



EVERYDAY MONUMENTS

A Conversation with

Jean Shin



SEONG KWON, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Everyday Monuments, 2009. Sports trophies, painted cast and sculpted resins, and projections, approximately 7.3 x 5 x 45 ft.

BY SARAH TANGUY

Known for her labor-intensive installations of everyday accumulations, Jean Shin broke new ground in *Everyday Monuments*, a commission begun in 2007 at the invitation of Joanna Marsh, curator of contemporary art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. Conceptually, the installation added elements of narrative and a national scope to Shin's interest in community participation, while it met the challenges of working in a miniature scale.

Sarah Tanguy: *How did Everyday Monuments come about?*

Jean Shin: I conceived the project by looking at Washington as the United States capital with a national identity and as a place that's always entangled with historic memory. The idea that the city was built around public monuments was fascinating—our societal ideals embodied in the heroic figure of the Lincoln Memorial, Maya Lin's wall engraved with the names of thousands of veterans, and the interaction of visitors who leave flowers, notes, and their own memories at these sites. Yet a massive void is left in the middle of the city—the National Mall. I thought it was full of potential. It is left empty for millions of people to gather in celebration and protest. I was also considering my everyday experience of growing up in Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington.

For the installation, I chose trophies, mini-monuments to one's personal achievements, as equally symbolic materials to work with, to make our experience of the historic monuments more intimate and modest. Trophies collect dust in attics and basements, yet people hold on to them because they preserve significant memories. These objects pay tribute to childhood sports. For many, they retain feelings of nostalgia or the hope of becoming something. For others, they represent accomplishments earned over a lifetime. With these ideas in mind, I imagined a large-scale project that would involve the DC community. Locals would donate their trophies, which would then be transformed and displayed in a large, indoor site at the Smithsonian.

ST: *How does the immigrant experience inform the installation?*

JS: Typical of first-generation immigrants, my parents supported our family through menial work. They left good jobs as professors in South Korea to come to the U.S. In this project, I wanted to celebrate the unsung heroes in our society whose everyday labors go unrecognized, and, in part, that includes populations who are new to this country and live the American dream through hard work and perseverance.

America was going into a recession, and people were losing their jobs. During the last administration, I shared people's feelings of frustration and hopelessness about the direction this country was



Everyday Monuments, 2009. Two details of installation.

taking. And all of a sudden, Obama arrives and reinvigorates a passé concept like hope. These were ideas that I was struggling to articulate in my own work.

ST: *Could you talk about the donation process and how you altered the trophies?*

JS: The first part of the process—soliciting the donation—is critical to my practice. I collaborate with the host institution about how best to connect with the community, through local media, the museum’s on-line presence, and outreach. The conversation begins there, and the work shapes itself through the relationships with my participants. With *Everyday Monuments*, I heard back from individuals reflecting on the meaning of these old trophies in their lives. I also reconnected with my high school, and the accumulation occurred through a grassroots social network of local parents. Within a month, we went from giving up hope to having thousands brought to the museum and eventually arriving at my studio.

Each trophy was individually altered and meticulously resculpted. My assistants and I inventoried, repaired, and photographed them—trying to classify the different sports and match them with poses from various occupations. First, we cut the arms and removed the rackets, balls, and so forth. When you look at the figures on trophies very carefully, they’re strange and idealized—their actions frozen at heightened moments. Then, we reattached the arms and legs in more natural, everyday poses. Next, we handmade over 50 new objects and props, such as a typewriter, a hammer, and a mop. These were cast in multiples, sprayed to have a gold shine, and integrated into the altered figurines. In all, we had almost 2,000 trophies, encompassing over 100 tasks and occupations.

ST: *What is the relationship between the altered trophies and the wall projection?*

JS: When you come into the gallery, you see a sea of golden figurines and their pedestals, an aerial view of the trophies as a glittering, triumphal mass. Because of the work’s density and scale, it takes audiences a while to notice that the miniature figures have been altered.

The accompanying wall projection allows viewers to feel immediately surrounded by images of life-size figures—like being among a crowd or walking in front of a frieze. The images change every couple of minutes. I love the contrasting relationship between the grand yet ephemeral projection and these cheap, elaborately colored, plastic trophies with their marble pedestals that appear so permanent. The aerial view of the National Mall is familiar to us because of the media’s obsession with the critical mass needed to populate this signature public space, yet for the people who are there, the intense experience among the crowd is quite different. Simultaneously presenting the dual perspective of participant and observer was important to this site-specific installation.

ST: *How does Everyday Monuments fit into your earlier work? I see less emphasis on Minimalism and feminism and more on narrative. In terms of cast-offs and our consumer culture, losing lottery tickets aren’t quite trophies.*



Everyday Monuments, 2009. Two details of installation.

JS: The narrative aspect was heightened in this work, in part because of the nature of trophies and the site. It's the first figurative installation that I've ever engaged in. That's an interesting topic of discussion in my work, because I think of my cast-offs as surrogates or group portraits of the community. Although my past works are abstract, they metaphorically represent the figure in many different guises. In *Everyday Monuments*, I'm literally transforming the human body in sculpture. Unlike lottery tickets or umbrellas, the trophies are donations from specific people who are represented and memorialized in this work. This exchange with my audience and donors has been particularly meaningful.

ST: I also see a reference to classical sculptures like the Discobolus.

JS: *Everyday Monuments* evokes my earlier interest in classical sculpture from the Parthenon friezes and in Rodin. I thought of the grand compositions, the multitude of figures frozen in action and embedded into the architecture. All around Washington, you see references to classical sculpture and architecture. I was also thinking about works that came out of social realism, the New Deal, the WPA—depictions of the American workforce. Instead of the usual conversation about post-Minimalism, I revisited my love of classical, figurative works and brought this into territory that was familiar to my own process.

ST: Aren't there a few instances where you intervene with traditional gender roles?

JS: It wasn't very conscious on my part, though my feminist background was probably present. My decisions came out of examining the pose. The arms of the basketball player were reaching up, so we replaced the ball with a drill. There are just as many female basketball trophies as there are male ones. I realized in my conversations with donors how proud parents were that their girls had participated in these particular sports. What does this say about our culture when sports stars are predominately male? Or when beauty pageant trophies indicate a certain role for women and ideas about beauty? My project attempted to update the trophies, to make them reflect our shared, lived experience today, which is that women can pick up the drill and men can push the stroller.

ST: What kind of feedback did you get?

JS: I was very moved by the number of donors who attended the opening. It's always a wonderful occasion to have the project come full circle and to see them acknowledge the exchange and transformation. I was nervous about their reaction to my alterations and the removal of the sports references. Thankfully, they really got the piece: they knew that it honored them but also celebrated others who never received trophies, including myself. One family had donated several large martial arts trophies earned by their deceased son, and I was struck by their generosity in the face of loss. Their participation deepened the project's significance for me: I recognized that the trophies weren't just about competition and glorifying the victor; sometimes they can symbolize unfulfilled hopes and dreams.

ST: How do your intentions differ from those of other artists who use everyday objects?

JS: Many contemporary artists use consumer products. However, over the last five years, I have realized that my work is increasingly less about the materials themselves and more about a community and a context. No longer are my materials found or just purchased. I'm actively soliciting participants to engage in this social exchange with me. It's not just finding beauty in the mundane, it's finding a connection with someone. The finished installation brings the individual experience to the collective. The labor-intensive, transformative process is like alchemy. By soliciting cast-off materials from communities, the projects reveal how we live, who we are, what we do. My primary interest is to figure out how to engage with the next community and how we are going to begin a conversation, a relationship.

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