

## JEAN SHIN *Surface Tension*

by Jonathan Goodman

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Jean Shin is well known for her large installations consisting of accumulated objects—disparate artifacts such as prescription pill bottles, sports trophies, sweaters, and swathes of fabric—given to her by people in the community where the art environment takes place. Always interested in the exchange between the individual and the mass experience of the urban community, Shin looks at relations generated by contact on the street, and includes the possessions of persons not active in the art world, thereby socializing them within the parameters of the contemporary art arena. For her current show at Cristin Tierney, she has appropriated wooden fencing used at an active construction site on the Upper East Side.



Jean Shin, *Surface Tension* 2A, 2B, and 2C, 2016. Paint on wood. 91 3/4 × 143 7/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

Shin is deeply interested in the contestations of the street, the dialogue between sidewalks, buildings, and people. This is part of the excitement of city life, but is

also an experience that carries some disaffection, in the sense that the mix of people, differing by class, race, ethnicity, and nationality don't connect so much as move past each other in a highly impersonal way. Part of the installation of the panels of the gallery might be called performative in nature; the removal of the fencing is not exactly an act of illegal stealth, although it approaches, on some level, an event of subversion. In actuality, Shin had the loose permission of the construction people to do what she did; but she was required to replace the panels with ones that fit the locations exactly—and like the panels she took with her, the replacements were painted blue.

Shin chose these unusual materials because these barriers are exquisite found paintings—mostly blue in color, they demonstrate the history of the site—the graffiti put up that is then painted over, as well as the nature of the plywood, with its knots and grain and ragged edges, and small oddities like differences in color brought about by removal of tape. The remarkable consequence of these events on very humble materials is that the individual pieces of fencing become both a palimpsest revealing the history of people's interaction with them and a remarkably sophisticated painting that looks like a work of the New York School—indeed, viewers asked Shin what her approach to painting these found objects was like.

The results are quite extraordinary. In *Surface Tension 5* (2016), two cloudlike passages done in a cerulean blue cover the darker blue of the panel. On the left, the form is roughly rectangular, with a trunk at the bottom marked by cuts and a hole in the wood. On the right, we see a squarish area of light-blue paint, next to which is a rectangular form that covers most of the right side of the composition. Between the two blue segments is a reddish brown passage, while the background at the top of the painting is a matte blue. One would be hard put not to appreciate the formal qualities of this found object, which mimics a professional painting in every way; one is reminded of passages in the work of the Abstract Expressionists. But of course its processes are impersonal and anonymous, and Shin's greatest achievement is her ability to see art where we don't usually find it.

That Shin has claimed the appropriation as her own work is a highly interesting, but also somewhat debatable, idea. Shin is working within an established history

that includes such artists as Duchamp and, more recently, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince. It seems that today it is not so important who made the work as the context in which it is shown. But Shin is doing something genuinely new: not only is she borrowing from the street, she is suggesting an entire urban context by doing so. In Shin's case, the appropriation is based on acute artistic insight. In *Surface Tension 2B* (2016), the painting (part of a triptych), like most, occurs on a tall wooden board, whose upper-right corner is chipped. In the middle of the painting, there is a spectacular sky blue form that consists of roughly geometric shapes—a strip, connected by a vertical trunk to the main body of the form, makes its way across the work from the middle to the right edge. In this work and the others, Shin demonstrates genuine acumen in choosing the panel, whose aesthetic accomplishment is real.

Still, the relations between creativity and the use of another's object as one's own demand a complicated response. Shin has done nothing to the works beyond displaying them in the gallery. Appropriation is part of the general extension of the definition of art, which now has no boundaries, and Shin brilliantly makes use of this practice, asking her audience to accept construction fencing as art. The show works really well because the panels are so beautiful. And Shin has had the eye and intelligence to read the panels as fine works of art. This is a type of creativity in its own right, a perception that is an art itself. Because Shin is working with found art, this show adds to appropriation by using materials that carry a history from the real world, outside art traditions. In doing so, Shin demonstrates that such borrowing can involve not only art history but also real life. Consequently, the show is just as much about experience as it is about painting.