

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 2004

## The Modern's Dirty Laundry

MoMA Queens Puts Its Detritus on Display



Digital rendering by Brian Ripel

Jean Shin made art out of museum employees' clothes, above; in "Humble Masterpieces," top, a waffle cone (first designed in 1896), a Spanish lollipop (1958), a Band-Aid (1921) and a Bic pen (1950).

**'Humble Masterpieces'** Museum of Modern Art Queens  
**'Projects 81: Jean Shin'** 45-29 34th St., at Queens Blvd.

By SARAH BOXER

It is spring cleaning at the Museum of Modern Art in Queens, or what? The curators are heading back to Manhattan. And on their way out it seems they decided to sweep the clothes from their closets and the objects from their desks and put them on display in two small summer shows.

The exhibition of employees' clothes, "Projects 81: Jean Shin," has two parts, a fabric mural and a hanging sculpture, both of which Ms. Shin, an installation artist, created out of 90 articles of clothes donated by the museum's guards, curators, registrars, publicists and even its director, Glenn D. Lowry.

The show of ordinary objects, "Humble Masterpieces," takes up a single case. Arranged in a grid under glass are 122 things, including a Bic pen, a paper clip, a soda can with a stay-on pull-tab opener, a Durabeam flashlight, a Bayer aspirin tablet, some Lego pieces, a Solo plastic coffee cup lid, a Ziploc bag, a Band-Aid strip, a roll of Scotch tape, a Duracell AA battery, a Swatch watch, a safety pin, a Post-it note and a pile of M & M's. The objects did not actually come from the staff's desk drawers. Some are in the museum's design collection; others are being considered for acquisition. And they are in mint condition.

In contrast, the clothes that appear in "Project 81" have clearly been through the wringer. The curator, Eva Respini, sent a memo out to the staff calling for clothes. Some articles, she noted, came right from the dry cleaners and still had their tags and staples. Others came dirty. Some she remembered seeing on her col-

leagues' backs. And then the art began.

To make the mural, Ms. Shin clipped out the seams, cuffs, collars, plackets and pockets from the garments that the curator collected for her. Then, as Ms. Shin explained during the installation, she starched and ironed the remaining pieces, labels and all, to the two facing walls leading from the coat check to the galleries. To make the sculpture, she wove the missing parts, which she poetically calls "the seam skeletons," into a messy net, dripping with cuffs and collars, and hung it from the gap between the two mural walls.

It's all quite lovely. Starched to the left-hand wall (as you walk toward the galleries) you see the cut-outs from colorful print dresses and shirts. On the right-hand wall are the flattened remnants of lots of black and gray garments, shading into the dullness of khakis and into the paleness of oxford cloth. Why so much black? The art world wears black, she explained, so "a lot of people gave black pants." She helpfully pointed out Mr. Lowry's shirt, a pink-and-white striped oxford.

"It is a portrait of the MoMA staff," Ms. Respini said, and it is about "the impossibility of seamlessness." How so? "We are in many locations, here in Queens and in Manhattan. This speaks to the fractured nature of the staff," she said. "It is an attempt to deal with that." How has the staff responded? They are excited about the show. She said they keep coming up to her to say, "I can't wait to see my corduroy shirt!" And so the mending begins.

At the opening of "Humble Masterpieces," the curator, Paola Antonelli, from the museum's architecture and design department, indicated that she, too, had a public mission in mind. This show of ordinary stuff, she said, like "Useful Objects," an annual series of shows that the Museum of Modern Art started in the late

1930's, is about "empowering people." She hoped, she said, that people would use the guest book to nominate their own design masterpieces.

And nominate they did. People named some things by brand, some things by type and some things that aren't exactly things. There was: Vaseline, Velcro, Pringles chips, the Polaroid camera, Dixie paper plates, Nestle Rolos, Right Guard deodorant, the Wiffle ball, H2 by Hummer, Durex condoms, Pampers.

And there were wet wipes, zippers, dill chips (dill chips?), T-shirts with logos, "my pen, this paper," a folding-clasp knife, a vibrating foot massager, "the humble cotton bud" (that is, the Q-tip), an all-in-one vinegar-and-oil bottle, a flour sifter, a "girly girl," latex gloves, the laptop computer, the cellphone, the alarm clock, measuring tape, the sunny day, the sea, the stiletto, the toilet seat, mascara, lipstick, lamination, any window or doorknob, the shower, the self-adhesive padded mailer, a homework doer, "a self-ironing, drying thing" and — why not? — the girl next door.

But most of all there were drawings. The guest book, when checked in May, was being filled by empowered teenagers making their mark at the Museum of Modern Art. One sketched an expert Hello Kitty, another a jigsaw puzzle piece. One drew an ice cream cone with three dips, another doodled a lion defeating. One played tic-tac-toe, another made a musical staff. One scribbled the sea with a shark's fin sticking out. Another made a tight line drawing of men's Y-front briefs. One drew a baseball player with an erection doing a handstand. Another sketched the moon smoking.

In it an accident that the Museum of Modern Art, that temple of high modernism, is simultaneously showing two low-brow exhibitions of ordinary stuff just at the moment when the museum's paintings and sculptures are awaiting shipment to Manhattan? Ms. Respini said she didn't know about "Humble Masterpieces" when she started collecting clothes for the Jean Shin show. The museum's interdepartmental communications, she explained, are "not so good." Accidents will happen. □