In Brambila's work, she saw the delicate balancing act of bringing the very human system of agriculture in unison with nature through the study of ecology. Bobolinks, boisterous songbirds with a vibrant yellow cap that travel from North America to South America every year, rely on expansive grasslands during mating season for both ground foraging and nesting. Those visiting *Perch* may catch a glimpse of the males in the tuxedo-patterned plumage they sport during mating season, rowdily making their case to potential mates. The grasslands are central to the species' survival, but their availability has been shrinking as New England's landscape has changed over centuries to accommodate industrial farming methods and economic development. This history

has drawn a distinction between human and nature, obscuring the interconnectedness of species as we have pursued progress to the detriment of the environment. By highlighting the Trustees' agroecological approach, Shin's installation foregrounds a more sustainable approach to land use.

Shin is no stranger to working with trees that have succumbed to the elements or disease. In 2019, she reenvisioned Storm King's ailing maple allée in a work titled *Allée Gathering*. Splitting the maples open and assembling them as a communal table and benches, Shin revealed the trees' inner lives, allowing visitors to count their rings and notice the imperfections that told a broader story about the trees' health. The artist once again offers the opportunity to see a ubiquitous medium in a new way in *Perch*. Her manipulation of fallen trees often turns them into a space of commemoration, simultaneously memorializing their environmental and cultural significance. In speaking with her, it is clear her engagement with her chosen media runs deeper than simple aesthetics. From the very beginning, she has considered the life of the object—its past, its present place in her work, and its future.

Shin's curiosity about the history and the lives of objects allows her to see them as individual parts of a much larger whole. Born in South Korea and raised in the United States, she operates in and between cultures, making her a careful observer of behavior and shared values. In her artist statement, she says her perspective as a first-generation immigrant has allowed her to "[bear] witness to racial, economic, and environmental injustices," which has inspired her to "create value out of discards as a form of repair." As a young artist, Shin began working with discarded objects because they were free and readily accessible, transforming commonplace umbrellas into a shading canopy or sweaters into yarn with which she mapped the relationship between ourselves, our bodies, and each other. Over the years, this resourcefulness has turned into a

Jean Shin, *Perch* (detail), 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Praise Shadows Art Gallery.

"Suddenly, it's not so unique, and you are no longer thinking about your individual relationship to the subject, but the collective."

Shin is using red oak, Norway maple, and sugar maple found on Appleton Farms. Photo by Olivia Moon Photography for Boston Art Review.





Shin is using salvaged copper to cover holes in the stumps. Photo by Olivia Moon Photography for Boston Art Review.

central part of her practice, allowing her to bring people into the process as participants through their donation of items.

“I’ve always been attracted to the multiple and the repetition of things,” she told me when talking about how the materials inform her process. This can be seen in a work like *MAiZE*, a 2017 installation at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa. The work features thousands of green plastic bottles manipulated to resemble cornstalks and arranged like a corn maze. In 2020, the Mountain Dew “corn maze” reappeared as *Floating MAiZE*, suspended from the ceiling in an installation at the commercial property Brookfield Place in Manhattan. The sheer volume of single-use plastic bottles needed to create these works can trigger both admiration and dread.

Shin does not shame or scold when she uses plastic or e-waste, but rather asks us to reconsider our relationships to these objects and realize that our individual experiences are always part of a larger whole. Discarded, salvaged, and found objects inherently carry associations, meaning, and inner lives that Shin considers before she collects and manipulates them. “I think it changes the meaning when you find one thing that you think is special and unique, and then you realize, ‘Oh no, there’s ten thousand of those things.’ Suddenly,

it’s not so unique, and you are no longer thinking about your individual relationship to the subject, but the collective,” she said.

The artist sees plastic, in particular, as “incredibly seductive” but quite challenging to work with, noting that it has a tendency to degrade and change quickly. Manipulating items such as single-use bottles is a laborious and tedious process.

