

TEMPLON



CHIHARU SHIOTA

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Building a Home From 100 Miles of Cord

Chiharu Shiota, a Berlin-based artist, has conjured a multitude of immigrant stories in “Home Less Home,” her largest museum show in the U.S.

By Hilarie M. Sheets May 26, 2025



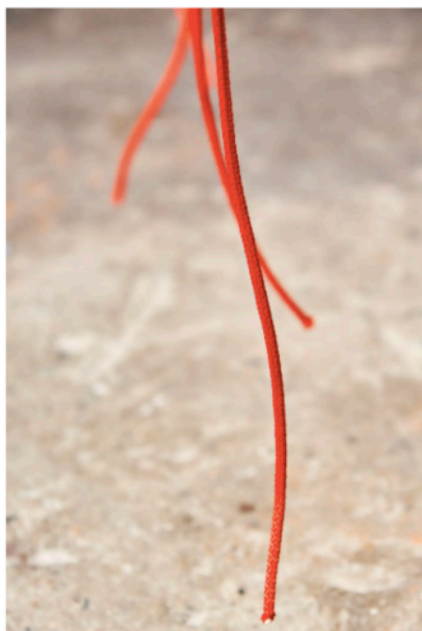
The artist Chiharu Shiota at ICA Watershed, a massive exhibition space at an active shipyard in East Boston. Philip Keith for The New York Times

The artist Chiharu Shiota has drawn a simple shape in thin air and at monumental scale — a rectangle with a pitched roof, instantly recognizable as the universal symbol of home.

This ethereal installation is made of polyester cord — some 21,000 lengths of it, streaming down 23 feet from the ceiling of the ICA Watershed, a massive exhibition space at an active shipyard in East Boston.

A rectangular forest of blood-red cords hangs nearly to the floor of this former factory space. Inside, the cords shift to lengths of black that form a dark silhouette of a house.

Visible within this mirage-like structure are antique furnishings — a four-poster bed, rocking chair, dinette set, sewing table and chair — with a spectacular flock of paper, some 6,000 sheets, fluttering above the domestic tableau. Shiota's new commission, titled "Home Less Home," opened Thursday under the banner of the inaugural citywide Boston Public Art Triennial and will remain on view through Sept. 1.



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"The house shape looks like a shadow because home does not exist," Shiota said in a recent interview at the Watershed, as she reached among the cords to affix the final pieces of paper with a stapler. "Home is like something in your heart, inside," added the soft-spoken artist, 53, who grew up in Osaka and has lived and worked in Berlin since 1997.

Shiota's immigrant story, both personal and age-old, echoes those of many residents living in East Boston near the shipyard, once the second largest point of immigration in the United States after Ellis Island.

Earlier this spring the ICA distributed a flier asking the local community to consider Shiota's open-ended questions of "what home means, what it feels like to leave home and what it takes to rebuild it." Their personal stories, photographs, drawings and documents were reproduced on the sheets of white paper animating her installation.

For almost three decades, the artist has created haunting, visceral environments using vast webs and fields of her signature cords — she calls them "threads" — entwined with accumulations of well-worn objects, like shoes or beds that evoke both human presence and absence. At the Venice

Biennale in 2015, Shiota transformed the Japanese Pavilion with an atmospheric matrix of red thread embedded with thousands of collected keys raining down into wooden rowboats — objects poetically summoning ideas of entry, exit, passage, afterlife.

A midcareer retrospective that opened in 2019 at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, "The Soul Trembles," has toured Busan, South Korea; Shanghai and Shenzhen, China; Taipei, Taiwan; Jakarta,

Indonesia; Brisbane, Australia; and most recently Paris — with an accompanying monograph published this spring by Skira (the show travels next to Italy and Canada).

Mami Kataoka, the director of Mori Art Museum who organized the retrospective, said by email that she has been astonished by visitor numbers worldwide that have far exceeded each institution's expectations. "Beyond cultural differences, this response underscores the universality of the themes in Chiharu's work," Kataoka wrote, including "our shared fear about an uncertain future and our common quest to understand the meaning of life and what may lie beyond it."

