

# BLACK CANDY

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WELCOME TO MITHU SEN'S EXOTIC ADVENTURE. A PROMINENT FIGURE ON THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART SCENE, SHE TALKS SELF-PORTRAITS, SEXUALITY AND THE COLOUR PINK.

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In the first of two images Mithu Sen stands amidst real palm fronds, her head tilted and left arm outstretched, looking up at the sky and smiling brightly. It mimics the traditional studio photograph, where subjects pose in front of painted scenic backdrops featuring

palm trees and shrubs. Squatting on either side of Sen are two young men, curly-haired, with only their taut, bare, upper bodies visible, the rest hidden in the fronds.

*"Bienvenue dans votre aventure exotique"* reads the line printed across the top of the image, "Welcome to your exotic adventure." Reminiscent of a picture-postcard from another era, it evokes nostalgia, as well as a sense that it is dated, which is why it feels apt to refer to the three models as 'swarthy', the outmoded term for those with darker skin. It is this very swarthy that is the essential feature of the photograph. Light skinned models would have diminished the exoticism of the tableaux, making it pointless.



Photograph by Waswo X. Hand-coloured by Rajesh Soni.

In the second image, which looks like a photo negative but is, in actual fact, a close-up portrait, Sen smiles coquettishly at the camera. She looks like a genteel Indian lady from the 1960s, primed for an evening out with the husband, vermilion running through the middle of her coiffed hair and strings of pearls gracing her neck. It takes a few moments for the discrepancy to register: the neck, upon which her dark-skinned face sits, is several shades lighter. It is then that realisation dawns that Sen's face has been adroitly superimposed upon another head. Suddenly her expression acquires a different complexion of its own: it feels all at once frozen, questioning, and vulnerable.



Perhaps You II (2007), mixed media on handmade paper.

The first image was shot by Waswo X, an American artist now based in India. Waswo often presents staged traditional and rural Indian scenery and people in his work (paintings as well as photographs), calling into question ideas about what is exotic and what is authentic or real. The second image is a self-portrait by Sen. Titled *Perhaps You II*, it was part of her 2007 show, 'Half Full'.

On a recent visit to Sen's studio, she recounted to me the year she spent in Scotland, working toward her Masters in Fine Arts. People she met there told her repeatedly that she was beautiful, that her skin was beautiful. When she returned to India she wrote to one of her teachers in Scotland to say how she wished that every girl with dark skin could go there once. So that at least once in her life, she would feel admired.

Growing up, Sen was “super proud” of her mother’s beauty. “She is one of the most beautiful people in the world. Very, very fair,” she said. “Even my sister is very fair. Not like me. And my aunt [too]. They all [have] pink, pink skin colour.” Her father’s job involved frequent transfers, so until Sen was twelve, the family shuttled across small towns in north Bengal. She recalled that once, when she was only four or five years old, her mother bought identical baby pink frocks for both Sen and her sister to wear during Durga Puja festivities. Someone at the pandal told her that pink suited her sister, but not her.

So Sen banished pink from her life.

In 2003, she held a solo show of her drawings in Mumbai in 2003 entitled 'I Hate Pink', in which all the artwork was fashioned from an entirely pink palette. “I celebrated pink. This one colour, one of the *best* colours, [is] a favourite for so many young children,” she said. “And there I was so fearful of using that colour, because I thought it doesn't belong to me.” Pink has remained a constant in Sen’s drawings, sculptures and mixed media work since.

Sen studied art at the Vishwabharti University in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, and in the two decades since she was there, she has established herself as one of India’s better-known contemporary artists. Her works have been exhibited and widely admired in India as well as in cities across the globe.



An installation from Sen’s *Black Candy* show (2009).

Like any artist, Sen looks both outside, and within herself for inspiration and material to create art. But for her looking within has often meant looking in the mirror. To give life to her art, Sen has often treated her face as a canvas, one on which she draws and paints, distorting and manipulating it. Sexuality, eroticism, the body, and the grip they have on our subconscious - these are themes that Sen tends to revisit in her art. But it is the unsettling treatment of her subject matter that makes her work stand out.

Spending time with her pieces can often put viewers ill at ease. Her works are seldom pretty. Desire and beauty are mashed up with prurience and ugliness in a single collage, nimbly etched watercolours of female reproductive organs and male genitalia that are intertwined with a displaced ribcage or spinal column; human and animal anatomy - bones, entrails, feathers, claws - merge and fuse into each other, mostly to grotesque effect, interspersed with motifs of flowers, fruits, vegetables, tigers, fish, and Sen's own self-portraits. Playfully grim, Sen places the human body on a dissection table and applies a delicate watercolour tint to it, leading us to a fluid dream-world that offers little comfort or solace.

