

**Jean Shin**  
**Accumulations**

6.28-9.11. 2005

## Artist Biography

Born in Seoul, South Korea in 1971, Jean Shin currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She recently participated in the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and has had solo exhibitions at Galerie Eric Dupont in Paris (2005), Frederieke Taylor Gallery in New York City (2004), and Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens (2003). She was an artist-in-residence at The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2005, and was a recipient of The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Art Award in 2001.

## Artist Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who contributed prescription bottles for my project and facilitated the collection process. It could not have been realized without your participation.

I would also like to extend many thanks to Janet Riker and the wonderful staff at the University Art Museum for all their hard work to make this exhibition possible.

I am grateful to Frederieke Taylor of Frederieke Taylor Gallery for her ongoing support. Special thanks to Jen May and Junko Sugimoto for their assistance in the studio.

## Exhibition Checklist

*All works courtesy of the artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York*

*Chemical Balance 2*, 2005  
Prescription pill bottles, mirrors, and epoxy  
7 units from 32 to 46 inches in diameter; overall dimensions variable

*Safety Net*, 2002-2005  
Discarded polypropylene strapping and rivets  
overall dimensions 23 x 23 feet

*Bowery Display (A-Frames)*, 2004  
Digital print  
15 x 20 inches

*Bowery Display (Cold Boxes)*, 2004  
Digital print  
15 x 20 inches

*Bowery Display (Kitchen Chairs)*, 2004  
Digital print  
15 x 20 inches

*Bowery Display (Stainless Steel Trays)*, 2004  
Digital print  
15 x 20 inches

*Bowery Display (Steel Rods)*, 2004  
Digital print  
15 x 20 inches

*Found Installation (Colored Vinyl Rolls)*, 2002  
Digital c-print  
16 x 20 inches

*Found Installation (Ribbons)*, 2002  
Digital c-print  
19½ x 15¼ inches

*Found Installation (Seam Tapes and Cards)*, 2002  
Digital c-print  
19½ x 13½ inches

*Found Installation (Steel Red Rods)*, 2002  
Digital c-print  
16 x 20 inches

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COVER: *Safety Net* (detail)

BACK COVER: *Chemical Balance 2* (detail), installation at University Art Museum

Installation photos: Ford Bailey

## An Interview with Jean Shin

The following interview took place between Jean Shin and Janet Riker, Director, University Art Museum, via email in June 2005.

**Janet Riker:** I'm not sure audiences understand the intense labor involved in each of your pieces: collecting, taking things apart, reconstructing, reconfiguring, stacking, weaving...would you speak about this aspect of your artistic practice?

**Jean Shin:** This labor-intensive process has become a significant aspect of my work. The collecting process gives me the opportunity to reach out and involve my own community, and at other times to interact with industries and professionals that I may not normally have contact with. The dialogue that develops over months (sometimes years) of negotiation with a large number of participants who donate material or time for my art projects is a critical part of my research. Each new project takes me physically to new locations and to meet different types of people. In the case of the current project for Albany, I've spoken with many individuals about their health and engaged in numerous conversations with pharmacists, doctors, nurses, the elderly, and most importantly, individuals who have been dependent on medicine all their lives.

When I have accumulated these familiar objects in the hundreds or thousands, I begin to investigate the physical properties of the material and how it may be altered or rearranged to best exemplify the conceptual themes I am interested in. Often in the process of deconstructing the material, I figure out how it is made so I can remake and transform it. As much as I may come to these found objects with specific ideas of how I might want to use them, I also feel it is important to be sensitive to what the materials intrinsically want to do and how far they can be pushed while still retaining some of their original identity. It is always a balancing act between resources, materials, process, and ideas.