“It’s kind of depressing when you’re working with [plastic],” she said, adding that our reliance on it means she’ll likely never run out of material. Plastic has not just come to litter our landscapes but ourselves as well, as our bodies are inadvertently and increasingly saturated with microplastics.

She prefers a lighter touch when engaging with natural objects like trees. “I love working with organic materials because they can move and shift. They’re incredibly playful and malleable and soft,” she told me.

In 2021, Shin debuted another tree-centered work, *Fallen*, at Frederic Church’s Olana estate in Hudson, New York. An avid researcher, Shin dove into the history of nineteenth-century tanneries, an industry that devastated the hemlock forests in the Catskill region that were prominent in the

landscape the Hudson River School found so magnetic. She created a funerary-like piece that clad a salvaged forty-foot Eastern hemlock in recycled leather remnants and upholstery tacks. *Fallen* demonstrates the poetic nature of Shin’s approach to site-specific installations; from the depths of archives and interviews, she extracts the essential narratives and layers them in a manner that allows the viewer to see how the layers are interwoven. It is also an example of circularity in her practice—the limbs of the hemlock and upcycled leather were some of the leftovers from past commissions that found their next act as individual works in her 2023 solo show at Praise Shadows Art Gallery, “Second Skin.”

“She always ends up using material in a way that is going to resonate with what it was or where it came from,” said Praise Shadows founder Yng-Ru Chen, who represents the artist. “That’s the magic of Jean. You have no idea what she’ll conjure up, and it’s always so surprising.” There is an inventiveness and whimsy to Shin’s approach that presents multiple possibilities that she whittles down to the specific by grounding the work in its context.

One of the central components of Shin’s practice that can sometimes be overlooked are the many hands that touch a project like *Perch* from concept to completion. Shin, who is also a professor at Pratt Institute, has a remarkable ability to rally people around her ideas, and for an artist tackling topics as complicated as the climate crisis, this is a particularly valuable asset. Whether it’s the logistics of amassing articles of clothing—as she is for her next commission at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art—or learning from the staff at Appleton Farms, Shin’s commitment to marrying our individual experiences with the power of the collective is embedded throughout the life of the project. Chen noted that when she’s had the chance to speak with past participants in one of Shin’s projects, it is clear the impact of their participation stays with them long after the work is deinstalled.

Jessica Hong is a senior curator at the Toledo Museum of Art who has been working with Shin on *Perch* as an independent curator since the project’s inception in 2020. Hong says that the project

is a salient example of what is possible with collaboration. “The kind of work Jean does allows for all of these different stakeholders that may have never actively worked together to manifest this vision collectively.” Shin echoed this sentiment, telling me throughout our conversation about the many hands that not only make the work on a farm like Appleton possible, but also how they lent their skills and expertise to the project. It was, after all, the collaboration between the ecology and agricultural teams at Appleton—a nod to the interconnectedness of these two complex systems—that inspired this work.

When I ask Shin about what will happen to *Perch* after the installation closes in November, she admits that is still to be determined. While many of her works are in museums across the country, a work like *Perch*, fundamentally altered by the elements, bobolinks, and other critters, may be challenging to preserve. Past site-specific outdoor installations like *Allée Gathering* have made their way to other outdoor venues like Art Omi in upstate New York. Nonetheless, Shin’s relationship to her materials allows her to see degradation as a natural part of the objects’ lifespans.

Shin and Hong hope that highlighting the work happening on the farm and creating the space to commune with nature will not only expose visitors to the importance of their role in the environment, but empower them to take action in their own communities. In the bobolink’s yearly 12,500-mile voyage, Shin sees a compelling connection to our own stories of migration, including her own journey as a first-generation immigrant; in its dependence on native grasslands, she sees the many ways in which we depend on each other. The unspoken collaborators, of course, are nature and time. Subjected to New England weather and wildlife from spring to fall, these works will be marked by their environment. Though the next life for *Perch* is still to be determined as of this writing, the sculptures will be imbued with the history and characteristics of this particular place and this particular time. ■

“Jean Shin: *Perch*” is on view at The Trustees’ Appleton Farms through November 1, 2024.