Poetry, Beauty and Androgyny

MITHU SEN

By Jyoti Dhar

(Previous spread)
Installation view of "In House Adoption" at Galerie Steph, Singapore, 2012, made from 35 mixed-media works on handmade paper, found and assembled objects, fabric and plants, 9 x 6 m.

(Opposite page, top)
I CUNT IMAGINE, 2010, graffiti, 152.4 x 244 cm.

(Opposite page, bottom)
Installation view of "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)" at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, 2010.

Unless otherwise stated all images courtesy the artist.

Spray-painted in pink and dark brown capital letters are the words, "I can imagine myself as an artist, but I cunt imagine my paintings are done by a woman." Crudely written, and covered in delicate floral details, the words are compressed together, making them difficult to distinguish except in the cases of "artist," "cunt," "b" and "woman," which are distinct in pink. Fearless, vulgar and antagonistic, Mithu Sen's work has a way of stopping you in your tracks. Titled *I Cunt Imagine* (2010), the graffiti work takes its name from a line in a sound piece by Sen, a New Delhi-based multimedia artist and poet, for her 2010 solo exhibition "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)" at Chemould Prescott Road gallery in Mumbai.

Using a provocative, psychosexual and poetic form of writing and drawing, Sen probes, disturbs and resists universal societal concerns, from gender and racial discrimination to the more taboo aspects of sex and the body (both male and female). "If you don't provoke people, the truth of things doesn't come out," she says with a coy smile, during our conversation in January in Delhi. Sen has become associated with a fairly sensational, highly eroticized and deliberately "grotesque" image-based practice since her steady rise to both national and international prominence in the early 2000s. Looking beyond this, however, it is the creation, manipulation and abstraction of a deeply poetic language that underpin and permeate all that she does.

Defining precisely what makes Sen's imagery and text poetic is as difficult as describing what makes it artistic. Suffice to say that within Sen's practice there seems to be an embedded impulse to express an intimate and instinctual language that is conscious of its emotive qualities and spatial form, but that is also primal in its essence, such that it can be shared by anyone who receives it. "Poetry is my first love," she says. "It's about a feeling; the visual is just a clue."

Since the 1960s feminists across the globe, particularly women of color, have used poetry in multitudinous and interdisciplinary ways to create a space from which to reimagine or reposition ideas and provide agency to the oppressed. As a self-professed postcolonial feminist (something she describes as a self-crafted position that is about a way of life rather than a set of theoretical codes), Sen uses different forms of poetic expression in her practice, whether it be the written or spoken word, a visual vocabulary or performative gestures, to create her own so-called dream language. "I'm interested in the power of communication and creating a language without hierarchies," she says. At times childlike and humorous, in other instances sinister and debauched, Sen's language—whether written, drawn, sculpted, sprayed, photographed, filmed, collaged or performed—attempts to penetrate the audience's psyche, to address suppressed issues and to tap into more visceral ways of communicating. If the reality of a society is produced by its languages, then Sen uses her own poetic language to reflect larger questions back at it, challenging the way we view ourselves and our human relationships, as well as inherently patriarchal and predominantly conservative social constructs.

