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(ai) interview with Chiharu Shiota

by didi kirsten tatlow

Chiharu Shiota's work relates almost obsessively to a question that's important to us all: The question of origins. Japanese-born Shiota lives and works in Berlin, where she is one of 27 East Asian performance artists in the exhibition Translated Acts: 1990-2001, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures). After spending spring and summer in Berlin, the show moves to the Queens Museum of Art on October 23.

Shiota, 29, has focused much of her work on notions of birth and identity – ideas that come partly out of her experience of living in an adopted homeland. She lives in a typically shabby East Berlin walkup, where the stairwell flakes brown and light green paint. Relicts of East Germany's communist friendship with an unnamed African country dot the stairwell in photographs of a white doctor treating an African patient. The pictures reek of a vanished past, a feeling that's still prevalent in the Eastern parts of Berlin even twelve years after the fall of the Berlin wall.

Thin spring sunshine presses through the net curtains into Shiota's attic apartment. Waffles, her handsome gray and black cat, prowls around sniffing visitors carefully, the floor is dotted with gray cloths mice different sizes, but Waffles ignores them. In her 1999 work Bondage, Shiota soaked soft toy animals and dolls in mud and bound them tightly with thread to a large, cream-colored board. So when she scoops up Waffles and clasps him tightly to her chest, the resonance is suddenly striking.

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(ai): What role does your family history play in your art?

CS: In my work I'm seeking my own birth, where I came from. Where I come from is one of my main themes. I did a performance called Bathroom, where I cover my skin in earth. Wet earth. And I wash my body. But I always have the feeling that I'm not clean yet. That's like my own history. I can never wash away the memories that are in my skin. You can never bet that clean. Where I was born and from which my parents, what's on the papers and my passport – you can never get away from that.

(ai): The German idea of Heimat, which means home, or belonging somewhere, is a central theme for you.

Yet you have traveled widely, from Japan to Australia to Berlin. What was the impact of these changes of place on you and your art?

CS: I did a work called Dreaming Time that is a house. There are lots of shoes in front of it pointing away, but they're tied by red thread to one point in the house. This is exactly what I mean. It's a house, you can go away, but these threads still tie you to your homeplace ... My ancestors lived in the country, in a place called Kouchi. My family was there for a long time and married their own cousins a lot. When I was sixteen I went to Kouchi for the first time on holiday and I asked – where is the Shiota family? And an old man said, „It's all Shiota here!“

(ai): Your family then moved to Osaka and became urban. But is the relationship with the countryside still important for you?

CS: Yes, it's not that long ago. I exhibited a work in Hanover that was composed of photos of hundreds of my cousins. They're all Shiotas – some of them are dead already but others are still alive. My grandmother and grandfather died three years ago. They had a very big funeral. I took photos then. I photographed about 100 people. Then I got pictures from family albums and wrote to others in the family for their pictures and collected them like that. I have a dialogue with these pictures.

(ai): What is it like for you living in Berlin? Do you feel a sense of alienation?

CS: It's a comfortable life here as an artist. It's funny, when I travel elsewhere in Germany to do an exhibition, I'm suddenly a „Berlin artist“. Not a German artist, not a Japanese artist, but a Berlin artist. Berlin is a magnet in Germany for artists, and it's also attracting people from overseas. More than, say, Munich.

(ai): What is it that draws artists here?

CS: The town is in motion. The people are in motion. You can't pin it down. It's constantly renewing itself. There are constantly new streets being built. New buildings going up. New people around. There's always fresh air around.

(ai): New things, fresh air, are those things important to you as an artist? CS: Well, it's hard to say, but I did choose to come here, to work here, to live here. (ai): You've been in Germany since 1996. Did you ever think of moving on?

CS: I don't know. I'm really not sure... I've moved nine times in the last three years. Sometimes when I wake in the morning, I have a tremendous feeling of insecurity about where I am. Where I'm sleeping. Then I get afraid.

(ai): To what extent are you aware of trying to articulate something for your generation, or are you more concerned about saying something about yourself?

CS: The things that are more important to me are where I sleep, where I eat, what I think, more than speaking for others.

(ai): So a more individualistic approach.

CS: Yes, yes. My recent exhibitions have been called things like Heimat, Continental Shifts, Strange Forms. They've all been about being a foreigner.

(ai): And therefore also about the idea of home?

CS: Yes. Everything is about Heimat. I live here. I'm from Japan. I've moved home nine times. This is my life. But I find my nationality plays too big a role in my work here. Yes, I'm from Japan. But I don't need to be put in that box.

„I want to be something more than language. I want to bind the body with the universe. I'm looking for how to connect my body to the universe.“

(ai): Does it disturb you that you're described here as a „Japanese artist?“

CS: Yes, it does... I was born in Japan. But I live in Berlin and I work in Germany. For instance, I took part in an exhibition in Holland recently. It was called „The world from Germany's point of view.“ I was one of four artists that took part. The other three were German-born. But I was there too.

(ai): So you felt, „I live in Berlin, I work in Berlin, so I'm from Germany“ – at least for this exhibition.

CS: Right. But often, when there's a show here, people who come to look think: „Ah, a Japanese artist!“ and that makes me ... smaller. It's true that I have a Japanese name, I'm called Chiharu. They can see it next to the work. But that's just a detail. And then you're invited somewhere because you're from Japan.

(ai): Why do you think people here in Europe seem to need to put Asian artists in a „place of origin“ box?

