



ARTS ILLUSTRATED

Natal



Q&A

Thread Bare Stories

In conversation with Japanese-artist Chiharu Shiota and how her spectacular installations weave stories past and stories present into an irresistible narrative of the future against our collective landscape of sensory realities

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

Uncertain Journey, Blain | Southern, Berlin, Germany, Installation, metal frames, red wool, 2016. Photograph by Christian Gläser. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.



Letters of Thanks, Kunsthalle Rostock, Germany Installation, thank-you letters, black wool, 2017. Photograph by Thomas Häntzschel (Fotoagentur Nordlicht, Rostock). Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.

Unravelling a spool of thread in your hand almost feels like the beginning of a journey that is as unpredictable in its trajectory as it is predictable in its end. It holds the promise of immortality within the comforting expanse of impermanence, like fireflies held by darkness, or the unborn butterfly held in a cocoon. But there is something else that this thread can do, something that goes beyond tall metaphors or subtle philosophies. It is that it can speak when it intersects with your thoughts. And in Chiharu Shiota's hands, it sings.

Creating specific experiences through her installations that weave coloured threads around an object within a space, Chiharu's threads are like

suspended words in perpetual motion. It makes the impact of her work hard to describe – it is surreal, powerful, beautiful and sublime, like the layers of earth, the sediments just as significant as the soil. 'Before creating an installation, I have to see the space and be enveloped by it. I feel as if my body and spirit transcend into a certain dimension and I can start from scratch. The assembly of the installation is like a ritual for me, and I appreciate every step of the process. I am using my instinct as I weave, and it feels like I am connecting human relationships together. This intuition helps me create freely instead of calculating each movement,' she says over an e-mail interview. It is this freedom you see in

Chiharu's work that remains deceptively trapped in our sense perceptions, telling us things we don't see and showing us things we can't express. Much like the spider's web analogy that is often used to describe her work, you get a sense of the 'trapped' objects and that of 'free' viewership; you are outside of it to truly experience it, and yet you feel a part of it exists inside of you as well – you are trapped and free at the same time. It is almost like touch, one hand over another – you can never know where one begins and the other ends. 'I believe art has no sex, age, religion or nationality. Art comes from free thought. I understand art as a universal language. It is more about communicating from soul to soul.'



Searching for the Destination, Busan Biennale, South Korea, Installation, suitcases, motors, red ropes, 2014. Photograph by Sunhi Mang. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.



After the Dream, Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Aichi, Japan, Installation, dresses, black wool, 2016. Photograph by Kazuo Fukunaga. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.

Excerpts from the interview

I have always felt our senses are strangely fickle beings. They are loyal to our memories of what we 'sense' when we see, smell, touch or hear something, but not to the sense itself. For you, when your work revolves around the material – objects and thread – what kinds of memory do you tap into? That of the moment or of something past?

I am interested in the sensation of memory. I like to work with objects that have a trace of memory; old objects always have a story behind them. When I see an old object I start thinking of who could have used it before, and my imagination runs free. That is when I start creating. I connect individual feelings and memories, which results in a unique mindset of human relationships linked together. I accumulate personal and individual experiences and bring them together through my threads.

Your choice of objects is interesting in itself. They are such everyday objects – keys, shoes, suitcases, clothes, chairs, beds – that I wonder if the indelible magic of your creations lies in the extraordinariness of ordinariness. And if it is, is it a conscious choice you make for the stories you want to tell us, or do the stories lead you to the choice of objects?

I am inspired by human life. That is the reason why I use everyday objects in my installations. These

objects bring a sense of belonging to humans, and traces are always left by people who have used their key, suitcase or who have worn a pair of shoes, or sat on a chair. People move and change their location, but they can be seen through the things they have touched. Whenever I have a personal object from someone I don't know, I feel as if I was starting to get to know them in depth. I choose all objects I use in my compositions to build the different narratives I weave, transforming the threads into authentic webs that catch and isolate them like a set of words that tell a story.

You have talked about why you choose the colours black and red for the threads you use in the past in several interviews. Have you ever tried mixing them up? Or are they meant to exist as separate entities?

I have experimented with colours in the past. For my installation *Where are we going* (2017) at Le Bon Marché Rive Gauche, Paris and *During Sleep* (2017) at Herning Biennale, Denmark, I have used white and grey thread, but I don't think it would be appropriate to mix them. Overall, all my colours represent human life, but the colours itself express different entities. I use red because it symbolises the colour of blood and therefore human relationships connected to one another. Black thread refers to a more universal all-embracing space, like the night sky or the universe.



The Locked Room, KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre, Yokohama, Japan, Installation, old Keys, old wooden doors, red wool, 2016. Photograph by Masanobu Nishino. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.



The Key in the Hand, Japan Pavilion, 56th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, Installation, old keys, old wooden boats, red wool, 2015. Photograph by Sunhi Mang. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2017 and the artist.

As much as I love 'The Key in the Hand', I also loved 'In Silence' – the keys because it felt like a clamour of voices were seeking my attention, and 'in silence' for the deliberate absence of those voices that made 'silence' loud and clear. What happens to you when you are in the process of creation?

I feel the existence in the absence. Whenever my mind is going through many thoughts that cause me pain or worry, I find a way to express those feelings through art and sometimes it is the only form that helps me heal inside and feel better. When I do an installation I can let go of that feeling easily. I make peace with myself.

How do you, as the artist, find the objectivity to stay on the outside while creating on the inside?

There is no objectivity in my work. I am emotionally and physically involved during the development of the artworks. As I am installing, my feelings and thoughts develop a shape and a sense of being. During the deconstruction of the installation these conveyed feelings become memories. I begin from scratch when installing and return to nothing when I have to deconstruct the installation; it is like a cycle.

You have said in an earlier interview that '...there is always a piece missing that I am trying to reach and gain but I cannot seem to figure out what it is I am searching for. I don't have a clear definition of my void'. Do you think a part of that void, however indescribable, exists in each of your works?

No. In the past, I have experienced a certain feeling of insecurity before creating a piece of work. I don't know why I am actually creating it, but during



Chiharu Shiota. Photograph by Sunhi Mang.

the process the artwork gains more meaning as I am discovering the installation for myself and when the work is done this initial feeling of doubt is gone.

And, finally, do you think your artworks exist because of the materials, or that it is the materials that find new definition every time they come together in your installations?

The artwork exists because of the materials. The features of thread allow it to be tangled, cut or stretched to present the relations between human. The used objects let me express certain symbols. As the boats in *The Key in the Hand* (2015) represent two hands catching a rain of memories, opportunities and hope. They seem to be moving forward floating calmly along a huge sea of global and individual human memory.