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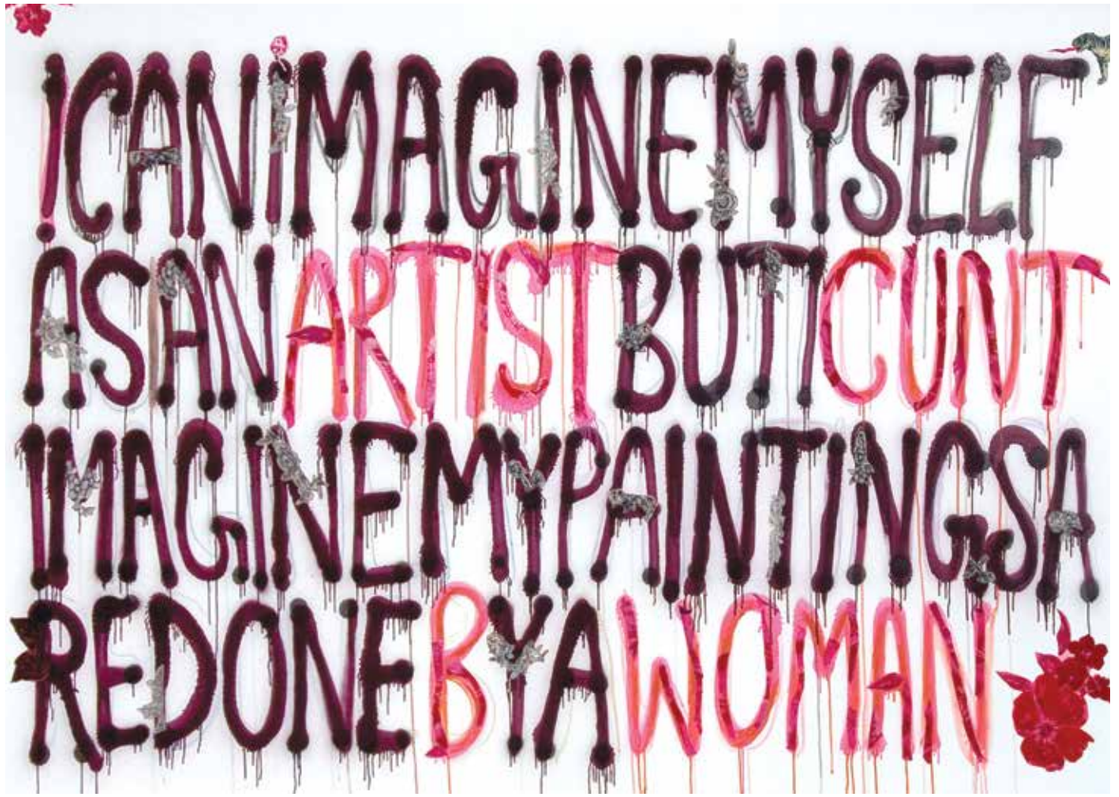


Sen was not the most likely of subversive characters. Born into a middle-class family in West Bengal in 1971, she describes herself as "a small-town girl" who spent her childhood in various suburbs of the eastern Indian state. Sen traces her penchant for poetry back to these early days spent on her own, reading and writing, when respecting language, knowing one's culture and embracing traditional relationships were of utmost importance in her family. "I've always been a collector of words," she explains. "My mother is a poet. A mother is always the first hero in any daughter's life." It was Sen's flair for imaginative language that helped her gain admission to the prestigious West Bengal-based university Visva Bharati, Kala Bhavana at Santiniketan, in 1990. There, the young student spent seven years formally studying art (gaining a BFA and an MFA) and informally producing and performing her poetry. Sen describes these years as some of her happiest. As she wrote to her parents at the time, "I think I've found my place, my wonderland. My existence is accepted here." It was a welcome change from points during her childhood when Sen had felt like an outsider, the "literal black sheep" of her family, considered too dark-skinned in a family of light-skinned women. She at times felt inferior, out of place or discriminated against by society. One particularly hurtful incident, when she was just five years old, involved a family friend commenting on Sen's and her sister Mou's new, matching outfits that they were wearing for the Durga Puja religious festival. "Why are you wearing pink, Mithu?" the woman asked. "Pink is for Mou. Pink is not your color."

Nearly three decades later, for her first major solo show, "I Hate Pink" (2003) at Mumbai's Lakeeren Gallery, a 33-year-old Sen unearthed and rewrote this memory through a series of sculptures and drawings celebrating the color in all its saccharine, fleshy and feminine glory. Consisting of shiny pink, silky shapes sewn together

(This page, left)
BURI NAZAR WALE TERA MUH GULABI, 2002, mixed media, 46 x 31 cm.

(This page, right)
TO HAVE AND TO HOLD, 2002, painting and drawing on embossed handmade paper, 76.2 x 56 cm, from the exhibition "I Hate Pink" at Lakeeren Gallery, Mumbai, 2003. Courtesy Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai.

