

EXPLORING TRADITIONAL AND METROPOLITAN INDIAN ARTS USING THE MUGGU TRADITION AS A CASE STUDY

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I approached Delhi-based artist Mithu Sen after viewing her 'Black Candy' series of drawings and reading a description of a sound installation called 'Confession'. Avni Doshi wrote:

Sen's work reflects an awareness of many sources and styles, and the politics of borrowing. Rather than passively assimilate her sources, in her 2009 installation 'Confession' (conceived and produced independently and exhibited with this series), Sen engages critically the notion of copying, using her own voice to raise concerns, including the fraught issue of repeating her own work. (Skoda Prize catalogue, January 2011)

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As former Art India editor Girish Shahane explained to me, the installation was essentially a 'confession box', in which she spoke about copying, an issue that she's very conscious about. I later heard 'Confessions', and despite not having experienced 'Black Candy' and 'Confessions' in the gallery space, I find I can appreciate the stylistic

devices Mithu used, so that viewers experienced a combination of 'beautiful', sensual - even erotic - drawings and a distorted, looped sound-piece which was part confession born of guilt and part evocation of her frustration with artistic repetition. I think the form of

the drawings and the sound-piece works well in taking the viewer through the process that Mithu goes through as an artist caught between her own and others' expectations.

MS: Thank you for your interest in my work. The sound piece 'Confession' was done as part of a project called 'Me Two' at Krinzinger Project in Vienna in 2009. Here is a brief

text that accompanied the piece during the show (see below).

MITHU SEN: 'ME TWO'

I want to confess as a contemporary artist that I feel that I am compulsively duplicating

visual, narrative and formal elements in works. Repetition and reproduction have been recurrent themes in artistic practice as a means of embracing hybridization and as stylistic devices.

My project is to address issues of guilt related to the exhausted receptivity by market forces and the art audience, as well as my own existential crises.

There are two parts to my project:

The first is a research-based authentic encounter with the local Austrian artist Egon Schiele and Herr Schiele's reactions to the social conditions of his time and ways to critique or deal with it. By incorporating elements of his work into my own stylistic space,

known for both erotic arts and self-portraiture, together with my own established sensuality, I hope to arrive in a new territory by using my own 'attractive' works as a jumping off point to address non-visual communications.

The second part is to confront my visual art practice in a confessional manner. It is about

critiquing one's own 'established' self as well as the practices of other contemporary

artists. By critiquing the primacy of my art practice, I hope to indulge everyone's need for

the beautiful 'Mithu drawings' that they covet while also presenting another side of myself, in order to address my feelings of guilt associated with the repetition of imagery

and motifs that ultimately feel confining and restricting.

It is the idea of having two extremes co-existing under the same roof.

AD: Thank you for further explaining your work 'Confession'. I have been exploring imitation and repetition and have been trying to incorporate contemporary artists' viewpoints. I find the following three statements most interesting. It would be good if you

could confirm that I have understood them correctly and clarify some of my doubts:

1) "Repetition and reproduction have been recurrent themes in artistic practice as a means of embracing hybridization and as stylistic devices."

Does repetition here pertain to repeating only your work or the work of others too?

Reproduction, I assume, does refer to reproducing the work of others (for example, Schiele). In this sense, I would assume that the challenge is to make your work

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stylistically coherent yet include a diversity of reference. Could you say something about

this challenge, that is, how you - in terms of formal language - confront the challenge of

embracing hybridisation.

2) "My project is to address issues of guilt related to the exhausted receptivity by market

forces and the art audience, as well as my own existential crises."

As I understand this, you feel pressured by the market and your audience to repeat a style - beautiful drawings - that you have established, and that they are familiar with, but

since you find this constraining, one of the aims in this project was to balance your need

to experiment while still catering to that expectation. Have I understood that correctly?

3) "By incorporating elements of his (Egon Schiele's) work into my own stylistic space, known for both erotic arts and self-portraiture, together with my own established sensuality, I hope to arrive in a new territory by using my own 'attractive' works as a jumping off point to address non-visual communications."

I am assuming that by non-visual communication, you refer to the sounds in your installation. What gave you the notion of using recorded voice with the visuals? Would it

be possible for you to send me your sound bites?

Apologies for the lengthy questions. Perhaps the following extracts from my thesis will explain my interest.

Extract 1:

"Needless to say, artists' 'signature' plays a significant role in their survival in a competitive market, making them reluctant to risk abandoning an established signature that translates to economic security."

Extract 2:

(Here, I am quoting David Chichester, Petra Kalshoven and Andrew Whitehouse, who critiqued and introduced my *Etnofoor* paper and the others in the same volume):

". . . the authors demonstrate that imitation is about so much more than imitating; it can

include copying but also innovating, sharing but also contesting, emulating but also appropriating a wide variety of cultural gestures, artifacts, and repertoires. Rather than

being dismissed as mindless repetition, criticized as derivative reproduction, or policed as plagiarism, imitation is recovered by these authors as a dynamic engine of cultural creativity. . . . imitation . . . [is] an engine of creativity. . . . By attributing creative force to

imitation, we break the notional hold of any authenticating original - the primal scene, the paradigmatic beginning, the foundational centre . . . (Chichester)

"Imitation also raises political questions of authenticity and appropriateness. The authenticity of copies and practices of copying is contingent on how they are socially embedded and conceptualised . . . These . . . articles . . . also investigate the pivotal role that imitation is assumed to play in cultural transmission and transformation, both in contemporary societies and historically. Both Das and Kalshoven consider how imitation is implicated in the diffusion of materials, forms and practices and how imitation relates

to creativity, originality and individuality. . . . re-experiencing is ultimately a matter of moving the present forward and of arriving at a deeper understanding of the self."

