

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Jean Shin
- Interviewer: Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
- November 22, 2016 / Artist studio in RedHook, Part of Brooklyn
- Recorded and Transcribed by Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
- 13 Video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Joo Yun Lee (JYL): Many of your large-scale installations and sculptures—either temporarily on view or permanently installed in public space—are made of ordinary materials such as sports trophies, military uniforms, and prescription pill bottles, which are donated by the community. How did you start making work with such collected materials that are otherwise abandoned or forgotten?

Jean Shin (JS): Collecting objects is what I have been doing for a long time, since my first installation. I am interested in everyday materials because they are abundant and often no longer needed or wanted. For me, collecting is an interesting social exchange with others. It creates meaning and relationships when individuals think about art or engage with an artist and an art project. Museums and other cultural institutions that have commissioned and shown my work are excited about the possibility of engaging with their audiences in different ways. Communities are invited to be part of the production of the work through this exchange.

JYL: Once you collect a great number of objects for use in your work, you go through a selection and transformation process. For instance, in *Everyday Monuments* (2009), sports trophies are transformed into the gestures of daily workers.

JS: Yes, it is very time-consuming and requires lots of planning but that's kind of the whole point. I always start from a site-specific intention: *Everyday Monuments* was initiated when the Smithsonian American Art Museum invited me to do a solo exhibition. They not only wanted to show past works but were also interested in commissioning a new work. I started to think about The Smithsonian as a site beyond just the museum. It's a federal museum and has so much history. I also grew up in Maryland, outside of Washington D.C., so I knew the city and it was a kind of homecoming. But for most, visiting D.C. is an essential part of American life because it's the nation's capital. With that comes ideas of national identity and democracy, among others. Tapping into some of those questions, I realized that there is no 'definitive' history since any site has multiple narratives about how we understand that place. It's interesting to talk about it now because the planning of the exhibition happened before President Obama's election. I felt so amazed at this moment in history where a man of color, an African-American man became president. That was significant. Considering that all the monuments in D.C. served men in the white history of white presidents, I started to think about an 'anti-monument,' to the people who elect the president. I wanted to make an intimate monument [of each individual in history].

In this respect, there is an object in one's life that is a mini-monument, one that is historic and full of optimism: the sports trophy. America is so obsessed with sports. The materials that make up a sports trophy—plastic, metal, and marble—are not that significant. But it's significant as a symbol. Parents save their children's trophies for decades. I wanted to transform them and update them because winning a trophy is a form of participation in the American dream – it's an achievement of optimism, of being a winner. Those are ideas that I believed in myself, being an immigrant, realizing the need for transformation and optimism, and the labor [that goes into winning]. At the end of the day, you won't become the president, but you do become someone else. Looking back, my parents worked all the time, as most immigrants did. They worked in menial jobs for small profits to raise their children here. For me, [rewarding] those [labors] are the kind of trophies we should be giving out. There is no format, no teams, no competition, you just survived and you have your life. It is a good life, but it does come with hardship. So, I updated the winners of the trophies from hockey players to janitors, construction workers, or maids, for doing the work that happens every single day, especially the menial work that is done by immigrant workers. I wanted to portray everyday people at work, rather than on their vacations or in family portraits.

JYL: The community's participation must be a very important part of your projects. How do you engage and work with people of different communities and invite them to donate their very personal objects, memories, and stories for your art projects?

JS: Each project is realized through different ways of engagement, but I do think building relationships is important. I usually work with someone who is local and knows his/her community better than I do. The community of the venue that's going to show the work matters the most. For instance, for the Smithsonian, I worked with the Washington Post to spread the word about my project. Also, since I grew up there, I contacted my high school, their current PTA (parent-teacher association), and my art community there. I met a parent who was so excited about my project. She had read about it in the Washington Post. People loved that the project was about their local community. The parents from the community became my ambassadors. They were excited about the little girl from Bethesda, Maryland, who went to art school, became an artist, and was now doing an art project with the Smithsonian. The project is not about me, but about them. It was like sending an open invitation asking, "Do you want to do this together?" because it cannot be done without them. There is a real need that they fulfill.

