



MITHU SEN
“Drawing Room”

British Council, New Delhi
in collaboration with
Gallery Nature Morte

6 to 25 January 2006

Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
14 to 31 January

*“A conversation begins
with a lie. And each*

*speaker of the so-called common language feels
the ice-floe split, the drift apart*

*as if powerless, as if up against
a force of nature*

*A poem can begin
with a lie. And be torn up.*

*A conversation has other laws
recharges itself with its own*

*false energy. Cannot be torn
up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.*

*Inscribes with its unreturning stylus
the isolation it denies.*

Adrienne Rich, ‘Cartographies of Silence’¹



Pencil Box 2005
mixed media
8 x 2½ x 2½ inches

A Primer of Intercourse

DRAWING OUT THE CONTOURS OF MITHU SEN'S LINES

Nancy Adajania

Imagine a drawing room with images of frogs leaping on slithering tongues, shoes unlacing to reveal a fuzz of pubic hair, chairs growing into pink-tipped ladders, and safety-pins embarrassing us with their open claws.

The conversation in this room begins with a white lie, but soon balloons out into truths that burst unexpectedly in the faces of its interlocutors. Mithu Sen communicates with her viewers with the most potent weapon of art: the flowing, bleeding, precise and erratic line. Through her recent suite of 80 large as well as intimate-scale drawings, titled 'The Drawing Room', Sen creates an interior where sexual fantasies are unabashedly caressed until they grow into the gigantic whorls of a rose; and where taboos and false pretences are gently trapped between the blades of a scissor and snipped.

All animate and inanimate objects are sexualised and lined with a sense of menace here, even when they are meant to induce pleasure: a pair of copulating clothespins locked in assault, or snap-shut jaws yanked open to curls of blood. But the anticipation, fear and pain related to sexual pleasure are edged with parody and humour. Sen revels in visual *double entendre*: a risqué fruit stands in for an unnameable body part; what is unsayable is allowed to image itself. It is no surprise then that the mouth, with its clenched teeth and

vaginal darkness festering in its depths, occurs repeatedly in Sen's drawings.

This raw pink mouth hints at the protocols of silence and politesse practised in drawing rooms bound by the hypocritical rules of patriarchal domesticity. Here, it would be useful to employ Chomsky's distinction between the enunciatory form and illocutionary intent of a statement, in relation to the politics of communication. While the enunciatory form connotes the statement made by the speaker, the illocutionary intent arises from beneath the surface of the spoken word. The unexpected emergence of a Freudian slip or the cracking of an improper joke in the course of a conversation are examples of such slippage.

The illocutionary intent of Sen's work takes bizarre and quirky forms to confront the pain and embarrassment that are intimately related to female sexuality. Hers should be seen as an attempt to find a language more expressive than discursive, in which these matters can be spoken of. That is why I choose to describe these drawings as a primer of intercourse: by intercourse I imply, apart from the obvious sexual connotation, the older sense of contact and communication. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin *intercursus*, the moment between strokes. And it is between strokes that Sen exposes us to the difficulties of



no STAR, no LAND, no WORD, no COMMITMENT
Installation: Artificial hair on wall
Size: 6 ft x 20 ft x 2 ft and 8 ft height
New York 2004

conversing about such a taboo subject as the female experience of sex.

By installing her drawings in a painted room with furniture to simulate the comforts of a drawing room, Sen inverts the social etiquette of silence in relation to this subject. On confronting her primer of intercourse, the viewer will project her or his own psycho-sexual anxieties onto these works and a conversation will begin. The lies, the social hypocrisy that stole the viewer from her/his own self will be unravelled. And the conversation will repeat itself, inscribing “with its unreturning stylus/ the isolation it denies”. The alienation that women feel from their bodies, a feeling that men exacerbate, will be faced up to, even if it is not ameliorated.