(Opposite page)
FREEMITHU, 2007– , works wrapped in pillow cover bags to be given to those who had sent "letters of love" to the artist, installed at Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi, 2009.

with sparkling fuchsia beads is an abstract sculptural form encased in glass that could equally be evocative of a body with protruding appendages or an oddly decorated and pain-inducing slipper. The title of the 46-by-31-centimeter work, *Buri nazar wale tera muh gulabi* (2002), riffs on an age-old Hindi saying, typically uttered to ward off jealous or spiteful intentions: "You, with the evil eye, may your face be blackened." Sen's version replaces "blackened" with "pink." The text is handwritten in pink script on top of the glass, so that viewers see the form through it. Employing superstition, dark humor and fairytale as devices, the sculpture brings into question societal assumptions of beauty, gender and gaze, reminding viewers that these notions are subjective. In contrast, the drawing *To Have and to Hold* (2002) is clear in its detailed, fantastical-meets-anatomical depictions of a pink, bulbous tongue protruding from a spinal cord next to a hand with pink, pointed fingernails holding an erect penis. This hybrid illustration is neatly labeled as if in a scientific diagram, surrounded by pink roses and faint outlines of other amalgamated body parts. For Sen, these early works seem to be about liberation from definitions and discriminations alike. "Sexuality is self-confidence, beauty is self-confidence," she says with some defiance. "What makes you, or something, beautiful?"

Over the next few years, as Sen began to receive critical acclaim for her feisty, confrontational approach to gender and identity politics, she continued to struggle with the idea of being objectified—this time as a so-called marketable commodity and well-known personality in the commercial art world. "I'm always very provoked by being told I'm not allowed to do something," she says. The rising star rebelled against conformities and expectations in a number of ways, including setting up her own, ongoing website project, *FreeMithu* (2007–), in which she promises free artwork to anyone who sends her a "letter of love." On another occasion, New York's Bose Pacia residency space invited clients to a private audience with the artist at the opening of her 2006 solo exhibition "It's Good to be Queen." For the event, Sen invited the audience into the apartment where she had lived during her two-month-long residency—filled with objects, curios and drawings—but decided not to stay. "I wanted to critique the gallery system and the idea of being an artist, where I'm skilled, so I'm invited and I exhibit," she explains. "I also critique myself in this process."

Nonetheless, Sen was invited back to Bose Pacia the following year to exhibit a solo show of her large-scale installation "Half Full: Part I" with the promise that she would "not run away this time." (The second and final installment of the exhibition, "Half Full: Part II," was shown at Nature Morte gallery in New Delhi later that year.) For the New York show, Sen embarked on her first series of self-portraits. In *Incapable of Being Unnoticed* (2007), a mixed-media collage on handmade paper, Sen's forlorn visage has twisted foliage sprawling out from underneath her forehead and hair, as well as a trachea erupting from her mouth, with tiger-striped organs branching out of it. A velvet-covered frame surrounds the two-meter-tall work, where various flora and fauna appear to pepper the image's borders, allowing the work to spill over onto the gallery walls. "I play with the idea of being 'somebody' and our identity as [manifested through] objects . . . I filled the gallery with images of myself. I wanted to see, how much can you take?" she explains. In another piece, *False Friends I* (2007), 11 images are juxtaposed on a wall, from pictures of false teeth and rows of eyeballs, to photographs of Sen taken by strangers that are layered with images of a lizard or a fake tongue. Connecting works and spreading throughout nooks and crannies of the Delhi gallery was a long, soft sculpture entitled

Destroyed Labyrinth (2007), resembling overgrown vines, tortuous blood vessels and phallic-shaped growths.

Like many of Sen's series, the "Half Full" body of work arises from a gut reaction to a personal and psychologically unnerving stimulus. This is articulated through a reflexive vocabulary, layered with several levels of symbolism and references similar to the way she writes poetry, as an impulsive yet considered reaction to the world. In the series' poetically juxtaposed images and forms, Sen layers the rational with the nonrational as her desire to combine her ideas on narcissism, the sexual body and fantasy start to take shape. Looking at this body of work in a psychoanalytical vein feels appropriate, since Sen chooses a particular visual language here and deliberately employs it as a means of entering the psyche and the self. "[The 'Half Full' series is] about our desire to become something other than our given role or identity," Sen notes. "It's about the secret side of human nature . . . How do we see ourselves?"

In keeping with American writer and social philosopher Norman O. Brown (1913–2002)'s theories on the psychosexual, in which he attempts to further and extrapolate on a number of Freudian principles, Sen's work seems to suggest that all psychological categories are also bodily categories, and vice versa. Brown suggests that the solution to human neurosis is in the reconciliation and acknowledgment of these (dialectical, not dualistic) instincts. In her 1966 essay "Psychoanalysis and Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*," American writer and activist Susan Sontag elaborates on this idea, writing that Brown invites us to accept "the androgynous mode of being and the narcissistic mode of self-expression that lie hidden in the body." It is precisely these repressed androgynous and narcissistic tendencies that are united in Sen's *Working Class Hero 1* (2007), which sees the artist's face on a male body merged with objects and animal parts including a tiger's face, a flower, a rooster and a tiger's tail with a human penis. Sen's poetic imagination and expression in these works exemplify and give voice to theories on underlying bodily modes and their subconscious counterparts.