I try to make sure they understand the work is going to be owned by the museum and their donated possession will be transformed. When I got donations of veterans' uniforms for the *Dress Code* (2008) project, I had spoken to them about their war stories, their desperate experiences, and the violence and trauma that these uniforms represented to them. They wanted to keep the uniforms for decades but didn't know what to do with them. It was more like holding onto something that held their memories or sacrifice. When I said that I would love for them to donate the uniforms to me for the art project, I wanted to make sure that they understood the uniforms might be cut up and become part of a larger project, not specifically about them, but the larger experience of many. They trusted me. This is a conversation that I can have as the artist.

JYL: Your work incorporates a variety of media: sculptures, photography, video, and site-specific installation. How do you realize your work in the specific site and space of the exhibition, choosing different ways of presentation and embracing different media?

JS: The medium and how I choose to present the work are very site-specific. It comes from looking at the space where the work is to be shown and the idea of engaging with the specific community. Sometimes it is a matter of what is allowed at the museum or what is challenging the museum, or what has never been used in that space before. Sometimes, a projection or video is a way to create an immersive environment in a way that objects can't do. For instance, in the case of *Everyday Monument*, the trophies I used were really small. The audience cannot see the details and they are not going to understand that each trophy shows an individual person at work.

When I got all the trophies, I took pictures of every single one and documented how they were transformed. Looking at so many digital files made me think of blowing them up. Thinking of D.C., we usually see an aerial view of protests, but when we are there, we have no idea what is happening—"Are we moving? How many people are here?" I thought about the difference in experience between physically being there versus an experience mediated by television. I wanted the audience to feel like they are standing in front of an important event, but at the same time understand how the trophies or figures are mapped or counted. The video installation enlarges the three-inch figures on a wall in the gallery so that when the audience sees the objects and the projection, they can understand the work in both ways. I played with the projection so that the crowds fade in and dissolve, but in the photographs, the figures look rigid with authority as each is a profile of a person, as opposed to the crowd.

JYL: *Dress Code* (2008) entails very dense subjects, such as international relations and the issue of immigration in the U.S. How did the relationship between you as an artist and

the participants come to embrace such social and political issues?

JS: The project got started when the federal government commissioned me to make a permanent work. I had never made a permanent installation piece before, so I was a bit intimidated at first. They walked me through issues of materiality and longevity for permanent works and explained why I would have to work with their conservators. After conferring with the conservators, I decided to make the work with fabric because the material is already transformed from when it was dyed and washed, so they would remain stable for a long time in the right conditions. Then I learned that the federal building [where the piece would be installed] was actually the place in Baltimore where my parents' immigration was determined. It was 1978 when my family immigrated to this country. My father applied for U.S. citizenship in the 1980s and gained it there. I remember that he was studying for the exam till very late after work. I had a very odd feeling when I found out that the federal government was asking me to make my first permanent work in that building. I was so excited that the project was not just about my story, but about my father's story and about all these other stories.

On top of that, I found out that the other major users of the building were veterans. So every veteran who came to the building could see the project, but the other component that I wanted to address directly were immigrant communities, because of the naturalization [that was occurring in the building]. The strange part is that American soldiers are shipped outside of the country to serve and represent America in uniform, yet their uniforms hide who they are because they are just part of the military, nothing more. Similarly, immigrants are labeled "immigrants to America" and stripped of their identities. To become an American, they have to say goodbye to their passport and homeland. I thought that was an interesting spectrum, from coming in to going out and the American life in-between. I wanted to make a wall that would be striated like the American landscape. I quite dislike the notion of the melting pot because that means we all become mush. Actually, we are distinctive layers of communities, some are bigger and some are smaller, and even within that, each particle is very unique, if you look closely. If you look at this work closely, you realize that there is an African traditional dress right next to the white GAP t-shirt, next to a uniform of a Navy Seal.

JYL: It seems that the relationship between you as the artist and the community grew as the project developed.

