

TEMPLON

II

CHIHARU SHIOTA

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Notions of home and windblown rootlessness tumble together at ICA's Watershed

Berlin-based artist Chiharu Shiota's installation of dangling ropes, airborne suitcases, and domestic comforts evokes an unsettled world

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 22, 2025, 4:22 p.m.



Chiharu Shiota, "Home Less Home," 2025, at the ICA's Watershed annex in East Boston. TIMOTHY SCHENCK

Just inside the door at ICA's Watershed in East Boston, a tight cluster of hundreds of dangling, poker-straight red ropes seems to soften before your eyes. Dense and uniform,

it nonetheless dissolves, visually, into a crimson fog — a satisfying illusion, the evocation of two states at once.

Twenty-five feet long and dangling at tight intervals from a grid on the ceiling that stretches deep into the cavernous space, their strict regularity belies the visual effect; the sense is of something monumental conjured from next to nothing at all.

For Chiharu Shiota, the Japanese-born, Berlin-based artist brought in by the ICA to fill the Watershed, its annual summer annex, the uncertainty of form parallels the content she means to explore. The exhibition's title gives a clue: "Home Less Home," it's a poetic, material meditation on uprooting, and the struggle to find new ground.

Two distinct works fill the cavernous concrete space, but their material and thematic echoes tie them tightly together, if you'll pardon the pun. Amid the forests of rope that give her exhibition structure, instability, loose and dreamlike, pervades; given her subject, precarity is simple fact.



In the first piece that greets you at the door, a dozen or more weatherbeaten suitcases dangle suspended within the red rope, arcing up and away in a gesture that suggests liftoff, blown by the wind to parts unknown. (A handful are motorized and twitch at the end of their tethers, as though anxious in their uprootedness.) The evocation, of lives unmoored and left to scatter, feels inevitable.

In this era of mass migration prompted by war, poverty, or any number of climate disasters, it's hard not to project a sense of the ominous on Shiota's scene. The movement of people across oceans and borders, by choice or not, has never felt more fraught, nor been more apparent.

“Home Less Home,” though planned years ago as the Watershed’s 2025 summer feature, lands in Boston amid a perilous moment for the American experiment. The city has become a favorite target of the new presidential administration’s [mass deportation campaign](#); the Department of Homeland Security has made a triumphant public spectacle of its [operations in nearby Chelsea](#). Just outside the Watershed, East Boston, a thriving Latino immigrant community, endures routine scrutiny from ICE agents on the hunt for undocumented residents, and [has learned to push back](#).



Chiharu Shiota's "Home Less Home," 2025. TIMOTHY SCHENCK

The intentions of “Home Less Home,” were surely not so pointed — it was commissioned years ago, in the before times — but reality has a way of intruding all the same. The suitcases are the core of “Accumulation — Searching for the Destination,” a 2014 piece reinvented here as a kind of introductory text for Shiota’s milieu.

Years ago at a Berlin flea market, Shiota found an old suitcase packed with family photos and personal notes. Absence became presence as Shiota meditated on the lives contained within; the artist felt a connection, having relocated from Japan to Berlin in 1996 as a young artist looking to find her feet.

Berlin, a thriving cosmopolitan creative crossroads, became home, a personal happy ending; her career arc took her in 2015 to the Venice Biennale, the pinnacle of the art world, as Japan’s official representative. But in the piece itself, the in-between space is left to your imagination, a satisfying prompt for an active mind, if not — at least in my case — a uniquely uplifting one.

Chiharu Shiota, "Home Less Home" (detail), 2025, at the ICA Watershed. TIMOTHY SCHENCK

The second piece in the exhibition, the titular "Home Less Home," 2025, commissioned specifically for the Watershed, feels tilted more clearly toward hope. Deeper into the Watershed, the space broadens, and Shiota opens a portal in the haze to let you inside.

In "Home Less Home," Shiota clears a path that winds, fittingly, through its stand of rope, which has shifted here; red limns the contours of the exterior, while black frames a distinct space inside. Along the journey are familiar objects: a bed, a dresser, a table and chairs — markers of home, a place to lay your head.

Alongside the domestic, Shiota conjures the uncanny: clusters of ephemera — notes, photographs, sketches — that hang suspended above as though trapped in a suddenly flash-frozen typhoon.

Chiharu Shiota, "Accumulation — Searching for the Destination," 2014/2025, at the ICA Watershed. TIMOTHY SCHENCK

Each one ties the piece to the immediate here and now; Shiota crowdsourced stories of immigrant experience from neighborhood organizations including the Donald McKay K-8 School, East Boston High School, the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, the East Boston Social Centers, and Eastie Farm, just to name a few.

Her prompts were simple: "What does home mean, what does it feel like to leave home, and what does it take to rebuild it?" she asked. From children's pencil-scratched essays and drawings to old family photos to expired passports and visas, the outpouring of hundreds of documents strike a distinctly human chord. The space, ghostly and evocative, becomes populated and very real.

It should feel heartwarming, a repository of the triumphant struggle to find home and take root. But the upheaval of the piece — so much up in the air, blown by the wind — led me to darker meaning. In the real world just outside the door, roots are being torn up, and lives cut adrift — a world of home more lost than found.

Out there in the real world, there's no sense of how — or if — they can all truly come to rest.