

## TIME AND DISTANCE:

### A POETRY OF ABSENCE AND SILENCE

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*It was often Obon season when we went there [Kochi] which invariably entailed a trip to my grandmother's grave, where we pulled up the grass growing over her, all the while fending off vicious bush mosquitos. I remember being frightened doing this, because it seemed as if I could still hear my grandmother's breathing coming out of that ground. Here in my child's mind was planted my first fear of death. I still remember, even at this age, how my hands felt plucking the grass, and sometimes at work in the studio can still feel the sensation on my palms.<sup>1</sup>*

Chiharu Shiota has lived and worked in Berlin since 1996 and, although she has often been drawn back to Japan, her geographical displacement has been a vital element in distilling, even intensifying, the dense mesh of poetic imagery that has fed into her work. Time and distance, absence and silence, have allowed her both to triangulate and digest vivid, poignant memories of childhood and youth that still provide an important creative mainspring. Yet, even during the early 1990s, when first she had begun to study art at the Seika University in Kyoto, such works as *From DNA to DNA* (1994) and *Becoming Painting* (1994), constructed out of woollen yarn, paint and other materials, were already frameworks for future actions in which she had started to break down the barriers between performance, painting and sculpture by using her body as both the subject and the object of her work.

By the mid-1990s she had moved to Germany, initially working under Marina Abramović at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig and then at the Universität der Künste in Berlin. These experiences undoubtedly reinforced her concerns with the importance of duration in performance as well as with the intense power of the body – even when its presence is suggested rather than present. As a result, many of Shiota's works began to take on the monumental appearance of sites where some momentous event had either just passed or is in nervous anticipation of something yet to materialise.<sup>2</sup>

Her installations contain objects - lamps, dresses, chairs, beds, shoes, suitcases or window frames - the yarn she uses may be black or red, or replaced by thin plastic tubing through which blood-like liquid pulses viscously as if the whole work were a body, an umbilical support of vessels and nerves that link, feed and nurture the objects found within them which then, suddenly galvanised, begin to take on new life.

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<sup>1</sup> Chiharu Shiota writing about childhood summer visits to the island of Shikoku in Japan from where her parents came. In "Letters of Thanks – about the exhibition in Kochi," *Chiharu Shiota 'Letters of Thanks'*, Kochi, The Museum of Art, 2014, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> The event itself takes centre stage in her sets for theatrical performances. See, for example, her work for *Oedipus Rex*, Dresden, Festspielhaus Hellerau, 2009; Berlin, Hebbel Am Ufer Theater, 2010; and for *Tattoo*, New National Theatre, Tokyo, 2009.

Such works suggest a dream-like, unconscious state of anxiety in which actual and imagined barriers surround both the artist and observer. In relation to this, Shiota has described two early memories that reappear throughout her work. The first image is of a fire set by an arsonist in a neighbour's house and of her hearing the sound of a grand piano inside being consumed by flames, an impression confirmed shortly after by seeing the piano's blackened skeleton within the burnt-out hulk of the building. She realized that she had been awakened by the 'music' of the burning piano and continued to relive this uncanny moment in her work *The Way into Silence* (2002-03).<sup>3</sup> Here the instrument had been silenced forever. Extending this analogy into a paradox about finality of death, Shiota subsequently wrote: *I always carry this silence within me. Deep in my heart. When I try to express it I lack the necessary words. But the silence lasts. The more I think about it, the stronger it gets, the piano loses its voice, the painter does not paint any more, the musician stops making music. They lose their function but not their beauty. They even become more beautiful. My true word has no sound.*<sup>4</sup>

The second recurring memory is of a near death experience when, as a young woman, she was confined to bed in hospital with cancer. This has been alluded to in many works, such as *During Sleep* (2001-2007), a series of installation/performances in which a number of young women in white nightgowns lie motionless, as if in sleep, in hospital beds enmeshed by skeins of yarn. This motif was further developed in the installation *Flowing Water* (2009) in which water rains down over thirty-five bare, metal-framed hospital beds that rise from the floor, high into the cavernous vault of the Nizayama Forest Art Museum in Toyama, Japan. The absence here of the human body implying, in this case, physical transcendence is, in other works, made all the more poignant by symbols of its former presence: girls' and women's dresses or nightgowns, worn out shoes, beds, chairs, pianos, all suspended within the separate worlds that Shiota has created for them, wrenched away from their previous lives.

