

PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY

Philadelphia Contemporary Presents *Freshwater* by Jean Shin

*Living Laboratory on Cherry Street Pier Celebrates Freshwater Mussels,
Showcasing Their Impact on Clean Water Alongside Delaware River*



Shin's pearl button beds (left) and shell mussel sculpture (right) in progress.

(Philadelphia, PA — June 16, 2022) Philadelphia Contemporary—a contemporary art organization connecting the people and places of Philadelphia through art and partnership—is pleased to unveil ***Freshwater*** by **Jean Shin**. With the Delaware River as its backdrop, the large-scale installation celebrates the twelve species of freshwater mussels found in the river and offers viewers the opportunity to reflect upon the compounding effects of industrial waste and overconsumption.

Freshwater mussels are some of the most endangered species in the United States, even as they are the backbone of freshwater ecologies. To draw attention to the lives of these overlooked species, which can filter between ten and fifteen gallons of water in a day, Shin conceived of a fountain that doubles as a living laboratory. Erected alongside the Delaware River on Philadelphia's **Cherry Street Pier**, the chains of glass vessels contain live freshwater mussels. River water trickles through glass spheres with the mussels, filtering the stream in real time and collecting it in a mirrored basin filled with blankets of pearl buttons. The clear and purified water then travels back to the river from which it came.

Shin's fountain invites viewers to witness the process of filtration over the course of the exhibition's run (June - November) and consider the sight of living mussels with wonder. Standing as a

monumental water clock, the piece marks the passage of time and calls attention to the climate crisis. What's more, it acknowledges the slow, necessary labor of restoration.

“By making visible the mussels’ incredible capability to filter the river, *Freshwater* elevates these native species’ role in restoring the blue infrastructure from collapsing. Juxtaposed next to the samples of polluted river water, dead shells, and the vast amount of unused pearl buttons, the project is an urgent call to care for freshwater mussels as vital to our healthy, living ecology,” said **Shin**.



A collection session in progress.

Alongside this central fixture, the Brooklyn-based artist has created a series of sculptures that incorporate mussel shells collected from the shores of the river. Cleaned and buffed to show the radiant, mother-of-pearl interiors for which these species have long been prized, the neighboring sculptures are topped with glass vessels full of unfiltered river water samples gathered by the participating community and the public. By highlighting the luxurious appeal of mussel shells alongside the polluted water, the work also recognizes mussels’ complex history. In the 19th century, the pearl button industry obliterated freshwater mussel populations in the Midwest, while in the Northeast industrialization poisoned the Delaware River for generations to come.

“Like the site-specific installations and public sculptures for which she is known, Shin’s *Freshwater* prompts Philadelphians to reflect upon critical environmental issues while also inspiring them with awe,” said **Harry Philbrick, Founding Director and CEO** of Philadelphia Contemporary.

“We hope this project will draw attention to the role of mussels in the ecology of the Delaware River. Our communities rely on a healthy river, and the monumentality of Jean’s work underscores the importance of protecting this ecosystem now and in the future,” added **Kerry Bickford, Curator of Ecological Futures** at Philadelphia Contemporary, who developed the project with Shin.

The installation is presented as part of Philadelphia Contemporary's multi-year public art series, **Water Marks**. Developed in partnership with the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation, the program aims to bring sculptural works by renowned artists to the Delaware River Waterfront. Past works include Tracey Emin's *A Moment Without You*.

Freshwater is being fabricated in collaboration with Recycled Artists in Residency (RAIR) and Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center. Funding for *Freshwater* is generously provided by the [VIA Art Fund](#) and the Yaverland Foundation.

Educational programming is being presented in partnership with the Independence Seaport Museum, Fairmount Water Works Interpretive Center, and Audubon Mid-Atlantic located in The Discovery Center, among others.

Following an **opening reception** (6:30 - 8:30pm) and **after-party** (8:30 - 10:00pm) hosted by [Rising Wing](#) and featuring DJ Oluwafemi on **June 16**, *Freshwater* will be on view at the Cherry Street Pier through early November 2022.

For details about the opening event and related programming, visit <https://philadelphiacontemporary.org/events/jean-shin-s-freshwater-opening-reception>.

To learn more about Jean Shin, visit <https://jeanshin.com>.

About Jean Shin

Known for her large-scale installations and public sculptures, artist Jean Shin transforms accumulations of discarded objects into powerful monuments that interrogate our complex relationship between material consumption, collective identity and community engagement. Often working cooperatively within a community or region, Shin amasses vast collections of an everyday object or material—Mountain Dew soda bottles, mobile phones, 35mm slides—while researching its history of use, circulation and environmental impact. Distinguished by this labor-intensive and participatory process, Shin's poetic yet epic creations become catalysts for communities to confront social and ecological challenges. As such, her body of work includes several permanent public artworks commissioned by major agencies and municipalities, most recently a landmark commission for the MTA's Second Ave Subway in NYC.

Born in Seoul, South Korea, and raised in the US, Shin works in Brooklyn and Hudson Valley, New York. She is a tenured Adjunct Professor at Pratt Institute and holds an honorary doctorate from New York Academy of Art. Shin's work has been widely exhibited and collected in over 150 major museums and cultural institutions, including solo exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC, and Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where in 2020 she was the first Korean-American woman artist featured in a solo exhibition. Shin has received numerous awards, including the Frederic Church Award for her contributions to American art and culture. Her works have been highlighted in The New York Times and Sculpture Magazine, among others.

About Cherry Street Pier

Cherry Street Pier is a year-round, mixed-use public space on the central Delaware River waterfront. Built into the shell of a century-old municipal pier, it is a reflection of Philadelphia today—creative, diverse, historic, adaptable, and inspired.

About Water Marks

Water Marks is Philadelphia Contemporary's multi-year program of rotating installations at a variety of sites along the Delaware River Waterfront. Water Marks references the term “high-water mark,” the point at which a body of water is at its highest. To live and work along the water in our current historical moment is to witness the ways in which precarity, specifically precarity caused by climate shifts, extreme weather, and industrial shortsightedness, threatens to upend our lives and livelihoods. Developed in partnership with the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation, Water Marks is an invitation for contemporary artists from a range of practices to respond to this precarity, as well as the river's possible futures, making their own temporary marks along the Delaware River.

About Philadelphia Contemporary

Founded in 2016, Philadelphia Contemporary is a contemporary art organization whose mission is to connect the people and places of Philadelphia through art and partnership. Currently nomadic, Philadelphia Contemporary presents visual art, performance art, and spoken word across the city, with ambitions to establish a freestanding, globally oriented, and locally aware non-collecting arts institution.

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