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Breaking a Wall to Understand It: Jean Shin's "Surface Tension" at Cristin Tierney

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Jean Shin, *Surface Tension 2A, 2B, and 2C*, 2016. paint on wood. 91 3/4 x 143 7/8 inches (233 x 365.4 cm).

Jean Shin's sculptures and installations are often a response to the environment in which her artwork will be shown. For example, in an early, career-launching piece titled *Cut Outs and Suspended Seams* (2004), Shin made a site-specific project for MoMA QNS using work clothes donated by the museum's employees. She deconstructed the garments, and used the flat cut outs as patterns to create a mural; the seams, which became like outlines of the clothing, hung from the ceiling. The installation was not only a sensitive reaction to the architecture of the museum, but also served as a stand-in for the often invisible bodies of the workers who enable the institution to function. Though *Cut Outs* was a commission from the museum, Shin has always worked in this manner of active immersion and response to people, cities, and systems: she has also created permanent public works for the MTA Arts for Transit and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Therefore, one could only be curious how Shin would engage with and activate the space in her long-awaited gallery exhibition at Cristin Tierney in Chelsea, New York.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Surface Tension consists of five appropriated paintings that trace their origins to the blue plywood walls that surround construction sites in New York City. The walls are such a common sight for New Yorkers that years could go by before one is aware of what was being built behind them. More effective than any text sign or security guard, these walls guide New Yorkers where to go and not go, where to look and not look. They are also an invitation for taggers, but to maintain propriety and code, these marks will always be painted over, though often with mismatching hues of blue, resulting in unintentional “abstract” paintings. There are traces of a conversation visible through the gesture of the paint marks, but the exact words are unknown.



Detail: Jean Shin, *Surface Tension 2B*, 2016.

For this series, Shin has located these plywood walls, chosen the panels that were interesting to her, and negotiated with a construction site in the Upper East Side in order to acquire them. Such interactions are built into her methodology, and the role of the artist as negotiator is a significant one, as Shin must present her case and earn the trust of different groups of people in order to create her artwork. Unlike other artists working with found objects, she is unique in that her materials are not merely “found.” With the scale and scope of her practice, it requires careful planning and strategizing to acquire what she needs, a skill Shin has mastered.

The blue panels of *Surface Tension* are hung low to the ground and drilled tightly to the wall through pre-existing holes. No touch-ups or repainting is done by Shin, though she is responsible for arranging which pieces should be shown as single panels, diptychs, or triptychs. The blue is jarring against the white cube – perhaps because subconsciously, or on a bodily level, these panels have been so internalized by New Yorkers that those who live there experience a bit of discomfort at being invited to look upon these panels in a direct manner, without any sense of constraint or trespassing.

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Jean Shin, *Surface Tension 9*, 2016. paint on wood. 94 x 48 inches (238.8 x 121.9 cm).

If Shin were just interested in these panels as appropriated objects from the city, she might have rebuilt an actual fence. By having them torn from their regular shape and form, she forces her viewers to consider these materials in a raw way, from the plywood's grain, to its weathering, and its repainting. As she did with *Cut Outs*, Shin demands that the viewers think about art objects not just as they are presented to us, but also how they are constructed. The labor in Shin's work is not due to a love of craft or process, but Shin's unrelenting curiosity, and her need to study and pull things apart. With the panels in *Surface Tension*, Shin is literally breaking down the fencing to understand the wall itself, and she asks us to do the same.

It would be shortsighted to focus too heavily on the painterliness of the panels when considering this exhibition. While that is something to be noted—and while Shin is indeed asking her viewers to look at the panels with the attention one gives to paintings—she is not asking them to view them *as* paintings. The art of Jean Shin is that the transformation happens through the artist's reconsideration of our everyday physical reality. Shin's work, though many times interpreted as such, is not about recycling or an inventive use of materials in order to make *another* object out of it. In this case, she has not used the panels in order to repurpose them as paintings, but rather to place them in the border where art and life meet. She demands her viewers stay in the state of activation, where objects and spaces are in a place of tension and contestation.