(Kalshoven and Whitehouse)

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Extract 3:

"Furthermore, it is viewers' and creators' hegemonic positions that determine whether an

artist has appropriated or not. There are several instances of metropolitans appropriating

traditional arts, though they are still in the minority. Jamini Roy appropriated Kalighat painters' vernacular - his large almond eyes and the clothing are all Kalighat. The Singh Twins and Manisha Gera Baswani's formal composition and attention to minutiae is inspired by Mughal miniaturists; the twins are additionally also inspired by Mughal portraiture, as evidenced in their recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Haku

Shah borrowed Gujarati tribal artists' flat planes of colour and their simplicity of form, Arpana Caur used the hieroglyphic figures of Warli tribal art as motifs for works like Rites

of Time and Harvest and the neo-symbolists appropriated Tantric geometric symbols, some of them retaining the symbolism of Tantra and others stripping them of Tantric associations to develop a language of abstraction. These examples - like Picasso's appropriation of African art - are less controversial than Indian artists' appropriation of

Picasso's style, because they are individuals appropriating collective traditions. The reverse also applies; just as Bengali patua artists appropriated popular imagery from English calendars and postcards, Andhra's women have appropriated Disney figures like Mickey Mouse for New Year's Eve muggus. When such reverse appropriation takes place, the results are often branded as kitsch. Appropriation of course can be of different

kinds; it can be stylistic appropriation, it can be appropriation of motifs or appropriation of

content; it can even be authorial appropriation - in other words, an appropriation of identity. The precise nature of appropriation is not under discussion here; the point is that when you have what Sheikh refers to as the familiar polemic between a collective and ahistorical tradition and an individualistic tradition focussed on originality and consciously situating itself in a historical timeline, it seems permissible to appropriate from a collective tradition precisely because such a tradition makes no claim to originality

and thus does not claim a stake in any corpus of intellectual or creative copyrights. The reverse however, is difficult to do without inviting accusations of appropriation used in its

pejorative sense. This is why writing and documentation are important; while

documentation in writing arguably introduces its own evils, it also generates a history for

any tradition and thus contributes to redressing hegemonic positions.

To repeat, imitate or derive from, is not necessarily a sign of weakness. It can be - and very often is - a foundation to build upon. By learning skills, techniques, forms and concepts, traditional artists learn a visual art's vocabulary and grammar, building up a vast reservoir that they then have at their disposal to draw from it, as they may choose.

Similarly, metropolitan artists' appropriation of traditional arts is not necessarily exploitative and their appropriation of international artists is not necessarily derivative,

though it can be so in both cases. There is a fine line between the instances where

appropriation is used by those lacking original thought or creative skill and the instances

where an Indian metropolitan artist for example wishes to use the arts of others - be they traditional artists, international artists or their colleagues - as a resource, to be developed further, to be re-assessed, questioned and re-interpreted, or even simply because they are attracted by the novelty of an unfamiliar form or style."

MS: I must say, first of all, that my English is very poor . . . My struggle therefore started

when I came to Delhi from Bengal (where I was already an established Bengali poet with

lots of dreams and appreciations). My destiny took me to Delhi, where I had to overcome

my . . . inability to express myself in this very particular and 'colonial' language, after going through a long, humiliating and frustrating period of communication. . . . I [finally] gave up, as I realized my limitation of becoming 'sophisticated' in this language. So I

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started exploring my own cocoon. Eventually, I felt that the language of art (and not just

visual art) is my most comfortable zone, where I can at least have my own way of communication. Today, along with my visual art practice, I simultaneously work with sound, writing (using texts in my visuals), poems/scripts, performances, etc, and all [of this] with my broken English.

I have addressed your questions below:

1) I think repetition pertains to repeating my work as well as the work of others.

2) Yes, the challenge is to make my work stylistically coherent yet include a diversity of reference. Also, hybridisation is always fun as well as a bit of a pun.

I always like to push myself to provoke others and myself, to extend my boundary so I am not limiting myself within a frame. So it [the piece 'Confessions'] was [done] more to question myself than others. It was also about protecting my 'love' (drawings) from its

over exhausting practices (to fulfill the market's and my viewers' demands).

It's a sort of psychological warning to myself (in the form of a confession), where I additionally tried to make my viewers aware of the repetitive factor in my work. It raised a

question and [highlighted] the risk of sometimes being 'dishonest'. In the sound-piece, I even used the phrase 'I seduce and cheat my viewer'.

The sound-piece is a combination of my personal and professional confession, where the listener could barely follow a complete sentence, but could just hear some broken, overlapping parts. It's a three-minute piece but because it is on a loop, it assumes a chanting or nagging manner and after a while, it makes the listener dizzy with its strong

words. It forces the listener to concentrate more and more to catch the provocative lines

but all in vain. The only sentence that is clear here is the confession of repeating images.

3) I have attached the sound-piece 'Confessions'. About my idea of using recorded voice with the visuals, I tried to put two extremely contrasting 'productions' in the same gallery

space (but in two separate rooms). The viewer had to cross the 'actual' fancy drawings . . . [the Black Candy series] to go to the next, dark room with a confession box in an invisible corner. I tried to play with two different human senses; the visual sense and the

hearing sense provide different stimulations for our brain. [Even when] . . . the visual sense stops receiving visuals, the mind can still be hungry to . . . [receive] some more

inputs. If the visuals bring a monotony and frustration for the viewers and they give up

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knowingly or unknowingly - they then face a new challenge and activate other human senses to receive new inputs.

Here, the sound part takes over [the experience] and tells the ultimate truth, where the

eyes are no longer functioning but the hunger for completing the journey is still there.

[In

a sense], the confession room was a room for unveiling the truth through meditation

and

disturbance.