

Night sky

The Stars are moving up and down –
When will you come, morning wind,
And lift again the shadows
From the dreamy Child?

„The night“, Joseph von Eichendorff

I had my first incisive encounter with Chiharu when she saved my life in a snow cold night in Oslo.

It had been a pleasant evening on the factory floor of Inghild Karlsen, then the director of Kunstneres Hus. The exhibition „Rest in Space“ had opened the evening before, and the artists and the staff were to be feted with an opulent farewell dinner party. Chiharu was one of the participating artists from everywhere in the world, and I was the guest curator from Berlin.

Contentedly we sat in the kitchen of Inghild and Bo and talked about the past months that often had been quite strenuous, while thick white snow flakes were languidly drifting by the window. Chiharu and her husband Sunhi had a lively discussion about the diverse fishes in front of us and about the various ways to prepare them, and I was quite intrigued by observing them. Suddenly a bite got stuck in my throat and I could not breathe anymore. I could not utter a sound and increasingly panicked. In utter agony I ran away from the others into a dark, empty room. Nobody had remarked my anguish except Chiharu who had followed me inconspicuously. She quietly looked at me, smiled and without any hesitation slapped me on my back.

Months later I met Chiharu again in Berlin where our friendship and cooperation began.

From the outset I found Chiharu's installations captivating and of an energetic intensity I could not and did not want to escape from. I felt that her work contained a truth I was looking for, a kernel one is often afraid to approach because the alternative is to give up any self-defence and expose and abandon oneself unprotected to this unsettling anxiety and fear.

Chiharu did this in place of myself and invited me as well as other viewers to follow her.

If you see Chiharu in front of you with her innocent beautiful child's face, with her Asian reserve

and her unbeatable, surprising humour that so frequently made me laugh, you will wonder what stirred this obsession to create these enormously spacious, overpowering installations, these dark, mysterious, and also frightening objects that are at the same time so beautiful and poetic.

Perhaps her production is sustained by a desire to contain her own inner perturbation and her constantly burgeoning, often overpowering anxiety and to face it through her art with decisiveness, perhaps also with defiance and with a remarkably subtle sense of artistic realization.

Chiharu's studio is located behind the paltry backyard in the attic of a shabby house in Berlin Mitte. The maltreated stairway still bears traces from the GDR times; you see faded wallpapers, torn off posters and occasionally lonesome flowerpots in old wooden window frames. You open a heavy iron door and find yourself directly under a red tiled roof. A pale light shines through small skylights upon the bulky wooden planks of the floor and upon the many often obscure objects Chiharu has collected over the years. There you will find old telephones, decades-old newspaper bundles, wooden birdcages, medical instruments from long bygone ages, as well as an old wooden bed with rusty coil springs, a fossil armchair, and a once noble, now singed piano keyboard, a conglomeration of objects that once were part of artistic activities like the keyboard or that are still waiting to be elevated to this status.

It is an intimate and romantic place that defied the ravages of time. Memories whirl through the air, telling tales about the dusty, old and apparently useless objects which are here given a new appreciation. Leaving this dim loft, you may notice also a small, stained vase standing unimposing on a wooden shelf with a carefully arranged bouquet of fragrant flowers.

Last year, when Chiharu received the invitation to participate in the first International Contemporary Art Biennial of Sevilla from Harald Szeemann, she often set pensively wrapped in thought in her studio or walked searching through the streets of Berlin. She had chosen as place for her creation the over 500 m² large Patio de Pergolas of a former monastery framed by powerful stone columns and shadowed by blooming trailing plants. This place that was so romantic and so sublime and beautiful at the same time was a challenge for her, to create something new. Soon Chiharu developed the idea to use old wooden windows waiting to be disposed of after the redevelopment of old houses. Over many months she collected around 600 windows which were to form the beginning of a new cycle of works.

Sleeping girls lay in the September heat of Sevilla, covered by white sheets and drowsing in hospital beds, while over flowering twines settled their weight gently upon them and almost shy

looks from the visitors observed them through a glass window barrier.

Chiharu is an artist who unearths her ideas with enormously strong will power. A rapid sketch often has to suffice to visualize a planned work for exhibition managers and technicians. Initial scepticism is then soon replaced by the perception of an exact and ravishing vision. Chiharu then often goes to her limits and inspires everyone with her overwhelming energy to let this vision become reality.

For me, the time with her is a present.

When Chiharu was diagnosed with cancer this summer, time seemed to freeze for a moment. Horror, deep sadness, and helplessness put their stamp on the days of uncertainty.

For many years Chiharu had painted her anxiety with black threads into the air, had gone to sleep in hospital beds, or turned her vulnerable back to visitors.

In spite of the shock she managed a mischievous smile: "What do you think, should I now only make cheerful art?"

Steffi Goldmann, November 2005