



Plastic bottles become cornstalks in new Figge exhibit

By Jonathan Turner

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Jean Shin

The newest exhibit at the Figge Art Museum proves the old adage, "One man's trash is another man's treasure."

Iowa's corn-fed landscape and the Q-C community's connection to agriculture inspired New York City-based artist Jean Shin to create "MAiZE" — in collaboration with the public — on the third floor of the museum, 225 W. 2nd St., Davenport.

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"I love doing these site-specific works," the artist said Tuesday. "For me, it's exciting to go on an adventure. I had never been to Iowa; it's always a special chance for me to get to know a place."

In summer 2016, Ms. Shin was invited to discuss a collaboration with the Figge, and was struck by the scenery and the area's agricultural heritage, according to a museum release. In an exhibit created for the Figge, 12,000 green plastic bottles were collected and transformed by community volunteers into an elaborate maze of "corn stalk" sculptures in the third-floor gallery.

"In addition to demonstrating the power of art-making and community collaboration, the installation will engage visitors in a dialogue about plastic waste, dietary choices and environmental stewardship," the Figge release said.

"We created literally a corn maze — you can walk through the gallery, like a maze, and encounter choices to go left or right," Ms. Shin said. "This is a metaphor about the choices people have in life, whether trying to deal with obesity or a heart condition."

"The consumption of those sodas, the containers, they seem convenient and easy, but are actually taking us further away from long life and health," she said. "They're essentially dead ends."

"I'm concerned about it, as everyone should be concerned," Ms. Shin said, noting each "MAiZE" stalk averages 8-10 bottles each, and is 5-6 feet tall.

The majority of plastic in this country is not recycled, and ends up in landfills, the Mississippi River, oceans and other natural areas, according to the Figge. "The sheer mass of plastic in the installation will encourage visitors to consider plastic waste and its detrimental effects on the environment."

"MAiZE" will "reflect broadly on social and environmental issues that arise from mass consumption and the convenience culture," the release said.

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Ms. Shin (who was born in South Korea) is nationally recognized for her installations "that transform everyday objects into elegant expressions of identity and community," the Figge release said. Her work has been shown in national and international museums, including solo exhibits at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona (2010), Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. (2009), the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia (2006) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2004).

The artist did another environmentally-conscious project with public help last year, called "Anthropocene Fossils," in Louisville, Ky. The community there collected discarded plastic along the Ohio River and pieces were embedded into sidewalks.

"By transforming the accumulation of river debris on site, my project invites the public to explore these cultural artifacts while contemplating the impact of consumer waste and post-industrialization on our environment, landfills and navigational systems today," Ms. Shin said about that work.

Working with the public on these is "such a pleasure," she said this week. "I have the privilege of spending my entire life making art. I don't think it's something just for artists. Being creative, making things is something very important, and we've sort of lost sight of that."

Partnering with the community not only gives people a personal stake in the exhibit, it aims to get them thinking about the impact of soda consumption on their health, and waste on the environment, Ms. Shin said.

"One of the messages is, it's hard to imagine all these pressing issues we have to deal with individually," she said. "If you think of it as collective vision, you wouldn't be able to make that piece without all the volunteers, the school children. The labor is so intense ... Bringing people together, they do take ownership, they become really proud. It's about what we build together that matters."

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Conversely, collective action by changing behavior is required to protect nature, Ms. Shin said.

"Seeing this many empty soda bottles, imagining how did we produce this much?" she asked. "The community did consume it. There are so many options we can make a decision about," and she said the mantra of reducing and recycling is key.

"I think it's turned out pretty well; it will be exciting for people to walk through it," Figge curatorial assistant Vanessa Sage said Tuesday. There were about 30 sessions where the public could participate in assembling it. The Figge worked with residents age 3 to 93, and Ms. Shin since last fall on the project, including placing bottle collection bins in area schools.

She will offer a free talk about "MAiZE" tonight at the Figge lobby at 7 p.m., preceded by a public reception at 5:30 p.m. The exhibit will be on view through Sept. 24.

On Thursday, Aug. 3 at 7 p.m., Pamela White, director of Western Illinois University's museum studies graduate program (and a public art consultant), will speak about the history of public art and the influence of artists like Ms. Shin.