

Chiharu Shiota: Me Somewhere Else

Chiharu Shiota: Me Somewhere Else at Blain|Southern, London, 28th November 2018 to 19th January 2019

Who'd have thought that female Japanese installation artists were like London buses and come along two at a time? Yayoi Kusama might have received all the attention before Christmas but Chiharu Shiota has been quietly doing her stuff at the Blain|Southern gallery in Hanover Square. And such wonderfully humane and thoughtful stuff it is too.

Originally a painter and then a performance artist, Shiota's signature medium is now thread. Using this to 'draw' in three dimensions, Shiota creates both large scale installation pieces and smaller, more intimate works that are both beautiful to look at and resonant with meaning.

Dominating this show is *Me Somewhere Else* (2018) in which Shiota has spun a vast funnel-shaped net of blood-red thread that billows up to the ceiling from two bronze feet cast from the artist's own body. Filling the first room of the gallery, this immense installation imparts a strong sense of theatre. From a distance, there's a macabre grandeur about it but close up, the process of its creation becomes clearer. Some threads are closely intertwined, some are cut off and hang down; there are different types of thread and knots; voids and funnels sit alongside dense areas of netting. It's beautiful and organic, mysterious and enigmatic, and we're encouraged to walk around it, even to touch the hanging threads, as we contemplate the associations it brings to mind.



Chiharu Shiota, *Me Somewhere Else*, 2018, Courtesy the artist and Blain |Southern; Photo: Peter Mallet

For Shiota, this work draws inspiration from within. Known more for her site-specific installations, Shiota created this gallery piece after a period of reflection brought on by ill health. The red thread alludes to the complex and fragile connections of blood vessels and neural synapses within our bodies that make us unique. Contemplating the relationship between these physical and mental elements of our being, Shiota examines the idea that human consciousness could exist somewhere beyond, somewhere else. 'I feel that my body is connected to the universe but is my consciousness as well?' explains Shiota. 'When my feet touch the earth, I feel connected to the world, but if I don't feel my body any more, where do I go?'

Like all great installation art though, *Me Somewhere Else* encourages multiple interpretations. The colour red not only symbolizes blood but also signifies bloodlines, those points of human connectedness created by family, country and language. For me, the work brought to mind the thought that we owe our existence to our forebears, whose bloodlines flow from the distant past to the bronze feet grounded in the here and now. In turn though, these long dead ancestors are only given continued meaning by our existence; their memory lives on in us.



Chiharu Shiota, *Me Somewhere Else* (Detail), 2018 Courtesy the artist and Blain |Southern Photo Sunhi Mang

And just as human connections can be severed, so at the end of the show, *Me Somewhere Else* will be cut down and no longer exist. The antithesis of commodified art, it will live on only as a memory in the minds of those who saw it.

In the second room are smaller, more private pieces that continue to explore Shiota's themes of time and connections. *In the Hand* (2018) features a cluster of bronze wire rhomboids that fizz away from a cast of the hand of the artist's daughter, signaling a wealth of future possibilities. In *Skin* (2018), Shiota has stretched blood-red thread across the face of a canvas triptych. Initially resembling veins spreading

over alabaster tissue, this work again carries echoes of the bloodline theme of the main work, the red threads like family trees proliferating down the canvases from single points of origin.



Chiharu Shiota, *In the Hand* (2018), Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern, Photo Peter Mallet

The standout piece in this room though is *State of Being (Dress)* (2018). This has an altogether different feel to the other works. Unlike the red organic form of *Me Somewhere Else*, Shiota utilizes a rectangular frame densely crissed-crossed by black thread in which she has suspended a white dress. A key motif for Shiota is existence beyond our presence, the sense that the essence of a person remains even if physically they are no longer there. Here, the dress takes on that significance, representing the temporal essence of humanity within the black infinity of the universe.



Chiharu Shiota, *State of Being (Dress)* 2018, Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern; Photo: Peter Mallet

But again the piece can be interpreted in different ways and I saw in it a feminist statement in which the dress signifies motherhood responsible for the continuation of those human connections that create a sense of belonging across space and time.

Or maybe it's a meditation on mortality, the presence of life within a spider's web of death and infinity.

And that's what elevates Shiota's work to great art. Never less than beautiful to look at and impeccably crafted, her works resonate with associations beyond the reach of even more famous contemporaries. In her quietly inclusive way, she invites us to reflect for ourselves on life's great themes – birth and death, body and soul, memory and loss – and to find associations buried deep within us.

Like the Kusama show, this too is immensely Instagrammable. But *Me Somewhere Else* is more than a photo opportunity. So weave your way round the selfie-takers, find a quiet corner and take some time to appreciate the genius of Chiharu Shiota.

And go soon. When this show has gone, it really has gone for good.

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