For the artist's subsequent 2010 solo show, "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)," she continued to play with ideas of exhibitionism, sexuality and the psyche, this time by staging an interactive, multi-sensorial encounter for audiences. For an audio component, Sen recorded a fictional conversation between two male characters, Rum and Vum, exploring their sexual orientation. Sen played both parts, digitally manipulating her voice to sound more masculine. Vum asks, "It's always been my desire to become a maternal man . . . Are you bi-curious or homophobic?" Rum replies, "No, no, no, no, am androgynous." As audience members listened, they were given black, fruit-flavored lollipops to suck on and invited to walk between several large-scale drawings on sliding frames, which they had to push aside in order to fully view the works. "I wanted to create a kind of chaos, where all five senses were involved and the whole body of the viewer was engaged," Sen says. In the diptych *You Owe Me!* (2009), a figure with both male and female body parts faces another, on an opposing panel, with its genitalia out of sight; while one appears to look down at his fetus-filled belly sitting above his protruding penis, the other simultaneously squats, spits and defecates while clasping its reddened face in its hands. The right panel of this diptych—depicting the defecating body—would later be removed by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations from a group show at the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, entitled "The Body in Indian Art" (2013). The left panel, portraying the pregnant body, was allowed to remain. As with many of the works that were in this exhibition, Sen continues to test viewers' boundaries, pushing the line between the compulsion to see and the repulsion that often ensues, but in an even more visceral way—by stimulating taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight all at once.

What was intriguing about this series of work was not only Sen's use of her visual vocabulary in a number of novel, interdisciplinary forms, but the way she had begun to flex her use of language and to

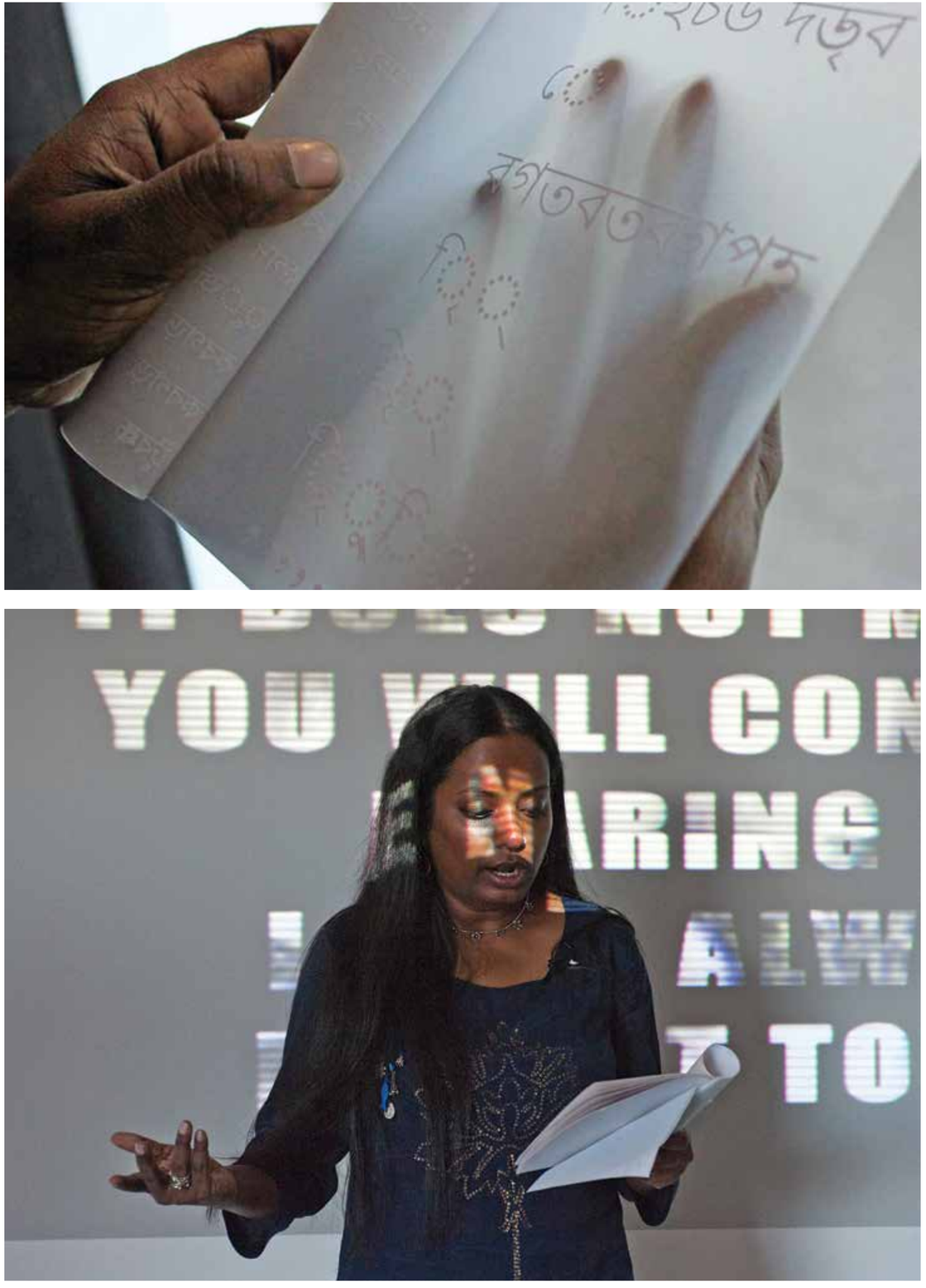
(Opposite page)
INCAPABLE OF BEING UNNOTICED, 2007, mixed media and collage on handmade paper pasted on ply, 236 x 129.5 cm.

