

Notes on Chiharu Shiota's "In Silence" at Detached, Hobart, Australia – Spring 2011

Chiharu Shiota has a solo exhibition at the **Detached** space in Hobart, Australia. Called "In Silence," it is composed of a photograph and an installation that fills most of the gallery space. Two earlier video pieces are on view in upstairs rooms, and a suite of drawings is in a rear gallery. The show is guest-curated by Olivier Varenne from the **Museum of Old and New Art**, also in Hobart.

The work is clearly about memory – that held by the artist and by people in general, but also that held by a place. Shiota has mounted similar installation works elsewhere - I saw a smaller example at the NADA fair in Miami last year. For me, the work achieves especially sharp articulation in this venue, a century-old church-cum-art space at the historic center of one of Australia's earliest colonial settlements.



Detached, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia



The brick and stone structure shows its age of 100+ years – a section of masonry slipped to the ground in the morning's heavy rains. We can imagine that the church served as a special sort of linkage point for generations, connecting early colonists to each other, and to their god, as they settled into this outpost so distant from their British homeland. In this way, the Detached site is suffused with ghosts of people and relationships long forgotten.

Shiota has filled the main gallery with a floor-to-ceiling skein of black wool yarn, forming a taut system that looks like a dense cobweb. A burnt-out grand piano and chair were charred in a ritual burning outside the space, recreating an act of arson witnessed by the artist as a child. The yarn grips and cloaks the piano like a spiderweb, one thick enough to have been spun by one of Louise Bourgeois's colossal spiders, which that artist claimed to signify her mother. The staggering amount of labor required to string miles of yarn also contributes to the work's sense of feminine energy. The sheer scale evokes grand visions, as though the measured strands of the Fates fell and collected here to form a matrix of lives. The lines hint at a map, like a reversed star chart pulled into 3-D, or any sort of network made visible. The thoughts, conversations, and links that defined this church as a social space seem to have been redrawn here afresh. But there is an inescapable sense of loss, in part due to the yarn's black color, but also to an emptiness described by the dark lines. The yarn seems to describe a system at its vanishing point, like soap bubbles, or the brain as dementia dissolves tissue into air, or lungs thinned to nothing by emphysema. This sense of irretrievable loss-in-progress is why a disused church is an appropriate setting. It is as though the "social fabric" is made manifest, and yet is shown to be shockingly fragile, barely there, and disappearing.

In an upper gallery, we find a video (strongly reminiscent of the artist's mentor, Rebecca Horn) of the artist laying nude on the floor amid an effusive tangle of plastic tubing, with red liquid coursing through, as if her circulatory system has been moved from within the body to without. The work brings the border of the body into question – where does my environment end and "I" begin? Applying this question to the yarn installation invites the reading of the yarn as another bodily system recreated in space – the obvious such system is the neural net. A visiting doctor remarked: "it's like being inside someone's mind," a description further paraphrased by Detached curator Craig Judd as "a forest of dendrites." In this way, the Detached space has become the artist's nervous system, her external memory bank, both hers and not hers – a dissolving and intertwining of memory and feeling. "In Silence" is the structure of consciousness made visible, like the copper viscera of an old-time computer mainframe, or a visualization of the Hindu **net of Indra**.

The artist's process involves an immense amount of time and energy: 3 people working for 16 days at 12 hours per day, running 140 km (87 miles) of yarn. Fred Sandback it ain't.

Craig Judd introduced me to European notions of the "Antipodean," through which they regarded Australia as opposite to their own sensibilities and expectations. For example, the gum tree not only does not drop its leaves, it also sheds its bark; and black swans predominate rather than white. At Detached, I found perhaps another case: the mind ex-pressed outside of the body. Clearly, it's the right venue for Shiota's work.