

CHIHARU SHIOTA

20th Biennale of Sydney 2016

Webbed in the Past

By Dr Julie Rees

A highlight at the 20th Biennale of Sydney is the work of Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota (b.1972). *Conscious Sleep* (2016) is a site-specific installation located in the Convict Precinct on Cockatoo Island. Glowing with incandescent light, 20 hospital-like beds stand upright along walls encased with interwoven black thread. When entering this elaborate installation, the viewer is immediately transported into a world that mirrors an imaginary mindscape of memories past. This mindscape is a decidedly immersive environment, which the audience experiences viscerally.



The aesthetic features of this work can be read as a labyrinth of forgotten memories from prisoners

who once resided in this locale. *Conscious Sleep* (2016) acts as a visual metaphor for how the prisoners may have felt, physically and emotionally, about their imprisonment. Perhaps it is no accident that the interwoven thread eerily resembles a cobweb made by a Sydney funnel web spider. This spider is engrained in Sydney's folklore making it an ideal city for the display of this installation. However, since the official opening the artwork has produced mixed reactions among viewers, particularly those who suffer arachnophobia or claustrophobia. Whatever the evaluation, the work will generate strong responses from spectators who visit the site.



Black thread is a constant source of inspiration in Chiharu's art practice. *After the Dream* (2015) and *Letters of Thanks* (2015) are two examples of previous works that use this material to depict concepts of confinement, memory, anxiety, and loss. With each new piece, the suspension of everyday objects in space creates a dynamic visual vocabulary loaded with multiple meanings.

Conscious Sleep (2016) provides a reflective space for audience members to ponder not only the work's meaning but their own feelings towards—and experiences of—confinement, memory, anxiety, and loss. Chiharu's work can be viewed at the 20th Biennale of Sydney on Cockatoo Island from the 18 March – 5 June 2016.

On this page, *Conscious Sleep* (2016), 20 beds, black thread, and lighting, dimensions variable.

Photography by *Matthew Cheras*

The article can be retrieved from www.contemporaryartawards.com