

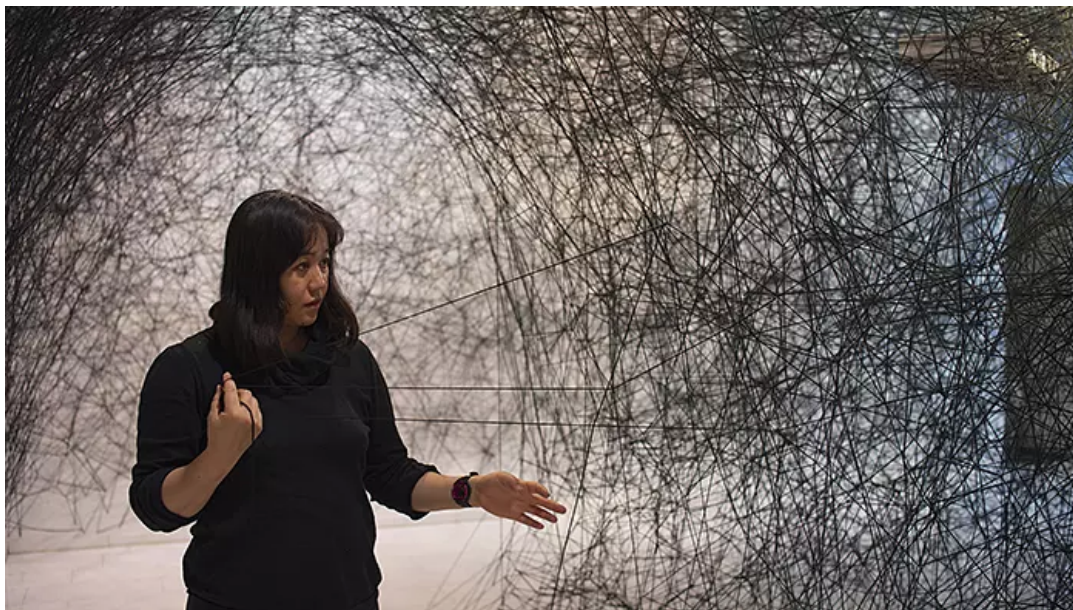
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## Visual Arts

## Chiharu Shiota's high-wire act at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

A haunting childhood memory is the key to the artist's intricate, uplifting piano installation



The artist Chiharu Shiota © Sunhi Mang/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Jane Ure-Smith MAY 18, 2018

One of Chiharu Shiota's most vivid memories of her childhood in Japan is of waking in the night to discover a neighbours' house on fire. As she and her parents watched in horror from their Osaka street, she spied in the wreckage a silent, burnt-out piano. It's an image that has stayed with her, inspiring various works, including one where she actually set fire to a grand piano, and now a delicate white thread-based installation unveiled at Yorkshire Sculpture Park at Easter.

Best-known for "The Key in the Hand", the magnificent, red-thread installation of 180,000 keys suspended over two boats in the Japanese pavilion at the [Venice Biennale in 2015](#), Shiota has responded to YSP's serene 18th-century chapel by placing the wire outline of an upright piano at its heart. Referencing both her childhood memory and the chapel's long-gone organ, the piano unleashes its own silent music in a dense white web of thread that flows upward to the ceiling and back down the walls. Embedded in the weave are the scores of music once played or sung in the chapel.

"People told me of the organ and the thought of people singing and making music here reminded me of my childhood," Shiota, who will turn 46 this Sunday, tells me when we meet at YSP.

White — signifying purity, but also the colour associated with death in Japan — is a new departure for the artist. Her trademark woven works have up to now been black or red, the latter symbolising blood and, thus, human relationships. "Black is the universe, like the night sky," she says. "It would have been too heavy here." White, however, seemed appropriate — for the artist, death is part of the cycle of life. "I see it as a new beginning, not an end."

Shiota's intricate cocoon is beautiful and uplifting, protection from life's vicissitudes. But the comfort it offers is as ephemeral as the work — and indeed, almost all the artist's site-specific work: as I stood alone in the chapel, it wasn't long before the insistent thud-thud of a heartbeat intruded on my reflections. In a small room off to one side I found the artist's video, "Wall".

Entwined in a mass of tubes, Shiota lies naked, her body twitching as a bloodlike substance pumps through them. On one level, she seems to be suggesting that blood is as much a part of the chapel's history as its lost music. On another, this is more personal. Having made videos of the Berlin Wall and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, she decided to focus on “the walls present within my own bloodstream: family, race, nationality, religion and other boundaries tied up in the human condition that we find so difficult to move past”.



A still from her film 'Wall' (2010) © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

It's a disturbing work, though much less shocking than some of the early performance pieces that launched her artistic career. “Try and Go Home”, made in France in 1997, saw her fast for five days, then, naked, climb repeatedly in and out of a muddy hole. More extreme still was “Becoming Painting” from 1994, when, as a disillusioned student of painting at Kyoto Seika University, she spent a semester in the Australian capital, Canberra. While fretting over finding an alternative medium, one night she dreamt she found herself inside a painting — and that seemed to point a way forward. She went out and bought red paint and covered herself in it. “My skin was burning — it was poison,” she says now, with a shrug. But it was also a liberating moment: she had found a satisfying way of making art.

Shiota moved to Germany in 1996 to study, and has been based in Berlin since 1999. Initially, she had been hoping to work with Magdalena Abakanowicz, a Polish artist known for powerful textile sculptures, who died last year. But due to the similarity of names, something got lost in translation, and she ended up studying performance with the Serbian artist [Marina Abramović](#). The latter is a clear reference in “Try and Go Home”, for instance. Also referenced, I think, is the boldly feminist work of Ana Mendieta. “When I see her work, I know this feeling, I can understand,” Shiota says.

Weaving is like drawing in the air for Shiota, whose first woven installation involved her own bed. It was partly a response to having been in Germany for three years and moving nine times. She was desperate to have her own space. A series of “bed installations” followed: “Breathing from Earth” (2000), “One Place” (2001) and “During Sleep” (2002) — all performance pieces where she herself or other women were tucked up in the beds as part of the installation.

Over time, however, Shiota has substituted objects — notably rather Freudian ones, including shoes, keys, windows, suitcases — for her own body in her art. That progression is one reason why “Wall” is a surprise. Since it centres on her body, I had expected it to be an early work, yet it dates



from 2010. It suggests that performance will always be one strand of her oeuvre, a way of expressing extreme, sometimes contradictory emotion — when things become, as she remarks of “Wall”, “too much”.



Detail from 'Beyond Time' (2018), at Yorkshire Sculpture Park © Jonty Wilde

These days, Shiota is in demand as an artist and stage designer across the world. A *Götterdämmerung* deploying her designs opened in March in the German city of Kiel. But having lived in Germany for 17 years, Shiota was surprised to be asked to represent Japan in Venice. She visits Japan every year and since the biennale it has become easier, she says, though for years no one understood what she did. She describes her first trips back as like wearing shoes that didn't fit. “My feet were the same size, but something was different. Every time I go back something is different from the Japan in my imagination. Am I ‘going back’ or ‘coming back’? I don't know how to write it. I'm always in between.”

Yet it is by leaving Japan that Shiota has developed a deeper sense of herself and her cultural background. That awareness, and the questioning of her identity, is what “helps her create”, she says. It feeds into the sometimes poetic, sometimes dramatic east-meets-west aesthetic she has developed in her installations. In-between-ness is what gives Shiota's work its edge.

‘Chiharu Shiota: Beyond Time’, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, until September 2, [ysp.org.uk](http://ysp.org.uk)

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