Interestingly, and perhaps unknowingly, Sen has stumbled upon the original function of the drawing room. As the architectural historian Witold Rybczynski informs us: “During the seventeenth century it had been customary for the women to go to a ‘withdrawing room’ after dinner while the men stayed in the dining room to drink brandy, smoke cigars and indulge in boisterous conversation. Although the post-dinner separation continued over the century, the now renamed drawing room became a larger, more important space usually located next to the dining room. . . . It was then in response to the growing influence of women that. . . important changes to comfort first made their appearance in the drawing room, the one public room that was under women’s direct control.”²

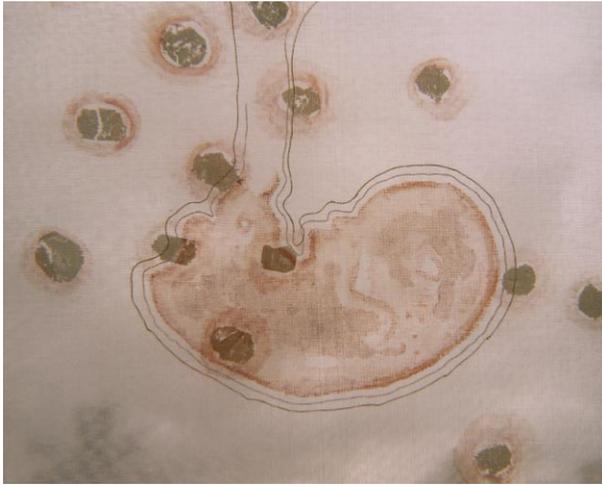
I would contend that Sen is recovering the nuance of the ‘withdrawing room’, the room where women once discussed their private affairs. Instead of secreting the private fantasies of the women away from the patriarchal tentacles of the present-day drawing room, Sen returns this room to its original owners: the women, literally drawing them out of their isolation and marginalisation.

In this ‘withdrawing room’, Sen plays out her fantasies,

shifting the emotional register from bathetic revelry to fear. Body parts, especially reproductive organs, grow into fruits and trees or mountains, and animals frolic among them. Sen’s is a fabular imagination: a cycle rides between the tips of unusually tall phallic mountains; a ladder rests tantalisingly against one of them. Below, text randomly constituted from alphabetical characters forms an unsurmountable barricade. Or consider the amusing image of two frogs mounting each other on a tightrope: they are provided with a personal rating card: “I am pretty satisfied with my level of physical attractiveness: Not at all [to] Very Much.” This drawing mimics the puerile newspaper supplement articles that advise readers on how to improve their sex life.

The drawings are staked out in blacks and greys, and are picked out with pink highlights and sudden bursts of red. The subtle flowing lines made with pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour, are given dimension and texture with floral and other motifs taken from printed fabrics and Chinese fabric stickers that provide the effect of embossed or relief work. In the sequence which employs traditional Chinese papercuts as well as fabrics, Sen juxtaposes pretty maidens with a cactus pot or a dancing cobra, ironising the clichés by which women are popularly represented. Here, we find the intriguing tableau of what look like dramatis personae from a shadow puppet play, their insatiable bodily appetites drawn out of their elaborate costumes.