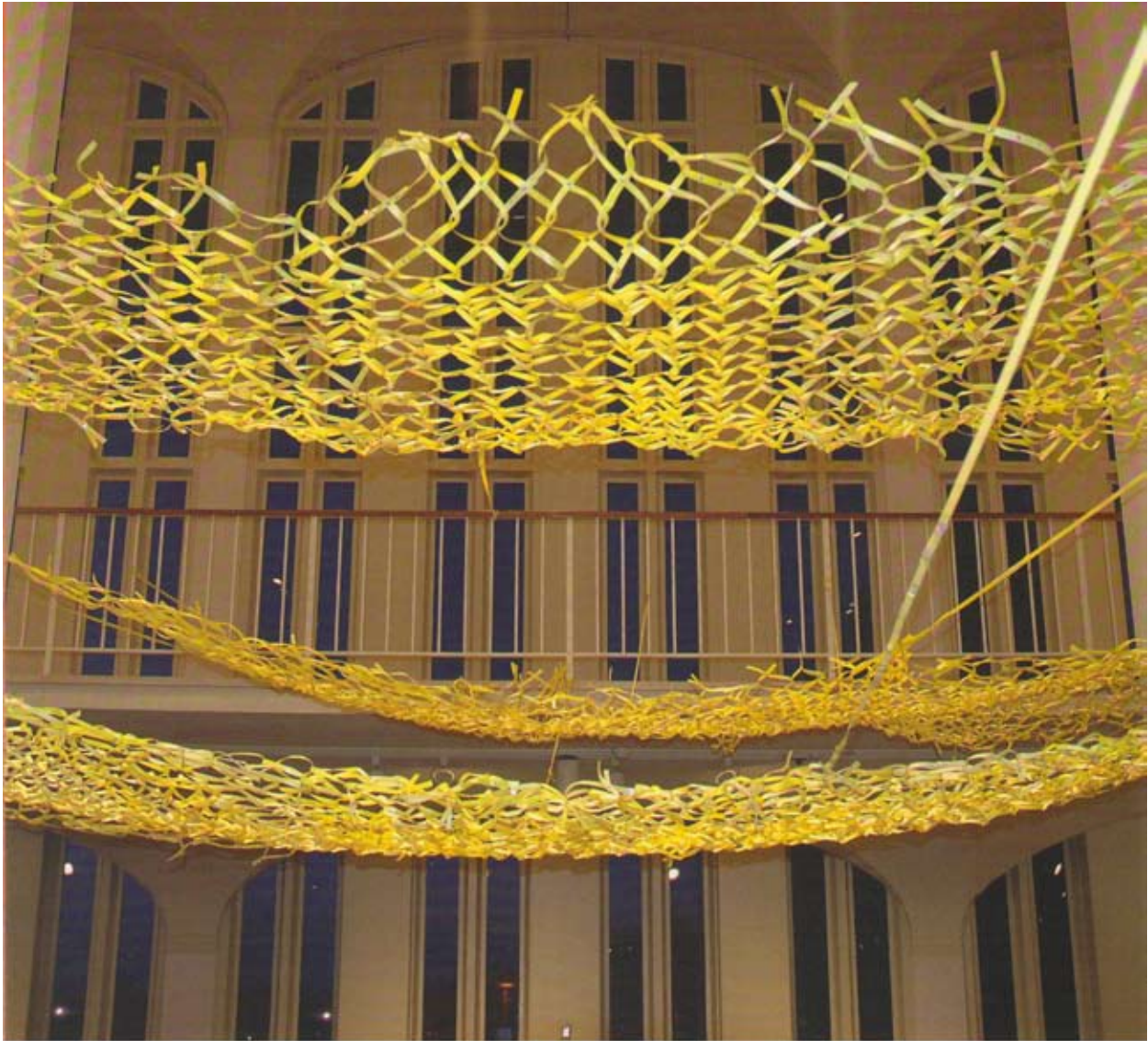
**JR:** You've touched on one of the things I admire most about your work, which is a sense of intimate involvement

with the material and all that material represents. It's not hard to see how the process you've described contributes to the layers of meaning in your work—a density that can take a viewer from castoff pant cuffs to a consideration of the immigrant experience in America, or from empty pill bottles to the trials of end-of-life caregiving. Is it pertinent here that many of the objects you choose to work with have reference to the body?

**JS:** Yes, absolutely. The relationship to the body was much more direct in my early sculptures and installations. For example, I wanted to use clothing and related accessories (pant cuffs, single socks, neckties, worn shoes, umbrellas, etc.) to abstractly represent the presence and absence of the body. My work began to grow, both physically and metaphorically, from my interest in the individual body to the collective body. This led me to work with non-fabric objects that have been cast off by society at large (losing lottery tickets, eyeglasses, wine bottles, prescription pill vials, etc.) I love to explore the new potential of particular objects, to suggest the object's history in each of our lives while also connecting it to larger societal issues. I choose specific leftover materials that are no longer needed or wanted by the owner, yet still contain a kind of untapped potential. Ultimately these materials reveal an intimate connection to the body, though one that might not be physical, such as sight, desire, or consumption. In the case of *Chemical Balance*, the empty prescription drug containers allude to something consumed by the body in an attempt to alter its chemical makeup.

**JR:** I would say that through the objects you also connect us to each other. I experience an understanding of human commonality and interconnectedness in your work. Your installations tell us something about an entire community or a group of individuals.

**JS:** I believe that the inventory of things we leave behind is a reflection of who we are, how we live, and what we value. The process of accumulating hundreds of a particular discarded object for my installations becomes an informal survey that reflects our identity as a society—ulti-



Installation views at the University Art Museum

mately creating a "collective portrait" of our immediate community. In the past couple of years, I have found it engaging and challenging to work not only "site-specific" but also "community-specific." Whenever possible, I try to involve the audience that would see and host my work from the very beginning by inviting their participation in accumulating the materials with me. To a certain extent, it becomes an unofficial collaboration. In the case of the installation at MoMA, with the assistance of the curator I invited the Museum staff to donate their work clothes for the exhibition. The installation became an abstract portrait of the Museum employees, bringing together the diverse individuals that made up the large staff body from the different departments, many of whom go relatively unseen by the public. The project also revealed an unacknowledged yet self-imposed dress code at MoMA that seemed to inform the employees' professional identity.

