

Common thread

Chiharu Shiota's installation art examines life's big questions. As such, she's not expecting any answers soon.



By **MIRIAM COSIC**

July 7th, 2018 9 MIN READ

Calling artists “international” in our globalised art world has become a marketing cliché, but Chiharu Shiota has earned the adjective. Born in Osaka, she had the “aha!” moment of her artistic development in Canberra (of all - places), and lives in Berlin with her Korean husband and their child.

Shiota is in the middle of a quantum leap in her career. She has been admired in the art world throughout her 30-year practice but has hardly been a household name. That is changing. Her exhibition in the Japanese pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale was the most photographed and talked-about art there that year. Called *The Key in the Hand*, it was a collection of 50,000 keys, gathered from donors all over the world and representing countless memories, suspended from a blood-red woollen sky over two wooden boats evoking today's countless migrations.

The Key in the Hand (2015), Venice Biennale.
Picture: Sunhi Mang, courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery

Shiota specialises in using thread — string or wool, in black and visceral red mostly but sometimes in white — not as a crafty textual medium but as a 3-D stand-in for that most intimate of art forms, drawing. It is the line, - projected. We think of drawn lines as two-dimensional, but Shiota points out that drawing is a projection of the mind's idea into space, via the hand and the drawing implement, though finally contained on paper. Line is also the starting point for her ceaseless explorations of meaning: of the corporality of life, the inevitability of death and the outer limits of art.

From Venice three years ago, in what Adelaide curator Leigh Robb calls a “precipitous arc” in her career, Shiota also will have a retrospective next year at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, a world pinnacle in contemporary art. (Its chief curator, Mami Kataoka, was director of this year's Sydney Biennale, which concluded last month.)

In between, starting next week, she will show significant works in Melbourne and Adelaide: at the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne, at Schwartz's pavilion at the Melbourne Art Fair and, finally, in a large-scale solo survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

The Crossing, which will show at the art fair, is an installation of 100 books and white thread.

“Some pages of the books are flying in the air and the other books are on the ground like roots,” she says. “To me, books are a way to communicate over time. I can hear the voices from people in the 15th century and connect to people in futures unknown.”

Beyond Time (2018), Yorkshire Sculpture Park.
Picture: Jonty Wilde, courtesy of the artist, Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Anna Schwartz Gallery.

At Schwartz's Flinders Lane gallery, smaller framed works will place the installation in context: objects such as masks or scissors — like the keys and books, Shiota often presses everyday things into service — embraced in concatenations of thread.

AGSA, too, has commissioned an installation, which will remain in the permanent collection after the show. And one of Shiota's famous dresses — elaborate creations metres long — will hang from the North Terrace portal where publicity banners usually fly. More than 40 other works will be on show.

Self-effacing and gentle almost to the point of shyness, Shiota apologises for not being able to spring from German straight into English on the spot for our interview via Skype. Yet her work suggests something tough and tensile - exists below the surface.

“Her humility belies the intensity of her work,” agrees Robb, AGSA's curator of contemporary art and curator of Shiota's exhibition there next month. (Robb also has just been named director of the Adelaide Biennial in 2020.)

“For me, black is like the universe — you cannot follow just one string and they all become endless,” Shiota says by email when her spoken English and my German fail us. “Red is the colour of blood and symbolises for me human relationships, how we are all connected to one another. In a way, they both speak of the same thing: how we as humans are always a small part of something much bigger.

“And white to me is a blank colour, pure, like a fresh start. In Japan, it is the colour of death, but death doesn’t mean the end to me, it is more a form of blankness and also a new beginning.”

Chiharu Shiota's *In the Bathroom* (2002).

Who could have guessed that the little girl who first engaged with art by cutting out pictures of famous paintings in the newspapers her parents bought would end up a groundbreaking artist in her own right?

Shiota was born in Osaka to a comfortably off family. Her father’s business was manufacturing cardboard fish boxes and she had two brothers. None of them were particularly interested in art. “I didn’t like the factory system of working with machines, like a machine,” she says. “Which is probably why I wanted to become an artist. I wanted to live in a more humane way, to seek out something that would satisfy me in a spiritual sense.

Art first captured her attention when she was already a teenager. “There was an image of an artwork in the newspaper every Sunday. I collected them and glued them into an album, which became my treasure. It was mainly painting, classical or impressionist, so I wanted to be a painter.”

She went on to study art at Seiko University, which had an exchange program with the Australian National University. It was in Canberra that she made her creative breakthrough. Painting wasn’t working out for her: perhaps it was the freer atmosphere of Australian society, perhaps it was just being away from home, but she began to experiment.