JS: There was so much paperwork and so many logistical issues, like where do people mail their clothes, and so on. What I did was attend the actual naturalization ceremony to induce participation. It was amazing. All the people there had filled out all this paperwork

to be able to say the oath to get their U.S. citizenship that day. At the same time, I was moved because they were nervous that from now on they were U.S. citizens. I was remembering my own history with my parents and wondered what it took for them to take that journey, to be here and say those words. And I thought about the history they didn't know yet, whether it be their daughter becoming an artist, or something else. It was so moving to tell them that I am a daughter of immigrants, that we had gone through the same journey. I said, "I am asking you to leave an article of clothing of your own history and of your own life that can be here permanently for you so that in the future, someone can come and see that and can explain the same story, hoping that future generations enter that building and see that their own history is mapped." Some just gave me the shirt they were wearing because they were busy; one mailed me traditional clothing from their country that they had brought with them into the States. Others just said, "I am American now, so I will give you my GAP t-shirt." They made personal choices to represent themselves from both their past and the future. The plaque named every single person who contributed clothes and that was a way of honoring the people who made up this work.

JYL: It would be such an amazing experience for them to come back to the building and see their donated clothes in the work.

JS: Indeed. To be honest, after Marcel Duchamp, art can be anything, but it can also be nothing and meaningless. This kind of process allows people to understand why I might be doing something and connect with me as the artist, to my reason and desire to do that. They become the default audience and co-creators by giving me the materials. They don't do it because it's art, but they do it because they care about the topic. My role as the artist in such projects is about connecting what matters to me to what matters to my audience, so that we are on the same page.

JYL: *Chemical Balance* (2005-2009) is also made of collected material, specifically, prescription pill bottles. Unlike clothes or sports trophies, they contain more personal data regarding people's health.

JS: I have been working with a lot of clothes because they represent the idea of mapping the body. When I was a figurative artist, the body was very important to me, yet I wanted to represent the body in a way that was not obvious. That came out of my own traditional training as an artist where you look at the anatomy and study the body in ways beyond likeness. In that context, clothing became about the history behind how this object came to represent a person. I was going through every single item of clothing, like shoes, pants, shirts, and sweaters, but I couldn't keep doing something with them. I started to ask, how

can I map the body without clothing? I thought about medicine and the body's chemistry and how medication alters one's bodily chemistry to be stable, or correct something that's wrong. Those are struggles that no one really knows about because it's very private. It also raises the whole question about what is private and public information. What appears to be a functioning, normal and healthy body is oftentimes augmented by powerful medication. The project is also a critique on who has access to medication, doctors, and healthcare, and who makes money off medication. I have also been thinking about illness, which we deal with privately but can have a very different conversation about publicly.

At the time, my mother-in-law's grandmother was in a nursing home and we were talking about how much medication she was taking, whether it was too much or too little and how they have to give her the right dose of this cocktail every single time, and how so many people are taking medication. I tapped into that project by asking the grandmother to save her medicine bottles. I got help from the whole nursing staff who saved boxes of pill bottles for me. The [nursing home residents] were quite excited about taking their medication after that to save their bottles for me, when actually taking the medication was often quite a horrific thing because they were so dependent on them. I also knew from teaching that so many people are struggling with mental illness and it is so devastating to live while dependent on drugs. Friends of mine were dying of AIDS, but I didn't know they had AIDS because they were surviving through medication. It opened up so many conversations about who we thought we were, how medication helped, and sometimes also the sadness of dependency. The pill bottles also have one's identity [printed on the labels] so the whole notion of privacy came up. Of course, I let the people cross out or rip off that information. It was a form of mediation to see what they felt comfortable with or not. It was a way to tap into their vulnerability and imperfections, which is key to my work. I've always been interested in what doesn't fit in society's norms.

JYL: I see that your work crosses the border between the collective and individual, interlacing them, embracing each individual's voice and distinct identity while addressing the very powerful voice of the collective. Likewise, your work shows the intertwinement of the private and public spheres.

