

## Art

# Jean Shin Gifts At-Risk Birds a Safe Perch

At Appleton Farms, a new installation provides bobolinks a secure place to nest, affirming a sense of human agency in the face of ecological loss.



Louis Bury May 9, 2024



Human perches made from dead trees as part of Jean Shin's *Perch* (2024) installed at Appleton Farms (photo by Mel Taing, courtesy Appleton Farms, The Trustees, Ipswich, MA)

One of the oldest continuously operating farms in the United States has a new artwork designed, quite literally, for the birds. Within the grasslands of Appleton Farms, founded in 1638 in Ipswich, Massachusetts, artist Jean Shin used salvaged wood and copper to create sculptures that function as resting places for the bobolink birds who nest on the farm during their annual northern migration. Aptly titled *Perch* and on view until November 1, the public artwork was commissioned by The Trustees, the nonprofit land and historic conservation organization that maintains the farm.

Shin’s sculptural perches have a thrifty charm, each fabricated from a discarded wooden fence post and standing a bit below eye level. Affixed to the posts with nails are copper plates, which the artist salvaged during the roof renovation last August at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and copper pipes that hold long, slender twigs. These makeshift tree branches evoke a humorous blend of nature and artifice. At the same time, their reparative bent and use of surplus materials toward new ends affirm a sense of human agency in the face of ecological loss.



Jean Shin salvaged copper plates affixed to *Perch* during the roof renovation at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. (photo by Mel Taing, courtesy Appleton Farms, The Trustees, Ipswich, MA)

This hopeful spirit animates not just the installation’s form but also its function. Bobolinks are songbirds who nest in open, grassy areas, which allows them to feed on insects and grain while shielding their nests from predatory hawks that circle the tall grass. However, urbanization and other reductions in North American grassland have caused their populations to steadily decline over the last several decades. “There are always action points,” Shin told *Hyperallergic*. “After I mourned for the bobolinks, I asked myself what was possible for me to do.”

Shin’s installation, which she developed in dialogue with local agriculturalists and ecologists, opened to the public on April 22 and is designed to help the bobolink birds — which just arrived at the farm within the last week — to nest with greater effectiveness and safety. The sculptures serve as perches from which the male birds can perform their acrobatic courtship singing to



attract a mate. Once the bobolinks mate, the sculptures will prevent farmers from mowing the surrounding grass in which the birds nest. Shin also affixed salvaged copper to dead tree stumps and placed them in the fields as perches for humans, providing slightly elevated vantages for scientists to monitor the birds and for the public to view the sculptures. Each of these design elements has a soft touch, minimally intervening in the existing landscape to help humans and bobolinks better coexist.



Left: Shin also affixed the salvaged copper to tree stumps that function as perches for visitors and scientists to observe the birds; right: Jean Shin working on *Perch* (photo by Renee Gannon, images courtesy Studio Jean Shin)

“I was thinking about how to foster a more reciprocal relationship with nature on a farm that serves both as a space for human food production and as a habitat for birds,” Shin explained. From her conversations with agroecologists, she learned that the fields at Appleton Farms are mown for aesthetic as well as agricultural reasons: The site also operates recreationally with over 10 miles of hiking and horseback riding trails, and visitors may perceive unmown fields as unkempt. But ecologists told Shin that letting the grass grow tall protects bobolink nests from birds of prey. These differing perspectives on the same space got her thinking: “As an outsider, how could I facilitate conversation between the farm’s various constituencies?”

A similar approach to public art informs other works by the artist, who is known for creating mosaic-like monuments out of discarded objects that have a connection to the installation site and

its contemporary or historical communities. Her recent commission for the Perelman Performing Arts Center at the World Trade Center Site in Manhattan, “[Water’s Echo](#)” (2023), depicts a shimmering, black-and-white aerial map of Hudson River estuaries comprised of thousands of mother-of-pearl shell buttons, whose material nods to New York Harbor’s once-plentiful oyster beds. But the dazzle of Shin’s completed artworks can obscure the considerable participatory labor that goes into their conceptualization and fabrication.

Serving as a means of improving relations between Appleton Farm’s human and natural communities, *Perch* renders that labor more apparent. The artist’s studio assistants Rachel Gee and Nazli Efe participated in the fabrication process, in addition to employees at the farm property itself and Mayer Tree Service. Shin, who lives in New York, remained sensitive to her status as an outsider throughout the design process by prioritizing the local communities’ needs and capacities.

Yet *Perch*, in addressing interspecies relations, points out how even a mindful approach can encounter certain limitations. Humans can’t act on behalf of birds with definitive knowledge of their wants and needs, nor can this installation singlehandedly prevent widespread bobolink population decline. What it can do, a more modest but no less necessary function, is put human stakeholders in dialogue with one another. Perhaps this is the quiet legacy of *Perch* and Shin’s practice as a whole: Bringing communities together accomplishes more than one person can do alone.





A bird perched on one of the sculptures at Appleton Farms (photo Mel Taing, courtesy Appleton Farms, The Trustees, Ipswich, MA)



A viewing platform crafted from copper plates and a tree stump as part of *Perch* (photo courtesy Studio Jean Shin)





In-process view during installation of *Perch* at Appleton Farms (photo courtesy Studio Jean Shin)