CS: I don't know, but I do feel sometimes like I have to be „more“. I have to be more, in order to get past this.

(ai): Does that count for artists who are born and raised here too?

CS: Well I think, say, for artists from China, it's really important to them that they are from there. But for me it's too heavy. It's too heavy a burden. My own Heimat, that's inside, a personal thing. Art is a Heimat. And looking for it is what my art is about. The question is – where is my heart?

(ai): When I saw Bathroom (1999) at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt here in Berlin, two young girls who were about twelve years old asked me what it was about. So we stood together in front of it and one of them said: „Eew, didn't she have any clean water to wash

herself with?“

CS: That was a good question. I wonder too – why can't I find any clean water to wash with? The piece has nothing to do with being clean. It's about feelings and being born. About not being able to wash away that. About how you can never „finish“ with it. About the endlessness of that.

(ai): So what's interesting is that the girl thought she didn't get it at all. She said she didn't understand what you were doing. But still she asked the right question.

CS: Yes. When I was collecting old shoes for my installation Dreaming Time, it was the summer. I had to buy a lot of shoes from the flea markets and carry them home. I didn't have a car, I had to cycle home with them all. It was hot and I got pretty fed up. But I collected them all and one day a bunch of kids came and stood around, looking at my pile. They were marveling: „Wow, so many shoes! What are you doing with them? I'd also like to play with so many shoes!“ And I said: „Well, you can, if you become an artist!“ And they said: „Huh, we want to become artists too then.“ It was a kind of support for me. If you want to play with shoes, you can become an artist. It's very simple! (She laughs.)

(ai): Can you single out any major artistic influences on your work?

CS: Ana Mendieta is a big influence on me. She had an argument with the people she lived with, then jumped out of the window. She was only 38. In her work, she played with death all the time. And that interests me too. How she wanted to unify her body with the universe.

(ai): Is that also something that interests you?

CS: Yes. I want to be something more than language. I want to bind the body with the universe. I'm looking for how to connect my body to the universe.

(ai): You began exhibiting when you were very young, just 20. What did you show?

CS: It was paintings. I studied painting. But I don't paint at all anymore. That all belongs to what I call my „technical phase“, when I just became a brush, an eye, and paint. There were no feelings. Just technique. And I went through a six-month phase where I felt trapped. I was just walking on the spot. I had no art in me. I was trapped.

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(ai): How old were you at the time?

CS: About 21. Then one day I went to a museum, it wasn't an art museum, it was an ethnographical one. It had figures and artifacts from Africa. And there was color. Bodies. It was art and life joined. I felt it had something to do with my life. It changed my life. Those six months were very, very difficult. I thought I was at an end as an artist. That was the question. And I did go on, like this, as I am now. It was a breaking point. The painting had become meaningless.

(ai): You went to an art high school. What was it like growing up with the Japanese education system?

CS: In Japan every child is under a lot of pressure from a young age. To work hard, to work well. I'm the third child. I have two older brothers. In Japan, men are always more important – so I as the third, and a girl, I could pretty much do what I wanted. It wasn't so important what I did. I ended up with more freedom. My brothers have a very „normal“ life. Two kids, they live together with my parents in one house.

(ai): How important is it to you to go back to Japan from time to time?

CS: I always think I want to go back to Japan. To see my friends, to see Japanese films. But when I'm there, it's always different from what I expect. Everything is smaller. Completely different from what I'm expecting. I feel like I'm putting on old shoes that don't fit anymore. And then I start thinking – I'm glad I'm going back to Berlin.

(ai): The artists in Translated Acts are from across Asia, from Korea, Hong Kong, Japan. What do you feel you have in common with these other cultures, which are so varied?

CS: It's very funny, when I saw what the others were doing, I realized a lot of it had to do with inflicting bodily pain. They squash their bodies, or have bread thrown at them, or one guy went to jail for one year.

(ai): Why is that?

CS: I think it's because of some shared religious or cultural values that are connected to pain. That through pain you can attain consciousness and achieve something greater than consciousness. That higher state is something that comes from the body.

(ai): But your work seems to be less focused on bodily pain. Doesn't it interest you?

CS: Yes, it does. But the pain is more the pain of feelings than of the body. It's inside. Pain doesn't have to be physical.

(ai): You also show much less interest in technology, it seems to me.

CS: I think it's true. I was born in 1972 and at that time, especially in Japan, normal family life centered around machines, around the TV, the stereo. Now it's the computer. But when I was a child I played more with earth, with flowers. I didn't play much with plastic toys.

(ai): Did that make you something of an outsider?

CS: No, I don't think so. But it's true I don't work with such a high degree of technology. I think when there's a lot of technology in a work, then that might be interesting for the artist, but the audience isn't involved. It's about him, the artists and his technology. For example, my brother bought a new computer. I could only watch. I couldn't approach him. But he was interested in his new computer. It was something for him. That's what I mean.

(ai): Where would you go if you move on?

CS: I want to stay here for the moment. But I'd like to have a slower life. Since last September I've done lots of exhibitions. One week there to set it up, then back to Berlin to write letters and things, ten days there again. Enough of that. By April 1st I was finished. I want to stay in Berlin now and do some shows here. But then suddenly I also got afraid. I had been so busy, then the being-busy came to an end. Last week I became afraid of showing my work again. It snowed, it was Easter, and I was depressed. The very thought of showing my work or of working made me scared. •

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