**JR:** The MoMA piece also brings to mind a playfulness and sense of humor that I see in your work. How do you feel about that?

**JS:** That's a tough question...others have also commented on the humor found in my work. It's not intentional or



*Penumbra*, 2003, fabric (broken umbrellas) and thread, 72 x 45 feet x variable height, installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY

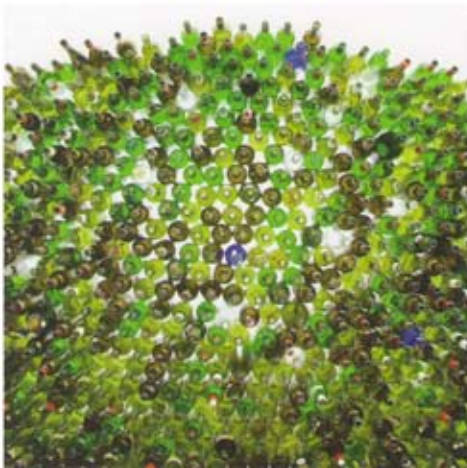
LEFT: *Cut Outs and Suspended Seams*, 2004, cut fabric (clothing of MoMA staff), thread and starch, *Projects 81* installation at Museum of Modern Art, NYC

really conscious on my part. However, I believe art, like life, is unpredictable, and that may be part of the playfulness of my work. In my process of experimenting with forms and materials, I never really know where it will lead me. Sometimes the outcome of my explorations has had surprising results—trying to defy gravity, playing with space light, or even wind. I am hopeful that viewers who encounter my work can connect to a basic optimism. The humble materials I choose to work with celebrate the imperfection of everyday things and an underlying beauty in all things. Perhaps for the viewer, my work causes them to pause, stirring a quiet laughter or a small pleasure in this realization because it's often overlooked in our daily experience. Another possibility is that the repetition in both labor and form in my work results in a kind of absurd yet meaningful monument.

I'm interested in how seemingly contradictory qualities may co-exist simultaneously. I guess this outlook is, in part, because of my personal background as a Korean-American and growing up in two cultures with a hyphenated identity in America. I live within many dualities. I have come to see these paradoxical characteristics in the found objects I choose and in the experiences I create within my installations. For example, an umbrella has essentially two very different aspects to its construction: the colorful, organic, almost seductive fabric skin attached to the rigid, chaotic metal structure, each co-dependent on the other for its function. My installations also reflect other fundamental dualities: the individual and the collective experience, the personal and the monumental, the fragile and the strong, the intimate and the public, the handmade and the mass-produced—and, as you mentioned, the playful and the serious.

**JR:** Many of your titles reflect that duality and juxtapose the original raw material with the associative meanings you give it. Would you comment on *Safety Net* in this context?

**JS:** With my titles, I like to offer a description of the form and material while also hinting at some of the content and meaning of the work. It's an opportunity to clue viewers in to my thinking process. At the same time, I realize that people will bring to the work their personal associations about the materials as well as their own interpretation of it, so I'm careful not to have the title dominate with a singular understanding of the work. I prefer words in the title to have multiple meanings. In the installation *Safety Net*, I am literally suspending a large net made out of cargo straps in the middle of the exhibition space. These broken straps are remnants of a global distribution of goods that I have reconnected and woven into an open, flexible structure that physically connects various spaces of the gallery. The word "net" also has a different association in the world of technology—short for "Internet." Isn't it interesting that our society is becoming more interconnected, not just through the international transportation of physical goods but more and more by a virtual digital network? A safety net implies protection from a physical danger, a backup system. As we increasingly exist within virtual networks, what safety nets remain?



**JR:** It's my turn to say. "That's a tough question..."

I'd like to shift gears a little and ask how you came to work with found objects. You have your B.F.A. in painting, right?

