

Great art makes us uncomfortable and more aware of who we are

By Jujhar Singh

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M.A.P. , showing Mithu Sen's face transposed onto a muscular, male body.

Setting out to explore the hybrid natures of human beings, Mithu Sen creates art that may be discomfiting to look at, since it makes us confront our inner realities and insecurities. Jujhar Singh writes about her in this print preview of his show, Art Talk.

Mithu Sen, one of the most exciting young artists in the country, creates very provocative art. Teeth, bones, blood, hair, sexuality. These are recurring elements in her work. But there is a clear purpose behind the provocation. Mithu grew up in West Bengal with a deep complex about her dark complexion. In fact she remembers how, when she was a little girl wearing a pink frock, somebody remarked that pink is not for dark people. Later, after studies, when she moved to Delhi to pursue

her art career, she again found herself in discomfort in a city characterized by social hierarchies.



High-heeled shoe split by dentures.

Soon, Mithu started observing not just her own fears and insecurities, but those of others as well. She realised that virtually all of us have our own sets of fears and insecurities. They could be physical, emotional, financial, social — anything. Most of us are not really comfortable in our own skins. And therefore we try — or pretend — to be someone or something else. One of Mithu's acclaimed works is a shoe. A high-heeled shoe split by terrifying looking teeth and dentures. Mithu says that it shows our hybrid natures. "The high heels talk of a certain society or status. But the shoe is cut into half. And the two mouths of the shoe are trying to eat each other up," explains the artist. The work is about the pleasures of wearing high heels, but also about the consequent social pressures of being, or turning out, in a certain way.

What Mithu Sen wants us to do is to look at her art and feel discomforted. She wants us to confront ourselves, confront our desires, fears and insecurities, and then dialogue with ourselves and finally resolve ourselves — within ourselves. The outer provocation is aimed at inner resolution.



Foreplay.

Similarly, the photo work *M.A.P.* shows Mithu's own head transposed onto a muscular, male body. It's another provocative way of showing our hybrid natures. "It's again about the desire to be somebody else", she says. "Or about having different shades in our personalities." Mithu adds: "My art may give discomfort to my viewers, but still they cannot *not* look at it." This in fact is exactly what Mithu wants to do. She *wants* us to look at her art and feel discomforted. She *wants* us to confront ourselves, confront our desires, fears and insecurities, and then dialogue with ourselves and finally resolve ourselves — *within* ourselves. The outer provocation is aimed at inner resolution.

It is like the time Mithu was invited by Khoj Studios in Delhi to create art on their blank walls. But Mithu decided not to paint anything. Instead, she started removing the existing layers on the walls. "I used a chisel, hammer, fork, knife and my own nails to take off all those layers, like as if I was taking the clothes, the layers off a lover." The work was called *Foreplay*. Mithu used the walls as a metaphor for the human body. The work was about gradually chipping away our external layers, then our sub conscious layers comprising our fears and complexities — in a bid to reach the inner core, our real selves. This is the essence of Mithu Sen's art.

Jujhar Singh is Senior Executive Producer, NewsX channel. His show, Art Talk, featuring Mithu Sen, will be telecast this weekend on Saturday 9.55 p.m., Sunday 1.25 p.m. & 10.25 p.m.

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