(This page)
YOU OWE ME!, 2009, mixed media on handmade paper, 211 × 107 cm each. Courtesy Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai.

incorporate it into her work—in this case, using it to examine the links between the body and the psyche. For example, in *You Owe Me!*, speech bubbles accompanying the pregnant figure and the defecating man read, "Always had a desire to write poetry" and "They removed my spit gland!" respectively. While one body describes how it wants to express itself more, the other protests that even its basic right to excrete has been taken away. "I see these two lines very much like poetry," Sen explains. These short statements give life to Sen's ambiguously gendered characters, revealing their hidden desires and moments of resistance alike. The carefully crafted sentences contain an emphatic, intuitive quality that brings Sen's preoccupations with psychoanalysis, poetry and the body to the fore.

In these works, as well as in her script for the audio portion of the exhibition, Sen uses an instinctive form of language she calls her "own version of English." The artist's ongoing, and at times difficult, relationship to the English language has remained a source of inspiration and has filtered into her work in a number of ways. "My constant struggle is in terms of sophisticated language and its hierarchies. I want to break all these rules and find a way that is my own," she says. Whereas in earlier series Sen seemed to employ the visual image in a poetic manner as a way of freely expressing concepts and innate emotions, more recently she has incorporated language directly into the work, using it as a way of challenging prescriptive sociopolitical notions. "I want to go beyond what is gender and what is race, to look at what is human," she says.

Though the English text she uses in her image-based body of work has been well documented and disseminated through her art exhibitions, Sen's erudite Bengali poetry, which has been published in volumes such as *Ma Jai Boluk* ("Whatever Mother Says") (2000) and *Bashmati Sarir Bagan Ba Gaan* ("Basmati Body Garden or Song") (1995–2005), has remained lesser known. During our conversation,



Sen describes how the poetry that she used to write prolifically and perform on the streets of Kolkata in the 1990s dried up after her move to Delhi in 1997. She talks about how alienating the relocation initially felt, and how disconcerting it was having to present ideas within the context of Delhi's Anglophonic art fraternity in a language that was not her own. Around this time, Sen symbolically began to write diary pages filled with a single word, letter or simply the date, leaving the rest of the page blank. "I was choked with the city; I felt like I lost my language, my existence, my everything—I felt like I was a void." Over the years, through global exhibitions, residencies and study—including a postgraduate program at the Glasgow School of Art in 2001—she met international artists for whom English was also not their first language. With them, she felt more at ease. "I started asking myself, 'What is the meaning of language?' and 'How can we communicate with language and non-language?'" she recalls.