JS: I always think of the individual and collective, and the private and public, just not at the same time. I'm not just Korean, I'm Korean-American. Korea taught me a lot about how to behave in society, to respect history, to be part of the collective and how it is important to have a group agree on social norms. While America taught me that that doesn't always work, so you need to speak up for how you feel, how you want things to be done and operate on your own. America is so much about individuality and that is in contrast with what the Korean norms are. I think about those polarities and I exist in both. At one end of

the spectrum, Americans ask, “why are you so interested in the collective?” while at the other end, Koreans ask, “why are you so interested in the individual?” but I’m interested in both and I live in both circumstances. And they are not so contradictory. One can’t exist without the other. It is more about how prominent one side is, but we have to live in both. I don’t see them necessarily in opposition, but together. In that respect, a lot of my installations are from one unit, intimate and singular, but if you amass many, you can start to talk about what all of it means. Even though each story can be different and contradictory, the stories are not in conflict.

JYL: As you mentioned, collecting material is an element found in your early work, but it began to entail more social political contexts. Was there a particular transitional moment, such as your art education or life experience, that wrought such changes?

JS: Studying art history and criticism, and a little bit of conservation in my master’s program became the academic groundwork for me to understand contemporary art and art history, which I value as an artist. It was important to me that I wasn’t just a maker of objects but that I was also thinking historically about the context of art, our lives, and the world. The artwork is one thing but how it is historicized and written is another thing, so learning the methodologies of art history was invaluable for me as an artist. It enabled me to see the work of art across the past, present, and future. I also worked at the Whitney Museum and not-for-profit art spaces with curators on major exhibitions. I was in dialogue with curators who were shaping historic and

important shows of contemporary art while looking into the museum’s collection. They were presenting new stories we never thought about before and also shaping our understanding of art. Most of all, such experiences shifted my understanding of what my role as an artist would be in relation to other equally important roles.

Besides my art education, I was the editor of my college newspaper and my passion was engaging with the world through publications, interviews, and writing. My professors thought that this was a distraction away from my studio work, but the issues around me were so important. Living in Brooklyn in the 1990s, there was so much going on, both on campus and around the world, like the wars in the Middle East, the riots in Los Angeles, what was happening right out in Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn, and I wasn’t able to stay in my studio because no one was really talking about these things in my studio classes, so I did it through journalism. I felt freedom because I thought, “this story needs to get out and we need to tell the truth.” I felt empowered to be able to bring people’s attention to these issues. At the same time, I stopped painting because I became so critical of it, and so honored by its history that I couldn’t do it, either.

My work came out of all of this critical incubation. I considered my audience: “what does this work have to do with someone else who wants to look at it?” That was my entire training in art history, to think as a curator, not as an artist, selecting a specific work and bringing it to a public space for an audience and talking about the significance of the art and artist. It made me think as an artist that I had better think of my audience and perhaps they need larger scale works. I didn’t know anything about installation and sculpture so I started with whatever I wanted to do, and I experimented. It was also cheaper because I used everyday objects. When museums became interested in public art, I had already established my thoughts about it, even though my work didn’t exist yet.

JYL: You have experimented with different media and materials. *TEXTile* (2006) was not made of donated materials but the collected keycaps from keyboards. It was realized by collaboration with fabricators via a textile workshop. Can you tell us more about the project?

JS: The piece was made at another critical moment for me. After school and several jobs, when I started to make large-scale installations, Marion Boulton Stroud, the founder of the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia invited me to do a residency there. I had never done that kind of residency or gotten that kind of support. It was an incredible experience to be working with a team who was pushing ideas and materials with other artists. Collaborating with experts, we pushed ourselves to make something we had never done before. Around that time, I had just had a child and I couldn’t reside there for most of the time, so we did a lot of the work remotely. I realized that so much of being an artist wasn’t really about physically making a work, but about communicating the direction of the work and the ideas. All of our communication was mostly done by emails and text messages. The mode of communication turned into the project itself – what was essential about this work was my typing. It became about digital communication and how my production turned into communicating digitally over a set of keys, which involved ideas about the keyboard, language, and the history of fabric. When I said that I wanted to make a project about technology it was quite challenging for the Museum initially, because they had expected a project about clothing.