**JS:** Yes, I have a B.F.A. in painting, but by the time I had my senior thesis exhibition the entire show was based on small three-dimensional objects. I was taught painting very early on in my training, so by the time I was studying painting in college I had hit a crisis with the medium. As a young art student, I felt burdened by the Western history of painting and the technical aspects of the medium. When I began working three-dimensionally, I wasn't so familiar with the history of sculpture, so there was great creative freedom for me. After school, I think I was consciously trying to distance myself from what I had learned in art school, and wanted instead to connect to a type of creative practice that was more universal. Trying to find my own voice, activities like cutting, sewing, and braiding seemed to be more natural to me. Continuing this strategy, I began using non-art materials. Found objects seemed more real, more

accessible, less loaded with tradition. And quite honestly, as a young artist it was cheaper than going to get my materials from the art store. Of course, I've come full circle: my passion for drawing and painting is very evident in my sculptures and installations. The connection to the body in my work comes out of my early study of life drawing and anatomy. Through my installations, I can still explore formal issues of color, shape, and composition, but now those explorations are rooted in their relationship to content and social relevance. ■

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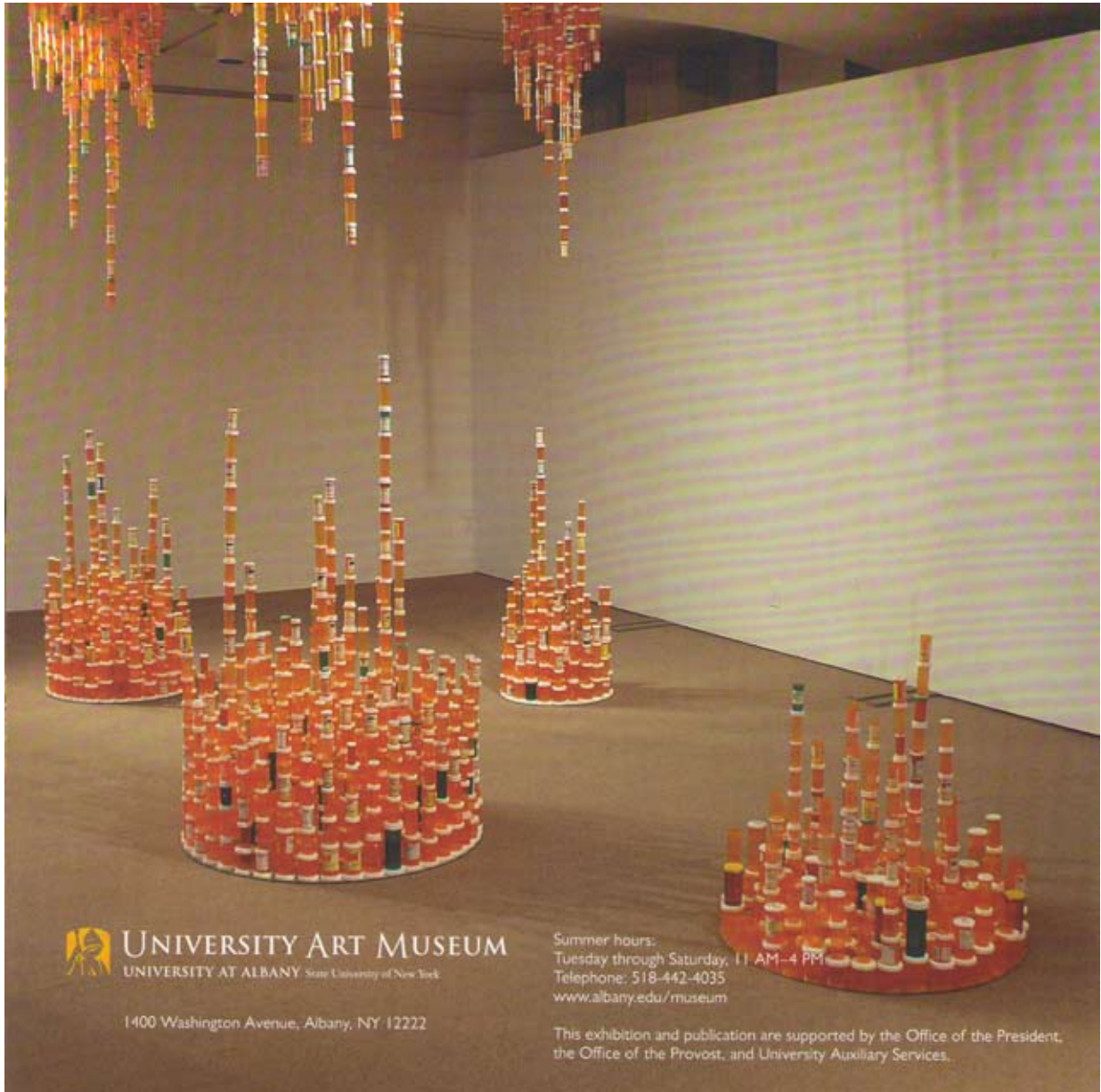
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: *Glasscape* (detail), in collaboration with architect Brian Ripol, 2005, wine bottles and silicone, dimensions variable, installation at Galerie Eric, Dupont, Paris

*Chemical Balance 2* (detail)

*Found Installation (Ribbons)* (detail)

*Chance City* (detail), 2001–2004, \$21,496 worth of discarded lottery tickets, 6 x 8 x 8 feet, installation at Brooklyn Museum





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