Rites of memory become acts of exorcism that transfer the unavailability of the past into seeds of future hope. *A Room of Memory*, a large circular tower twelve metres high, made in 2009 for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, creates another shrine to absence and silence. Constructed out of window frames from demolition sites in East Berlin, its dejected parts suggest the torn history of the formerly divided city as well as the hopes of the people who had once peered out of them. As with all the materials Shiota uses, her engagement with them is compulsive: *I go on searching... because the windows are in my eyes like a skin. They are like the boundaries of my Self that I cannot cross. I have the impression of being in a forlorn abyss of, not inside but outside neither.*<sup>5</sup>

In *Accumulation for the Destination* (2012), a recent site specific installation of over two hundred antique suitcases stacked in a rising mass against a wall, Shiota has reanimated everyday symbols of transit by acknowledging their status as repositories of memory that obviously once belonged to other people. With her Berlin background, reference to the

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<sup>3</sup> Later extended this idea into a series of installations by the name of *In Silence*.

<sup>4</sup> Chiharu Shiota, *Raum*, (ex. cat.), Berlin, Haus am Lützowplatz, 2005, p.33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

Holocaust is unavoidable, yet the redolence of the work goes far beyond this tragic history to remind us of the hopes, ambitions and fears of all people who have been forced into such physical upheaval, the artist herself included. The constant, at times impossible, search for “home,” is something we can all recognise as endless waves of economic, political and psychological migration still continue to shape our world.

A similar sense of questioning informs *Where Are We Going?* a related work from the same year. Two small wooden boats are fixed in a long shallow pool, their sterns facing in the same direction. Water pours on them from above. According to one’s viewpoint, this may give the impression of movement although there is none, or it could seem that the boats have become broken, derelict, obsolete. The abiding impression, however, is of the beauty of a particular moment: the sound of falling water as it glitters in the spotlights, the patina and grain of the wet wood, the numinous hulks of the old boats. Faced by such a captivating ambience, ideas of physical progress or progression become irrelevant

As Shiota has developed, a sense of dislocation has become increasingly evident in her work but this has also been accompanied by the feeling that the making of the work itself, the painstaking manual process by which it is “woven”, is a form of propitiation for this. In *Letters of Thanks* (2013), one of her most recent installations, she has brought together nearly two and a half thousand “thank you” letters written for different purposes by Japanese children and adults. These have then been inserted into skeins of dark woollen yarn that tightly define the exhibition space, obscuring, confining and centring it, rather like a spider’s web. As if they were insects awaiting their doom, these small, innocent sheets of paper seem transfixed as they shine out of the darkness but, in their directness and naiveté, they are reminiscent of the messages tied to the branches of Wish Trees outside Japanese Shinto Temples on which supplicants write their hopes for the future. Linked together in this work, the sentiments expressed within these letters become a reservoir of positive energy to be shared and enjoyed by all as well as, in the artist’s mind, a surrogate “thank you” to her parents who have cared for her, particularly to her father who, although still alive, is unable to communicate.<sup>6</sup>

In *Other Side*, the installation Shiota has just completed for the Towner in Eastbourne, the viewer is also invited to become a part of the webs and labyrinths of her immersive interiors. But here there are no messages to read. Doors open onto five different, dimly lit spaces in a Kafkaesque architecture of shadow and light where visitors are invited project their own memories, hopes or fears. Each threshold defines a different character or sense of possibility; the yarn becomes a semi-transparent membrane between the fantastic and the real. Imagining a space like ‘The Zone’ in Andrei Tarkovsky’s memorably unsettling film *Stalker* (1979), Shiota has woven five ‘rooms’ of memory, silence, self-discovery and desire.<sup>7</sup> They will only become active when a body is present, filling their webs with different thoughts and dreams.

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<sup>6</sup> See reference for footnote 1.

<sup>7</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986) Soviet and Russian film maker and film theorist.