

TEMPLON



CHIHARU SHIOTA

THE BEIJINGER, April 29, 2025

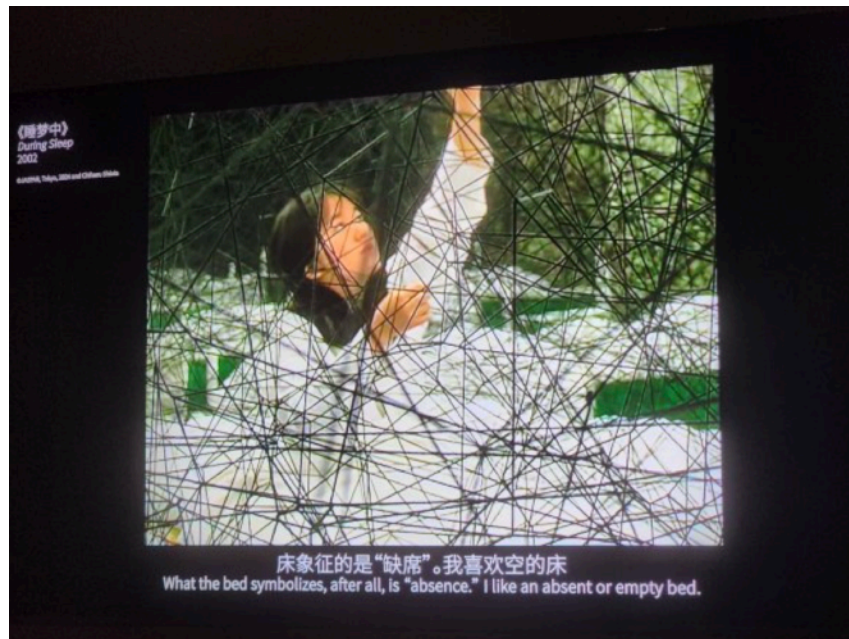


Silent Emptiness: Japanese Artist Chiharu Shiota at Red Brick

Red Brick Art Museum sets itself apart with its impressive, longer-term art showings, and this current exhibition is no different. I recently revisited the museum to see "Silent Emptiness," a fantastic showing of the work of the brilliant Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota.

The Artist

Born in Osaka, Japan, in 1972 and now based in Berlin, Chiharu Shiota explores connection, memory, identity, faith, the body, and absence from a variety of perspectives in her work. As she states in her online personal biographical statement, her "inspiration often emerges from a personal experience or emotion which she expands into universal human concerns such as life, death and relationships. She has redefined the concept of memory and consciousness by collecting ordinary objects such as shoes, keys, beds, chairs and dresses, and engulfing them in immense thread structures. She explores this sensation of a 'presence in the absence' with her installations, but also presents intangible emotions in her sculptures, drawings, performance videos, photographs and canvases."



The Work

The exhibition begins with a timeline overview of Shiota's life, career, and artistic development. Across from this is the video installation *Bathroom*, a defining work that serves as a good introduction to some of the main concepts of Shiota's practice.



We are then introduced to the exhibition's first group of Shiota's 2D works – some of which appear to be preliminary explorations of the “Rooted Memories” concept, to be fully encountered later in the exhibit, expressed in water-soluble wax pastel, ink, and thread on paper.

After this, we come across the first of the exhibition's large-scale installations. The first step into the room featuring *Multiple Realities* feels like a confrontation. A number of towering, empty dresses hang from the ceiling, slowly spinning over what appears to be a shallow expanse of water, with a curving path of stepping stones cutting through the center of the room. Speaking about the dresses, Shiota has said, “The dress represents the empty body where the person is absent.”



Multiple Realities sets the tone for the exhibition. Large-scale pieces with a clear, intentional aesthetic that, given the wholeness and initial jolt of its visual presentation, engages and interacts with the viewer with a physicality that renders it almost as another entity in the scenes in its own right.

With this understanding in mind, we move through the rest of the exhibition. *Metamorphosis of Consciousness*, with its dreamlike wash of white, fiberoptic cascade of gently undulating lights, delicate butterflies, and lone bed it's as isolating and melancholy as it is beautiful.



Gateway to Silence introduces one of the most notable aspects of Shiota's works: a dizzying array of intersecting threads – this time red – that spreads and twists around the room. The imposing Tibetan Buddhist door frame in the center of the space stands as a silent counterweight to the frenzied burst of red.



The red threads of *Gateway to Silence* take on a forceful quality, tearing through the walls, breaking through the space and escaping out to interact with other exhibits and large photographs of previous Shiota works in other locations.

Echoes of Time follows, this time exchanging red threads for black, the old wooden door for several large stones, and the network of physicalized connection for an uneasy web of space, time, and memory.



Rooted Memories is by far my favorite piece of the entire exhibition. A large, decommissioned wooden boat from the Zhuozhuang Reservoir in Xingtai, Hebei, rests silently on a bed of soil in the middle of a large space. From the ceiling hang innumerable red threads; they reach to the floor and fill the room, except for a clearing around the boat. It is a striking image. As you approach the boat, you see that a tree has apparently grown right up through the bottom, veiled by the hanging rain of red threads.

