Jean Shin is nationally recognized for her monumental installations that transform everyday objects into elegant expressions of identity and community. For each project, she amasses vast collections of a particular object—prescription pill bottles, sports trophies, sweaters—which are often sourced through donations from individuals in a participating community. These intimate objects then become the materials for her conceptually rich sculptures, videos and site-specific installations. Distinguished by her meticulous, labor-intensive process, and her engagement of community, Shin’s arresting installations reflect individuals’ personal lives as well as collective issues that we face as a society.

Her work has been widely exhibited in major national and international museums, including in solo exhibitions at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona (2010), Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC (2009), the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (2006), and Projects at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (2004).
QUESTION:
Thinking about your sculptures such as Chance City, Wishing Well, and Everyday Monuments, I can’t help but think how strongly your work is tied to the idea of “the city” – that your practice is one of a specifically metropolitan artist. The materials you use are often artifacts donated from fellow city dwellers, mundane personal objects collected and altered en masse. Can you talk about your relationship to New York City? Additionally, you travel to other cities quite often for commissions, how have other metropolitan experiences shaped your work?

ANSWER:
I moved to Brooklyn to attend art school in 1990 and ever since then have loved living and working in the city. I feel connected to this place. It’s full of promises and at the same time can deliver as many disappointments. These extreme, often contradictory conditions create vibrant communities that strive to make new realities of their experience. The density of the city and its constant influx of people exemplify transformation and potential. It reinforces for me a constant optimism. The city’s castoff is an infinite source of materials and ideas for my work, reflecting the society that use and discard them.

Many of my early projects like Chance City were inspired by urban detritus. I would find lottery tickets littering the sidewalks during my walks to my studio. Collecting losing scratch-n-win tickets was like discovering people’s leftover wishes. It made me think about all the people who come to New York City to follow their dreams. I’m struck by the persistence required to build their imagined realities against all odds. Despite the uncertainty and risk, I similarly understood this drive as an artist and immigrant.

In respond to Washington DC, I created Everyday Monuments. The capital is devoted to public monuments embodying ideals, yet the National Mall is a void left empty in the middle of the city. Recognizing the potential for people to come together in celebration and protest, this place felt a kin to my work. I chose trophies as intimate monuments to one’s personal achievement and transformed 2,000 sports trophies to create an installation that celebrate the unsung heroes of our society whose everyday labors go unrecognized.
My most recent work Surface Tension, I present used plywood construction panels removed from an active construction site in Manhattan. Drawn initially by the accidental beauty of the layered painted surfaces that cover up graffiti, I recognized them as powerful remnants of development resulting from constant negotiations in an ever-changing urban environment.

When other public art commissions bring me to different cities, I’m also researching their unique history and examining their notion of “place”. Each city offers different resources and exchanges with local communities who ultimately shape the direction of the project. Like Calvino’s Invisible Cities, the engaging experiences in the various cities are part of a larger journey and my exploration as an artist.