Recently, Sen's questions concerning different forms of language and her poetic reactions to alienation have begun to take center stage in her visual and performative work. In 2012, after a particularly frustrating incident in which a malfunctioning computer program rendered her typed Bengali words into a string of disconnected symbols and characters, Sen realized that the "computer gibberish" she was left with was devoid of hierarchy, meaning and structure. This was the closest Sen had come to giving voice to the subconscious. It would become the basis for *I am a Poet* (2013). This multi-layered installation, which takes the form of a book, verbal recording and performance, was shown in the group exhibition "Word.Sound.Power" (2013) co-curated by Delhi-based Khoj International Artists' Association and London's Tate Modern. Sen's ethereal-looking book, delicately bound with transparent fabric, presents page after page of what appears to be Bengali script interspersed with circular, dotted and linear symbols, laid out in stanza-like formations. These lines or letters are printed on top of one another at times, enhancing the feeling of indecipherability. The audience is invited to "read" aloud the abstracted poems, or to share interpretations of and responses to the texts, which are recorded and form part of the work alongside Sen's own occasional public readings of them.

If Sen's abstract poems are filled with everything that she desires to express through her "dream language," then that openness is transmitted through the interactive element of *I am a Poet*. In joining the act, the viewer becomes receptive to all that is possible and revealed through the process. The gesture is meant to be both a liberating and a democratizing one, allowing for a playful interaction and giving everyone equal—that is to say, no—access to the usual systems and codes that are embedded within a language, as well as the culture and society that language represents. With *I am a Poet*, Sen taps into what she calls a "pre-lingual" form of communication, one that permits the stripping away of the comprehensible and verbal to a set of more instinctual sounds and gestures. She sees this "nonsense" as an "act of resistance," a way of putting the cultural elite and the socially marginalized on the same plane for a given duration.

The following year, Sen took this notion a step further. At the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, "Whorled Explorations," Sen's video and sound installation, *I Have Only One Language; It is Not Mine* (2014) included film footage from her three-day-long performance at a government-run girls' orphanage in India's southwestern state of Kerala. There, Sen had embodied her fictional character of "Mago," who was unable to speak a decipherable language, performing as an otherworldly, gibberish-talking protagonist in an environment normally reserved for the socially outcast. The resultant video installation shows excerpts of this performance—shot by Sen, orphanage staff and the girls themselves—through a filter that renders the footage colorless save for red outlines and shadows. In the opening scenes, we see the traced linear markings depicting the central building and circular courtyard that is the girls' home. Enter Sen as Mago. We hear the girls excitedly asking "English?