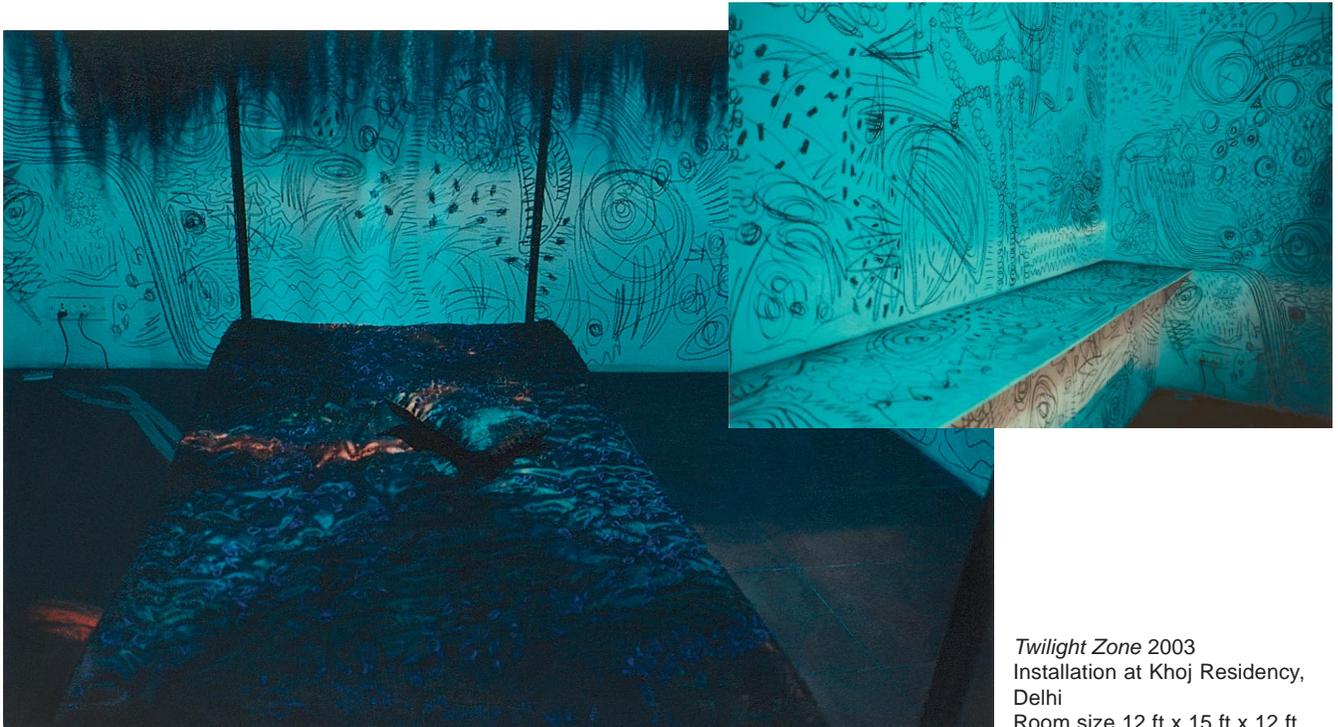
But we should not look for a linear narrative or definite meaning in these drawings. Sen works incrementally, one motif leading to another through the play of free association. Similarly, the spatial composition is made up of individual pictorial elements and stray elements are placed strategically outside of the main structure in a corner of the picture frame. The scale of the pictorial elements is also distorted to alternatively provoke comedy or menace. The narrational structure follows the graph of a conversation,



Outside the War Zone (detail) 2004
Drawing on silk with blood and gold leaf
72 x 72 inches