"Every aspect of my work-through medium, to concept, to subject - I try and push," she said. And this has been true from the outset of her journey. "I started working and my work started to project a strong sexual or erotic imagery." When she began, she used symbolic or metaphorical materials, such as hair and blood, but then, by her own description, her imagery became "representational, figurative, very graphic, very direct".

Her 2006 show, titled 'Drawing Room', featured both kinds of works: there were those that hinted and suggested, and those that hammered their point home with her characteristic bluntness. Sen said that at the time she shied away from drawing full human figures because she was still wary of her works being seen as vulgar or pornographic. One sculpture, *Pencil Box*, featured objects that suggested two pencils conjoined at their 'heads', resting inside an open pencil box fashioned out of black hair. Elsewhere a mixed-media drawing showed a large fish devouring another, slightly smaller fish, head first. Another, a small print of a woman's head, was prim and elegant in that 1960s style, but rested atop a plant with hairy root-like appendages that spread outward like an octopus' tentacles. Emerging from the woman's mouth? A three foot-long fleshy, pink object like a tongue.

Other drawings included a close-up of canvas shoes with worm-like Velcro straps, or another that showed a penis sprouting from the tip of a shoe, from a man's feet and other

improbable surfaces. She was also trying to create an audience for her work and did not want to drive that audience away. But while her work was gathering its own pace, she started to feel that it demanded an "identity" or some sort of recognizable human form. "Not gender, but more like a sexual identity" she said. "So I portrayed myself in many different ways, where even my sexuality was very ambiguous."

The result was 'Half Full', that 2007 show held in New Delhi and New York. Most of the mixed media drawings in the show feature Sen's face, an extended exercise in self-portraiture that allowed her to explore her now-established absorption on the themes of desire and desirability.



For someone who grew up feeling like the ugly duckling, this was a bold and willful gesture. Thinking back to her childhood again, Sen recalled how some expressed sympathy

for her because she didn't share her mother and sister's light complexions. But all that changed in Shantiniketan, where she found the freedom to dress as she pleased, to wear dark or bright coloured clothes, and where people complimented her looks. "Aesthetically, they altered even my own vision, what I saw when I looked in the mirror, how a hibiscus in my hair can look so beautiful and it can actually match my bindi or the red bangles [I wore]."

Sen's self portraits in 'Half Full' cover a spectrum of expressions of beauty - pretty, dreamy, plain Jane and grotesque. It is as if she laid bare her fantasies, anxieties and fears that converged around her own looks, and added to this confession the ideas of desire, mortality and death. One drawing sees her face attached to the body of a hybrid human-deer clad in a tiger print sari, with hooves for palms and feet, and antlers and deer ears sprouting from her head. Another has her as a Kali-like figure, with skeletal body and a tiger's head that shields the pelvic region. In one striking image, Sen's hair unfurls luxuriantly turning into a dark writhing gateway to the subconscious, populated by coils of entrails that ensconce a foetus.

"I portrayed myself in many different ways where even my sexuality was very ambiguous, very confused," she said of the show. "That role playing actually helped me gain a lot of confidence." That word, 'confidence,' cropped up regularly while Sen spoke of her work and life. Her art practice has been the pivot in her lifelong quest to acquire self-confidence. She lays bare her inner self on the canvas in all its tortured and perverse darkness, making herself vulnerable and throwing a challenge to her audience. Do they dare to look away and reject her work?



Chilli plant, from the Black Candy show (2009). Mixed media on custom, acid-free handmade paper.

For her 2010 show 'Black Candy' (subtitled, 'iforgotmypenisathome') held in Mumbai and Delhi, Sen's life-size drawings focused her corrosive and playful vision of sex, desire and the human anatomy on men. Outlined on extremely expensive handmade paper that Sen likes to use, made in Japan to her exact specifications, are naked and muscular male forms, contorted and intertwined suggestively, or elsewhere, just standing or reclining, inviting the viewer's gaze. On the inside of these outlined bodies, or spilling out of them, are bones, entrails, foetuses, with splotches and smudges of blood and fluids.

As a dare to her bourgeois Indian audience, the show succeeded wonderfully, earning her the first Skoda Prize for Indian Contemporary Art in 2010. The diptych *You Owe Me* from 'Black Candy' was to be displayed at 'The Body in Indian Art,' a show held at the Europalia India Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels in October this year. But one of the panels,

depicting a defecating man, was held back because the Indian Council of Cultural Relations found its content objectionable.

In those days at Shantiketan, visits to the villages of the Santhal tribe made a lasting impression; she was struck by the way they carried themselves. "I was amazed, seeing the difference between them and a middle class or lower middle-class Bengali family living in the same locality," she recalled. "[In the middle class family] a dark complexioned girl is not appreciated. But in the same neighbourhood, the girl of a Santhal family is so confident. The young girl is riding bicycles, working and going to school. She wore any kind of sari, white or red." She mused, "The more I worked with passion, energy and emotion, the more I think people started loving me, or liking me. Confidence is beautiful."

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