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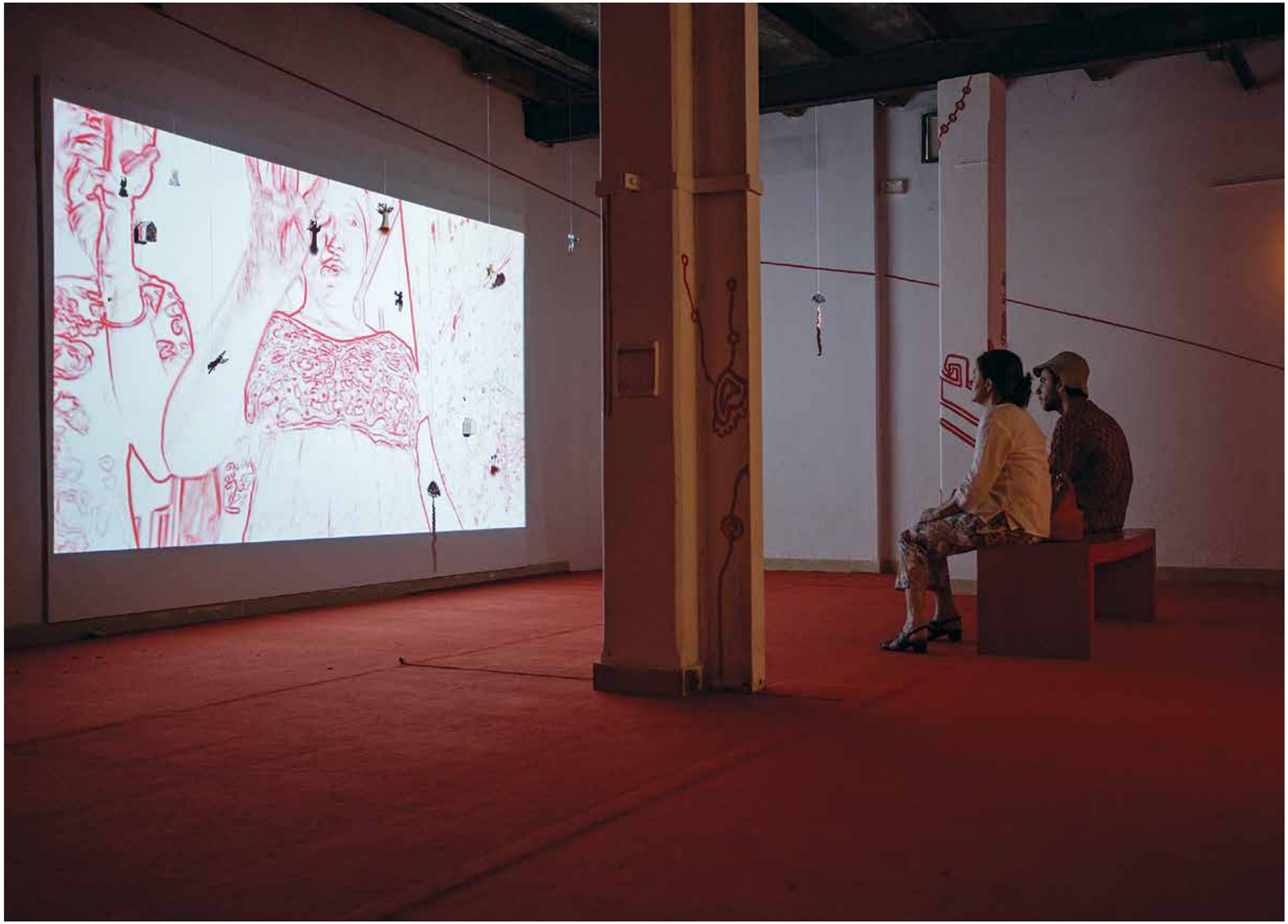
I AM A POET (detail), 2013, video stills from performance at Tate Modern, London, 2013. Collaboration with Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi. Courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai.



I HAVE ONLY ONE LANGUAGE; IT IS NOT MINE, 2014, site-specific installation with single-channel video, sound and objects, at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2014.

“If you don’t provoke people, the truth of things doesn’t come out,” she says with a coy smile.

Hindi? Arabic? Malayalam? Telugu?” as they try to categorize and comprehend this new person. A subtitle beneath the image reads, “She talks but she has no language . . . noise is understood and not understood.” As the video progresses, we see the girls interacting with Mago—looking at food menus, humming together and using a variety of hand movements and bodily gestures. The moments when they eat, watch movies and draw patterns together show them forming bonds without the use of conventional, interpretable means of communication. Sen’s whispered voice-over at times cannot be understood, but her subtitles offer glimpses into the lives of “humans that no-one owns or claims” as the orphans are often called.

One could question the ethics of the performance—whether the girls understood the nature of this experiment, or why Sen situated the act within an orphanage at all. But by treating the footage with a filter that leaves the girls’ identities anonymous, and giving the camera to them, Sen manages not to exploit or romanticize their social position, as a traditional documentarian might. Instead, she places herself within a marginalized environment in a performative way that allows for multiple, shared narratives and alternative forms of interaction and understanding. The performance shares aspects of the theory of *dérive* or “drift,” put forth by the 1950s avant-garde artist and philosopher collective the Situationist International in their study on the dehumanizing effects of a capitalist society on human behavior and emotion.

It is useful to contextualize Sen’s performance using such cultural theories, as much of her work appears to be spontaneous and improvisational, but often has strong art historical or theoretical underpinnings. The Situationists would frequently place themselves within man-made urban environments for brief periods to observe the “psycho-geographical variations” in these scenarios; the outcomes and recordings of these were considered a form of poetry. With a similar immediacy and analytical undertone, Sen once again finds a way of providing agency to the nameless in society through her experiments with different forms of language, or non-language. Mithu Sen is still challenging, penetrating and subverting convention, but in a way that allows for her “dream language” to be all-encompassing, taking on myriad avatars and asking larger questions of humans and the world. “All my work is about relationships, how they build and develop over time,” she concludes. “The psychology of humans—their expectations, what they desire—that’s what fascinates me. It’s a wonderful thing to discover at every moment.”