Outside the War Zone 2004
mixed media sculpture
70 x 30 x 24 inches

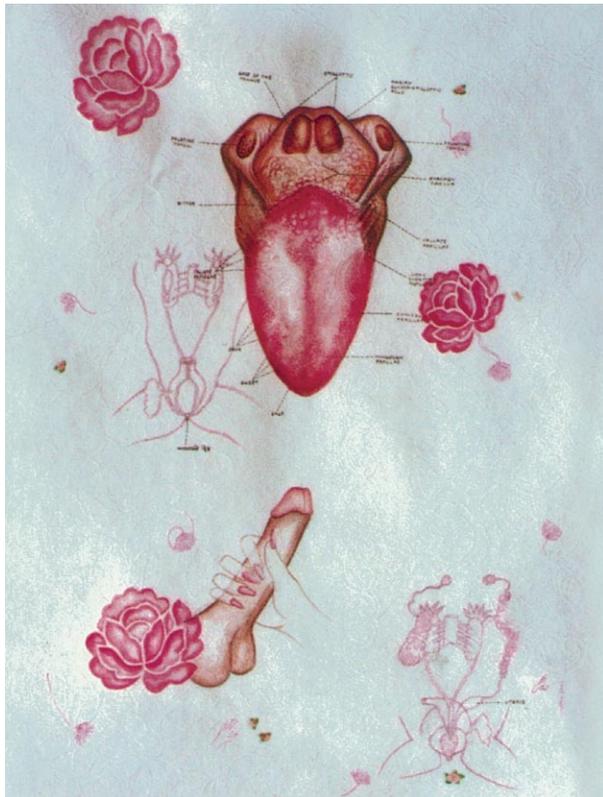


Twilight Zone 2003
Installation at Khoj Residency,
Delhi
Room size 12 ft x 15 ft x 12 ft

tracing a journey through the sigh, the excitement, the false note, to the pause and the momentary disconnect.

The visuality of these drawings can be seen as a take-off on the style of popular illustrations, but leaning more to the pastel fairytale mode than the pungently graphic *Aabol Tabol*. I must make it clear, though, that her work is by no means illustrative or pretty. While figures in the illustration mode are bold and symbolic, always shouting out their content, Sen plays hide-and-seek with her viewer.

To have and to hold 2002;
painting and drawing on embossed handmade paper
30 x 22 inches



The shoe is a shoe, but also genitalia. She shows boldly only to hide something dark, deep and anxious underneath the skin of the object.

Drawing is only one of the various media in which Sen has worked. She has also extended herself through soft sculpture, assemblage and installation that includes drawing, as well as video. She has always drawn, even if not in the conventional sense; she has, in the past, made drawings with blood and gold on silk. In her interactive art project, 'No star, No land, No word, No commitment' (New York, 2004), she made drawings with artificial hair on the wall. The hair, deftly shaped in the form of an unreadable hieroglyph, was a cryptic pictogram that defied decoding. The hirsute letters had no meaning; she was playing on the need that often grips a foreign audience, namely, to fix the meaning of the work of artists who belong to societies other than their own, by resort to cultural stereotype. By creating an alphabet of fantasy, Sen refused to pander to such cultural stereotyping; she signalled the need for art to pursue its idiosyncrasies, rather than performing to the dictates of the trap of viewerly expectation, whether localist or internationalist.

In the installation, 'Twilight Zone' (2003), inspired by the life story of a rape victim, Sen made charcoal drawings: spooky doodles that violently assaulted the room from ceiling to floor. A bed with switches of cascading hair hung like a mosquito net from the canopy, and the viewer lay on a silk mattress under the glare of a punishing blue light. This eerie, claustrophobic attack on the viewer's body was meant to provoke empathy for the victim. Sen has taken to the extreme her anger and fear against sexual violence, and abused female sexuality. The drawings in the current suite may stand at the opposite pole to the 'Twilight Zone' but the dark hints are present. The upright phallus – a mock-monument to male domination – recurs forebodingly.

But on the whole, the mood of the drawings and the



small sculptures that will be placed in the corners of the drawing room for unsuspecting viewers to stumble upon, is one of the 'withdrawing room', where women wrestle with the demon of otherness, but also attempt to regain control over their bodies and sexuality. Here, the ghettoisation of sexuality with terms like heterosexuality or homosexuality breaks down, with love winning over sexual emphasis. The pencil box with the conjoined leads and the hair sculpture (a jewel, or a nest, or a body organ placed in a box covered with tigerskin?) teach us that there are areas of sensuous experience beyond our usual hard-edged categorisation of sexual choices and perception. While the leads lock lips, the hair sculpture, stitched like a gossamer net, floats away; pearls, like frozen dewdrops, keep it fresh. It is through such gestures that Sen goes beyond the level of high-spirited fantasy and elaborates a significant renewal of the erotic.

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 16.
2. Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1987), p. 117.

Left, from top to bottom
Unbelonging 2004; hair sculpture; 6 x 4 inches approx.
Bed 2005; mixed media; 72 x 36 x 30 inches
Ladder 2004; mixed media sculpture; 180 x 18 x 4 inches