

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Step inside a corn maze — made of green soda bottles — at the Figge Art Museum

Amanda Hancock Jun 21, 2017



New York-based artist Jean Shin makes final adjustments to her installation, called "Jean Shin: MAIZE," which opens to the public on Saturday at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport.

[John Schultz, Quad-City Times](#)

During the last stretch of her flight into the Quad-Cities on Tuesday, Jean Shin leaned toward the plane window, pulled out her iPhone and took several aerial photos of the Midwest landscape.

It wasn't a first for her.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

About a year ago, Shin, an artist based in Brooklyn, New York, soaked in the same view during a trip to Davenport. The Figge Art Museum had commissioned Shin to do a project; she just needed to figure out what the topic would be.

“When you’re flying in here, you see corn everywhere,” Shin, who specializes in site-specific and project-based artwork, said. “It’s so much everywhere that you probably don’t even think about it. It’s almost like air. But for me, I’m struck by it.”

Shin was struck by other concepts here: the Mississippi River and public waste. More inspiration came from the museum itself.

“When I came to visit, I thought this museum is so beautiful and clean and compared to a lot of New York spaces, extremely large,” she said. “When I walked into the gallery space, I was like, ‘Wow this is like a field.’”

With all of that in mind, Shin pitched constructing what she now calls a “crazy” exhibit — a maze made out of stacked green recycled plastic bottles to resemble cornstalks.

“It came about from conflating the two things: plastic waste and corn,” she said. “I proposed we would make what people in Iowa know very well — cornstalks — and we would make them out of this very strange foreign object.”

When curatorial assistant Vanessa Sage heard about the project, she immediately thought: “This is going to be a lot of work” and “How are we going to get it done and make it?”

She was right. The installation required 12,000 repurposed green plastic soda bottles, some of which the Figge collected from Eastern Iowa Recyclers and recycling bins around the Quad-Cities. Plus, some people brought bottles into the museum.

To help, museum staff hosted 30 community workshops from December to April, inviting about 800 people to craft a total of 1,260 plastic cornstalks. Over the last week, staff

CRISTIN TIERNEY

and volunteers have assembled the rows of stalks to create the finished maze, which takes over a gallery space on the third floor of the museum.

The result, Shin said, is a balance of something that “overwhelms you, but it’s also something you can navigate through.”

“They’ve mimicked what I would do in my studio, which is do it over a long period of time with many assistants,” she said. “They’ve essentially made an installation.”

It made for a labor-intensive few months, Sage said..

“Obviously, it would be easier to hang a bunch of paintings on the wall,” she said. “This is a whole different animal.”

An upside?

“It also gets people down here,” she said. “The people who helped with this are going to come see what they made. In this project, they are involved very, very directly.”

That “true collaboration” marks a special exhibit for an artist who has worked with computer keys, prescription bottles, vinyl records and chopsticks in previous installations.

“I really do love using objects that are familiar to people,” Shin said. “I love to celebrate the everyday and the ordinary.”

In doing so, Shin hopes to start dialogues that aren't so ordinary, like conversations about public waste, food and beverage choices and the environment.

“Hopefully, people will ask questions like, ‘Why soda bottles? Why green? Why so many,’” she said. “And with those questions, they’ll come up with their own answers of how we are navigating this very, very complex world and the decisions we make every day.”