I explained that it was going to be a technology project but it would feel like fabric, smooth and seductive, like the qualities we associate with fabric, but it was going to be done through the most mundane, obsolete, yet completely current technology, which was the way we were communicating about the residency work. We made a sculpture from thousands of recycled keyboard keycaps embedded into a continuous textile. The keycaps spelled out every single email. It was crazy. We went to recycling centers and

found so many keycaps. Imagine how many ‘a’s and ‘e’s we needed to create “Dear Jean.” We were very conscious about how prevalent the digital communication we use is, yet when it became a physical thing, it became so precious. This project made us think about technology in terms of its materiality and obsolescence. Technology is great and we think it always moves forward, but actually it can be backward. Like a keyboard, the minute you get your technology, it becomes obsolete, because the companies are already designing the next model so that the one you have will be obsolete. Now we text with our fingers on a small monitor, but I like the QWERTY keyboard because it is technology from typewriters and we are still using it. We don’t actually need a keyboard anymore but it has been so stuck in our minds and bodies that despite it being unnecessary we stick to the tradition of having one. Material obsolescence is something I have been very interested in because culturally we are having to adapt so quickly to any new material—anything that is purportedly ‘new’ is never new enough, because it becomes obsolete the minute it is out there.

JYL: Among many of your permanent installations in public space, *Celadon Remnants* (2008) installed on the façade of the Broadway Long Island Railroad station in Flushing, Queens is made of discarded celadon pieces you brought from Korea. What led you to this project, and particularly to using a material that represents Korean tradition and values of beauty?

JS: Celadon is pottery from a specific ceramic-making village in Icheon, South Korea and the imagery on it is specific to that place. The mayor of Icheon allowed me to work with the potteries and I met celadon makers who gave me their discarded pieces. There were artisans who had made celadon pottery for generations and their studio had a whole landscape of discarded pottery because they didn’t find beauty in an imperfect and imbalanced vessel. I wanted to recreate that broken landscape. They allowed me to take all the broken parts, because for them they were unnecessary, but I would make them into a beautiful thing by putting these pieces together. Each small shard includes imagery of cranes or flowers, which is an amazing Korean tradition. It’s all there already and we can celebrate that. It’s about Korean identity—what we honor and take pride in, but at the end of the day, that story isn’t perfect because our history is not perfect. This is a way of celebrating all the brokenness.

As a Korean-American living in New York, I think it’s interesting that I can be a part of Korea, but just a shard of it. We can all come together as Koreans or we can just be these little shards and still be so incredibly beautiful and have Korean-ness; it may not be a form you recognize because the form is shattered but the identity, if you look carefully, is still there. This was a perfect project for me to introduce to Queens because being there, it

feels just like you're walking around Seoul, and people wanted to come together and have their identity take form. Another ironic thing is, as a Korean artist, whenever I go to any museum, they ask me if I have seen their Korean collection, by which they usually mean the celadon on a pedestal. Korean identity seems to be really hung up on celadon, but what about all the other celadon pieces that never make it to the museum because the artist destroyed them? I thought that was interesting, because the celadon had the potential, but it was not recognized at the time. It just didn't fit into that museum collection, but it can be shown at the subway station.

JYL: Finally, do you have any advice for younger Korean or Korean-American artists?

JS: I'm not sure it's specific to being Korean. Being an artist is challenging, even more now than ever, so it's a decision that you have to really make for yourself. This is probably a Korean thing: to listen and respect your elders and families who do not understand your decision to be an artist. When you make that decision, you are really on your own. Even though there is so much support, when you make your art it's on your own. Being an artist is kind of a lonely place to be. But it is an important decision and one you should make with courage and boldness. I think it's a really difficult decision, to be true to yourself and be committed for your entire life. Short-term achievement, like "I want to show my work at this gallery," may not get you to where you want to be, and may in fact become your shortcoming. I see that it entails tremendous responsibility. For instance, when I had the solo exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum as the first Korean-American artist after Nam June Paik, it felt incredibly momentous and I was honored, but it was something difficult to imagine happening. I am going to keep going until—my idea of history is that I have to live long enough to keep going through all those experiences and to show my commitment to this life. As young artists, we don't think about the future or about being old. Making art will just happen, yes, but you have to think about why you are making art and think about making art that matters to people and to you in a long term way. I think these are really important questions you have to think about before you engage with making art and decide to be an artist.

JYL: Thanks for your time and thoughtful and thorough answers.