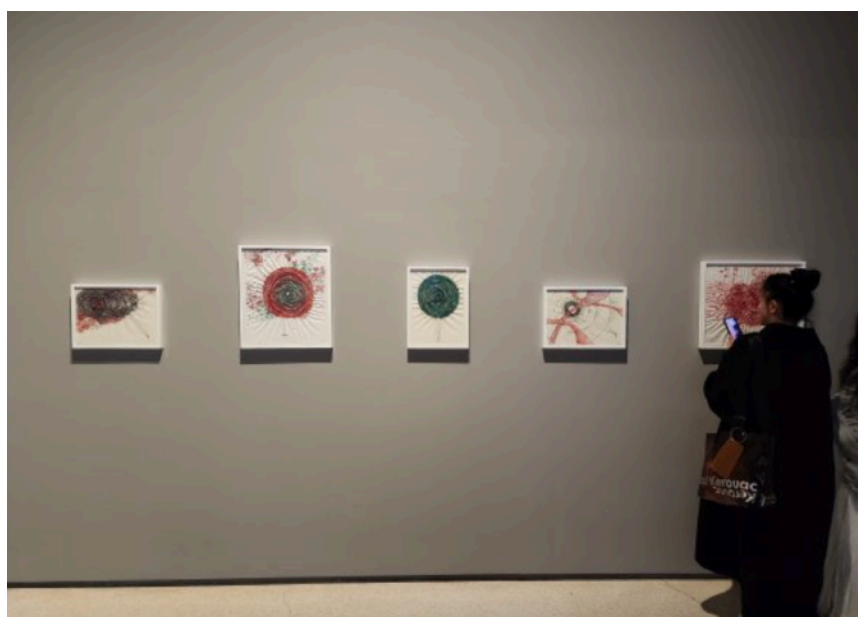


Nearing the boat, it becomes evident that there are “paths” through the red threads, which, as we move through them, seem to become a kind of forest. These paths that snake through the density of red threads bring us at times closer to and at times farther from the still boat, which remains rooted in the center of the room.

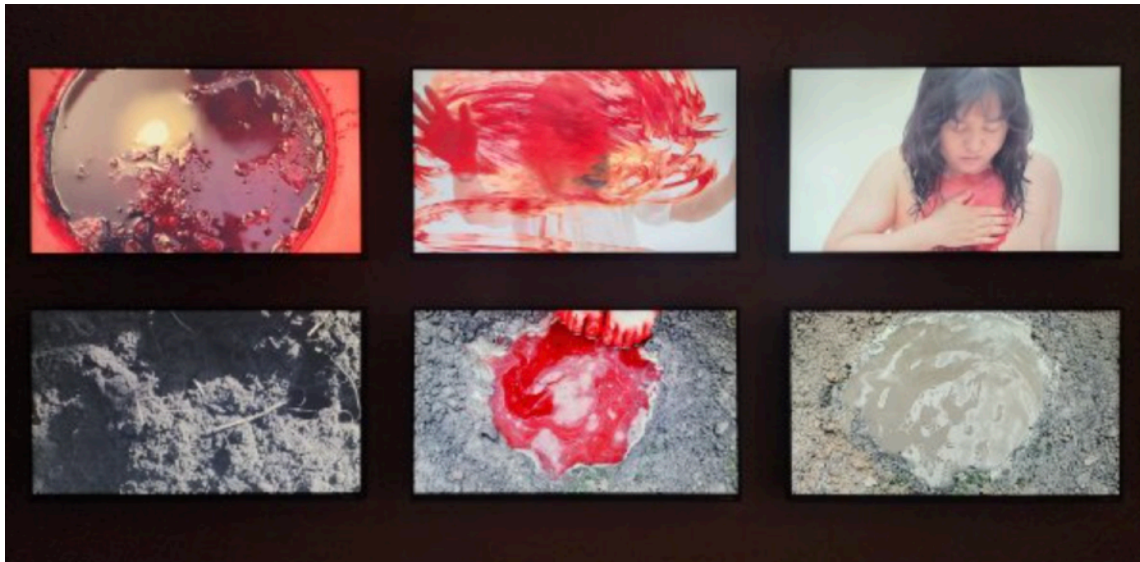
Connections in Ashes sees a haphazard procession of chairs entrapped and suspended from the ceiling by Shiota's threads. Get close enough, and you may also detect the scent of incense.



Another group of 2D pieces entitled *Connected to the Universe* consists of a line of five images stitched and inked onto smaller pieces of canvas. The works are softly and surprisingly moving, each depicting a swirling, tangled mass of red, black or green threads emanating from, surrounding, and affecting a small human silhouette. The stitched centerpieces dwarf the human figures, and the threads pull and wrinkle the canvas, in some cases curving back around to build up the landscape in which the figure exists – simultaneously a product of our interior emotional life and the structure of the universe that influences us.



There are video pieces in the exhibition, as well. Of these, my favorite is *Earth and Blood*, a setup of six smaller video screens which independently feature looping video of different images and video clips of dirt, a blood-like substance, and the artist applying the substance to herself and "over" the viewer.



At the very end of the exhibition, there is a video montage along with music featuring highlights of Shiota's 2024 collaboration with the Grand Théâtre de Genève on their production of Mozart's *Idomeneo*.