It was 1994, and she was already seeking a release from being trapped in 2-D. There seemed nowhere to go with painting. She made a kind of what-does-it-mean? performance piece, called *Becoming Paint*, in which she covered herself in red paint and wrapped herself in canvas. A fellow student photographed the process. It made a lasting impression — not least because the acrylic paint was poisonous, burned her skin and took months to remove completely.

It was a dramatic shift from canvas to body and the latter has remained a constant in her work. She was already interested in the use of thread as a 3-D projection of line. In another work, *Accumulation*, she used black string and acorns to explore interiority and exteriority across the ANU campus.

Shiota has travelled extensively. But her next lengthy overseas sojourn was in Germany studying with Marina Abramovic, who was already a famous performance artist with controversial, even dangerous, works in her catalogue.

With hindsight, it seems like an obvious step to have taken, except that it was an accident. She was very interested in the work of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, who also used fibre in her work, but, between her grasp of - European languages and Latin script, ended up applying — and being accepted — to study with Abramovic in Braunschweig.

“Marina Abramovic broadened my understanding of art,” she says now, and gives an example. “We went with a group of students to France and lived like monks, didn’t eat and speak for a week. These ideas of art were new to me.”

Later she would study at the Universitat der Kunste in Berlin. After she finished studying in 2003, she remained in Berlin: it has been her base ever since.

“After the wall fell, it was so full of energy. Many artists came and Berlin became a very interesting place to be,” she says. “Today it is changed, but I still like the creative energy and the international crowd that lives here.”

She may have finished studying formally but continues to study the world around her. Teaching has remained an interest: from 2010 to 2013, she was a visiting professor at her alma mater, Seiko University, and in 2011 was a visiting artist at the California College of the Arts. Despite some detours — more allied explorations than a search for the new, like the dresses that are still explorations of the body, albeit absent ones — the 15 years since she graduated have been utterly focused. “It feels like one journey to me. I keep coming back to the same interests,”

she says, adding with some irony: “I am asking the big questions, so I don’t think I will manage to find an answer soon.”

She grew up in a Buddhist household but has no religion. It is a hackneyed concept, but her art really is her religion.

“Performance to me can be also a personal thing,” she says. “Today I mainly do it for myself, to connect my thoughts and my body, to feel myself, almost like a spiritual exercise. When I think of performance, I do not think of doing something for an audience.”

The lack of religion, the spirituality, the importance of the body, the motifs of life and death, the internal focus: all those motifs run like red threads through her body of work.

It allows her to cross boundaries that today’s identity politics often places out of bounds.

Take her installation last year in Berlin’s oldest church, St Nikolai Kirche, which recently has been converted into a contemporary art space.

Called *Lost Words*, the work tangled thousands of sheets of paper torn from Bibles written in many languages in her signature black thread, which filled the nave with webbed tunnels. The piece was commissioned to mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

“I wanted to link it to the history of Christianity in Japan,” she told artnet.com at the time. “In the 16th century, Portuguese Christians came to the island as missionaries but Christianity was banned shortly thereafter.

“Japanese Christians practised their religion in hiding. You couldn’t publish the Bible or even own one, so an oral tradition of the Bible developed in Japan.

“The passages used here were chosen by the church, and all pertain to immigration, which is part of the concept, as I was thinking about mental immigration through storytelling”

Migration is another idea that informs Shiota’s work: not surprising perhaps for such a migratory bird and one who has fetched up in a country experiencing increasing political turmoil as a result of its generous refugee policy.

Yet it is never forced or even obvious. Without the boats in the Venice installation, the keys were intended to symbolise universal experiences and emotions: that everyone carries at least their house key, and that key accompanies them through all the vicissitudes of life. In many of her discussions of the work at the time, she left it there.

Her works, even the large-scale ones, are often ephemeral, so it is a departure for AGSA to intend to incorporate its commission into its permanent collection. It may seem surprising in these days of smartphones and Instagram, but people throughout history have relied on their memory to retain the art they have seen — and Shiota’s works are certainly memorable. They tend to imprint themselves on the retina.

The reason most of the installations are short-lived, she says, are mostly logistic. Yet she doesn’t experience them as ephemeral. “People tell me how they remember my installations, so I feel all of them still exist in the minds of the visitors,” she says.

Her installation in Melbourne will deal with books and communication.

In Adelaide, she returns to the body; in fact, the show will be titled *Embodied*. “I will have an installation with body parts, dealing with the idea of us humans being a broken or defective body and the difficulties we have of grasping that.” It sounds gruesome, yet Shiota’s work is so luminously beautiful, even while it is complex and ethereal and endlessly questioning, that whatever its theme it is bound to remain comfortably in our collective memory.

Chiharu Shiota: New Works will be at the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne from Thursday to August 11. **The Crossing** will be at the Melbourne Art Fair, August 2 to 5. **Chiharu Shiota:Embodied** will be at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide from August 24 to October 28.