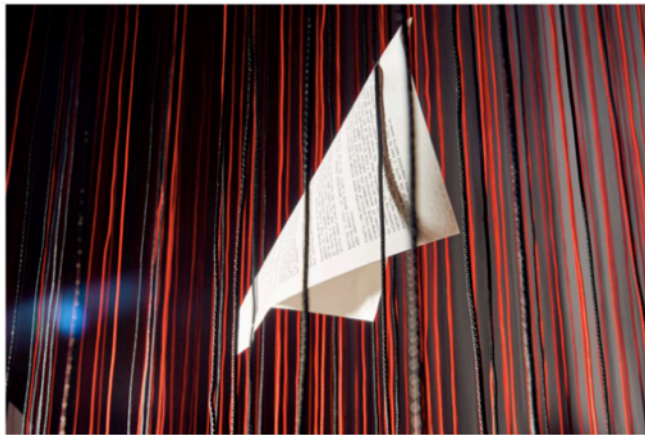
Shiota left her own home in Japan with just one suitcase to study abroad, eventually finding her way to Berlin. She trained as an abstract painter but early on shifted to "painting in the air," she called it, using networks of wool thread, a medium she felt better conjured the intangible tangles of emotions and invisible connections among people. "Many times I'm using red string, the color of blood," she said, symbolic of "family, nation, religion, survival."

In Berlin, a city she found weighted with history, and inspiring to her artwork, Shiota met her husband and raised their daughter, who is 18. "Now I have the feeling I have two home countries," said the artist, who often collects discarded suitcases and other commonplace items at Berlin flea markets for her installations.

For the ICA Watershed, Shiota's largest museum show in the U.S., she has also adapted her 2014



Personal photographs of community members were reproduced on sheets of white paper. Philip Kaitz for The New York Times



Philip Kaitz for The New York Times

piece "Accumulation — Searching for the Destination" near the entrance as part of her reflection on home. Thirty pieces of vintage leather luggage, dangling inside another shower of red threads, lead viewers into the show. Some of the suitcases are packed with an internal motor, making them bob as though adrift at sea.

"Each person, one suitcase — they're ready to go but we don't know where," said Shiota, who will have solo shows in New York this fall at the Japan Society and Templon gallery.



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"Chiharu is incredible at picking these objects that feel like they have this lifetime of wear and use and memory in them, that can be a kind of surrogate for a human story," said Ruth Erickson, the chief curator at the ICA. She invited Shiota to make the site-specific installation for the cavernous Watershed space, calling her "an artist who understands how to work at a scale that can be a real challenge."

"Home Less Home" comprises around 100 miles of cord, roughly the distance from the Watershed to Cape Cod. Walking the processional length of the installation, a visitor experiences it perceptually dissolving into singular threads up close, while in longer views, it coalesces into a majestic volume.



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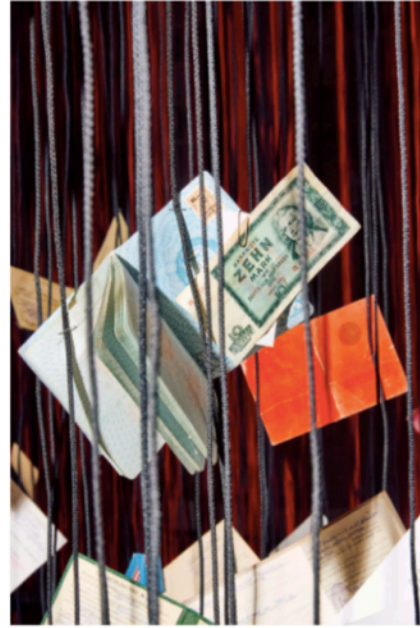


Philip Keith for The New York Times

Shiota has created a winding pathway through the heart of her project, and viewers can see at close range what's printed on the fluttering sheets of paper. There are photographs of airport reunions, children playing on front lawns, a Venezuelan's first experience of snow in Boston. One person offered a recipe for apple dumplings. A child's drawing of a house includes the handwritten line, "Home is all the important people who makes the life better." A woman contributed her own falsified adoption papers deeming her an orphan, with the accompanying message: "May all Korean adoptees find their way back home."



Philip Keith for The New York Times



"This idea of where one makes one's home and what the connections are to a place could never be more at the forefront of our minds," said Ruth Erickson, the chief curator at the ICA. Philip Keith for The New York Times

While none of Shiota's work is overtly political, "this idea of where one makes one's home and what the connections are to a place could never be more at the forefront of our minds," Erickson said. "We see a country and an administration really analyzing those rights."

Against the backdrop of court cases and debates raging in the news cycle about the fate of immigrants, who so often are portrayed as a faceless monolith, the testimonies in "Home Less Home" are acute in their individuality.

Sifting through these collected stories, they touched Shiota like a chorus of voices. "I never met this person," she said, "but I feel like I know this person."



Philip Keith for The New York Times

Home Less Home

Through Sept. 1 at ICA Watershed, 256 Marginal St, Boston; 617-478-3100, icaboston.org.