

a miscarriage last year. The ritualistic and performative elements of the works, together with their sensitivity to the earth, recall the work of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, whose work has remained highly influential to Chiharu's practice.

If possible, I wanted to make something that would conceal my feelings, but I just couldn't hide. I'm still frightened to imagine what kind of work might emerge before an exhibition. It's not that I'm frightened because I'm hoping to succeed; I'm frightened because when I work I throw all of myself out, and throw all of myself into my work even if it kills me.

Deborah Robinson
Head of Exhibitions,
The New Art Gallery Walsall

*Quotes by the artist have been taken from an email correspondence between Chiharu Shiota and art critic Omori Toshikatsu. We are indebted to both for their permission to use these quotes.

Chiharu Shiota was born in 1972 in Osaka, Japan. She now lives and works in Berlin, Germany. Her work is widely exhibited and collected. In 2013 alone, solo exhibitions were shown at the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, UK; Carré Sainte Anne, Montpellier, France; The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, USA; Museum of Art, Kochi, Japan; Manege, Moscow, Russia and the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, Australia.

The New Art Gallery Walsall would like to thank everyone who has helped to install these works. They are Chiharu Shiota, Noriko Horie, Kiyomi Uozumi and Tetsuhiro Uozumi, with Maria Alambritis, Hannah Anderson, Rebecca Clark, Adam Darby, Jodie Edwards, Rhiannon Evans, Mike Gallagher, Jeremy Hunt, Alice Jones, Harminder Judge, Zachary Lupton, Jonathan Maddison, Sean Millington, Cabe Rice, Deborah Robinson and Kevin Storrar.

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Chiharu Shiota Dialogues

17 January — 30 March 2014

Exhibition guide

Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota is renowned for her dramatic immersive installations which frequently utilise found objects such as clothing, shoes, old furniture, vintage suitcases and doors and windows from demolished and derelict buildings. Such items resonate with personal and emotional if elusive histories. Chiharu's installations alter and energise the physical and architectural space, challenging our perceptions of the immediate environment and embracing the viewer as an integral part of the experience.

We are delighted that Chiharu has created two new site-specific installations for The New Art Gallery Walsall. The first, in Gallery 1, is comprised of around 400 vintage suitcases suspended from the ceiling with red rope. These battered and bruised suitcases evoke unknown yet powerful human stories; stories of journeys, of migration, of discoveries, of love and loss. The suitcases are hung low at one end of the gallery, becoming increasingly higher towards the other end, altering the usual orientation of the space and forcing the viewer to negotiate it in an entirely new way.

Vintage suitcases have been used in previous installations by the artist but for the first time, they will be suspended from the ceiling. Chiharu often re-visits previous installations and is able to constantly refine her work in this way. It is vital that she makes a site visit to the venue well in advance as the installation develops from her response to the particular space. Her initial visit to Walsall was made in January 2012 and the exhibition as a whole has developed from this visit. The gallery's unique architecture plays its part in the

realisation of the work as does every visitor who occupies the space, both physically and emotionally.

For the installation in Gallery 3, the artist employs her characteristic use of black wool which is woven across and through space, creating a dynamic and cavernous environment which envelopes the viewer within it. Encased within the woollen mesh are hundreds of hand-written letters of thanks.

Letters of Thanks was first created for the Museum of Art

in Kochi, Japan in 2013. Both the artist's parents were born and raised in Kochi but moved to Osaka to run a fish-box manufacturing plant. This work has a particularly emotional significance for the artist;

My solo show Letters of Thanks... was the only exhibition I ever wanted to show my father. I was born and raised in Osaka, but whenever I visited that museum with my parents, my father would say, "It would be great if you could have a solo exhibition in a place like this someday." I remember dismissing the idea and saying, "It's not that easy," but at the same time wishing that it would happen. My dream came true...and as I was thinking about how to show my works, I started feeling thankful about a variety of things. So I asked people all over the country, from kindergartners who are just learning to write to elderly people, to submit a letter to the museum addressed to someone they really wanted to thank. In the end, we amassed a total of 2,400 letters from a wide range of people.

I think they include things that people would normally be too embarrassed to say to someone face to face even though they really wanted to. The closer someone is to you, like a relative or close friend, the more difficult it is to say things like this that should

be so easy. Having people write letters of thanks inspired me to make a work covered with yarn. I had the feeling that I could convey the feelings of all of these people to the people who came to visit that space in the exhibition.

When Matsumoto Norihito, the curator in charge of organizing the exhibition, asked me who I wanted to thank, I didn't know. All I was thinking about was connecting people's feelings with yarn. But as I was creating the exhibition, I gradually realized who I wanted to thank.

My father couldn't visit this solo exhibition like he did when we used to visit the museum together. But I wanted to dedicate these words, which were too difficult for me to say to his face and which I should have said when he was still healthy, to my father, who worked as hard as he could for his family and waited patiently for his daughter to return from overseas. I wanted to say thanks to him more than anybody else for watching over me and raising me.

The exhibition began in July and ended on September 23, and just as it was starting to get cold again in the fall, my father died. Looking at his mortuary tablet, his existence seemed bigger. These are some of my ideas about death in regard to my work. When someone

*disappears, we come to recognize their existence for the first time. Presence dwells within absence.**

Chiharu also says of her characteristic use of black wool;

The reason that I've been able to continue using yarn is that to me it has nothing to do with handicrafts; it's something that allows me to explore breath and space like a line in a painting. An accumulation of black lines forms a surface and I can create unlimited spaces that seem to me to gradually expand into a universe. When I can no longer trace a yarn installation or art object with my eye, it begins to feel complete. Piling up layer after layer creates an indescribably deep black... I have a sense that the truth emerges from a work for the first time when you can no longer see it with the eye. When I saw Monet's pictures, it seemed as if he probably couldn't actually see when he painted them. I believe that a work is something you make with your heart. If an artist's job is to affect the viewer emotionally, the yarn that controls their heart sometimes comes to resemble words that express a relationship between people. Expressions involving knotted, tangled, cut, tied or tightly stretched yarn can also be expressed verbally in phrases like "a knotty relationship." When we can't see something anymore, we begin to realize that the things we see in front of us are different from

what lies behind the works. Then we realize that the artist wanted to say something through the things we see in front of us. Until this point, I have used yarn as a tool for exploring this phenomenon.

The successful realisation of a work such as this demands careful planning, trust and teamwork. Chiharu's vision is made tangible through the help of skilled and experienced assistants working with a local team, in this case, the gallery team together with an extended technical crew and a team of volunteers. I have had the privilege to work as part of this team, sat atop a scaffold tower weaving black wool (1500 balls in total). The process has been a rewarding one, bringing a team of hard-working and dedicated individuals together, each committed to supporting each other to create an installation that is worthy of the artist's vision. The process has allowed moments of contemplation and meditation together with healthy social interaction.

Also on show are a selection of the artist's drawings and a series of six short films. These films show the artist's engagement with "blood" and "earth", both being elements associated with familial bonds and cultural origins. The films are dark and discomfiting and were created after the artist suffered