TEMPLON

CHIHARU SHIOTA

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Japanese Artist Chiharu Shiota's Monumental Webs Capture The Fragility Of Life

As her internationally acclaimed exhibitions continue across Europe, North America and Asia, Chiharu Shiota reveals how personal experiences of loss, survival and memory have transformed her distinctive artistic language.

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Chiharu Shiota, Accumulation – Searching for the Destination, 2014/2024, suitcases, engine and red rope, variable dimensions. Installation view of The Soul Trembles at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2019
PHOTO KIOKU KEIZO. COURTESY OF MORI ART MUSEUM, TOKYO / ADAGP, PARIS, 2024

Few contemporary artists have transformed something as ordinary as thread into one of the most instantly recognizable visual languages in contemporary art. For close to three decades, Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota has captivated audiences with vast, labyrinthine installations that suspend boats, dresses, keys, suitcases and pianos within seemingly weightless webs of black, red and white yarn. The result is less an exhibition than an emotional landscape, inviting visitors to navigate the invisible ties between memory, identity, absence and human connection.

Born in Osaka and based in Berlin since the late 1990s, Shiota studied under Marina Abramović and then under Rebecca Horn at the Berlin University of the Arts. She abandoned painting after realizing the canvas could no longer contain the ideas she wanted to express, instead creating immersive environments that blur the boundaries between sculpture, drawing, performance and architecture. Drawing on deeply personal experiences—from childhood memories to illness, displacement and mortality—she transforms intimate emotions into works of striking universality that resonate across cultures, representing Japan at the 56th Venice Art Biennale in 2015.

Shiota's landmark retrospective "The Soul Trembles", which has toured Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Indonesia, China, France and Italy, is now on view at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts until February 14, 2027. At the same time, "Reflection of Memory" continues at Yi Museum in Hangzhou until March 7, 2027, while "Connectedness" is on display at Kunsthalle Rostock in Germany until January 10, 2027, underscoring a remarkable moment in the artist's international career. I spoke with Shiota about the origins of her signature thread installations, how cancer fundamentally changed her relationship with drawing and why memory, loss and the traces of human existence remain at the heart of her practice.



Chiharu Shiota, During Sleep, 2026, metal bed, bedding, black wool
PHOTO SUNHI MANG

Your work is known for its evocative use of threads to weave emotions and memories. How did you first discover the power of this medium, and what does it allow you to express that other materials might not?

I always wanted to be a painter, but when I was painting at art school, I felt like everything I made was already created. I felt like I was imitating someone else's work. I wanted to create drawings in the third dimension, and started to thread. It is like I am drawing in the air. Thread is a very flexible material and when the string is cut, tangled, loose or tense, it is like a mirror of my feelings. The material is about emotions and the relationships of human beings. This is what I can express with the material.

How did your cancer diagnosis in 2005 impact your art?

After graduating from art school, I stopped painting. I couldn't make any drawings and changed my practice to installation and performance art. I could not paint for 10 years, but when I was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, I started drawing again. Before, it was all about technique, but after the cancer, I realized technique is not so important. I wanted to draw my feelings. I painted with my hands or even closed my eyes when I was painting. I could start drawing again.

Why do you sometimes make sculptures of your own body parts and those of your family members?

When I got diagnosed with cancer again in 2017, I wanted to use an eternal material like bronze. I was thinking about my body and what would happen if it disappeared. I wanted to recreate my hands and feet and connect with the thread. But I only did this once, during my chemotherapy. During that time, I felt like I wanted my body to stay and to keep something and connect with my husband and daughter. I wanted to connect my body with them even if I was gone.

Your work often explores themes of memory, human relationships, trauma, loss, death and presence in absence. What sparked your interest in these ideas, and how have they evolved in your recent works?

The theme of my work is "existence in absence", so when someone dies, the memory of this person is much stronger. When they die, the person is not there, but their memory and existence are present. Through the memory, I can see their existence. For example, many people are born and die in bed. Even when someone is sleeping, the next morning, the shape or trace of the person is present in the sheets. No one is there but I can feel them, I can see their existence even more. This is the feeling I want to convey. By collecting shoes and other ordinary objects, I can see existence, a person. This feeling is always the same, but the objects change.