

Mithu Sen does what no one else did in Kerala

Uma Nair in PIUMAGE | Lifestyle | TOI

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At the moment Mithu Sen is in New York getting ready to do a performance at the After Midnight opening at Queens Museum in New York. But she has created ripples in Kerala for her visit to the Kochi Biennale. Instead of doing something at Aspinwall and wielding the brush on canvas, she took her art straight into a place where life is experienced in rawness — in a Kerala orphanage for minor girls brutalized and devastated by sexual and emotional abuse.

Celebrated artist Mithu Sen shot her 42-minute riveting but disturbing video installation, 'I Have Only One Language; It Is Not Mine', at the orphanage for destitute girls in Kochi without letting them know that they were becoming part of her project, which now features prominently at Aspinwall House, the chief venue for the ongoing Kochi Muziris Biennale.

By doing so, the artist was careful not to objectify children, but to share their anguish and hope, spontaneity and innocence, vulnerability and rebellion, and, above all, their zest for life. This she did by living with them for nearly a month in the orphanage by assuming a fictional name of 'Mago', her alter ego, to experience firsthand what the life meant for them.

For Sen, it was an unscripted performance captured primarily on her home video camera and iPhone, through which she engaged with the idea of "radical hospitality", exploring the limitations of language and the possibility of dialogue outside it. 'Mago' is a homeless person who speaks gibberish, does not understand the concept of time and is in a state of transit between two unknown places.

During her stay, Sen placed herself in the situation as if she and the children themselves were all fictional. The performance was visually documented by the artist, a house mother at the orphanage and the children who, happily and intermittently, took the camera into their own hands. A video and sound installation assembled from this footage, along with "remnants" of the performance, forms her exhibit.

Reflecting on her work, the Delhi-based artist says it has two experimental sides through 'Performance' and 'Technology'. "Creating a fictional character as alter ego and using non-language communication/performance as an anti-violence intervention with emotionally and physically abused young girls in a government home in Kochi, define my work," she points out.

"I believe language imposes a strange and alien logic that tells us not to smell poetry, hear shadows or taste lights. Escaping this rigid framework, this project seeks not only to locate communication outside the narrow alleys of comprehension, but also tries to envisage dialogue in a way that cannot be read, heard or understood," she explains.

Sen notes that she created a fictional character of her "to help the girls start believing in strangers...they should not lose hope, but with some intuitive acts they should learn the instinct of reacting prompt. As for the performance part, I stayed with the girls by adopting and adjusting to their life for a short period of time. I tried to do an artistic experimentation on a functional home."

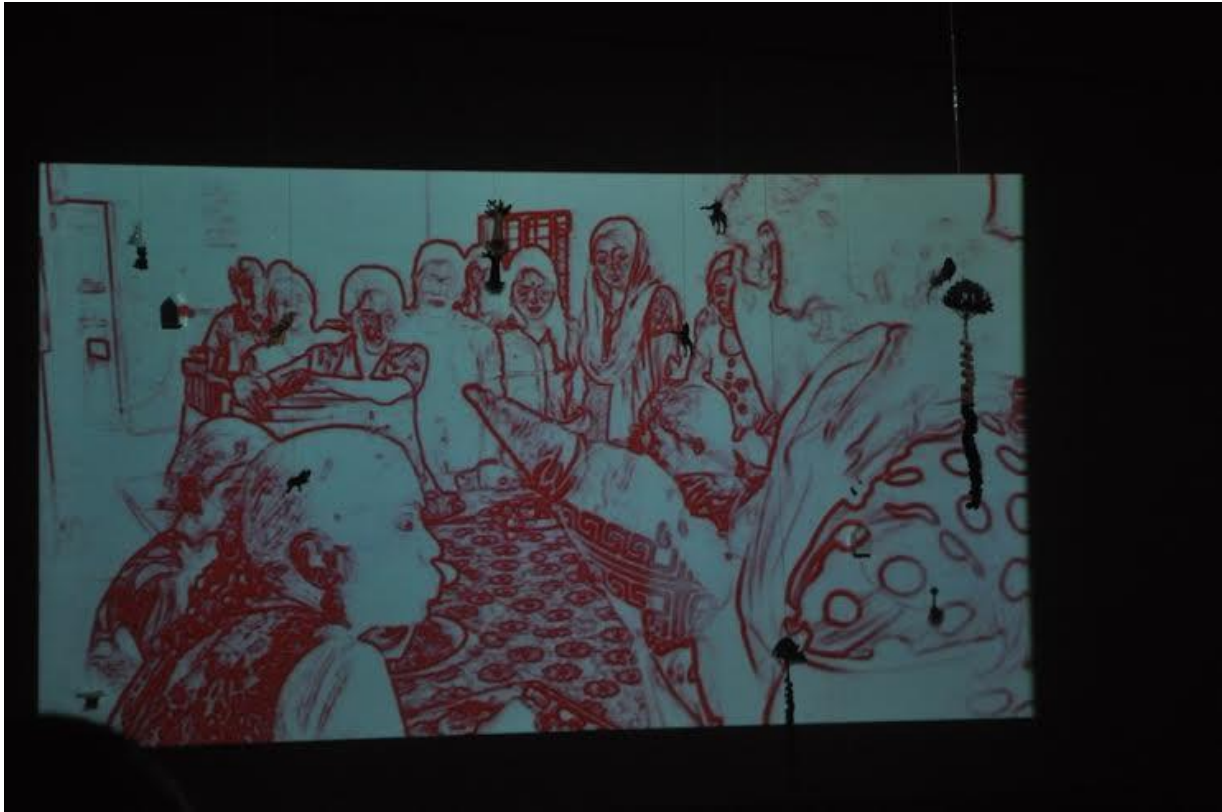
Explaining, she says non-language at the orphanage was a form of protest against the common form of communication. "I (Mago) took the kids away from the burden of communicating in one language but a shared bodily experience that is not threatening, violating, harming but universal. I wanted to create a trust with physical and emotional behaviour. I wanted to make them believe in an alternative world. In my belief, it helped as psychotherapy to express feelings and thoughts, which would have otherwise remained hidden or repressed."

Sen's work has cathartic impact not only on her, but also on the children. "These innocent young abandoned girls (of low self-esteem with anxiety and loneliness) were being exposed to the corrupting behavior of others in their society. They are uncontrollable, absconding from custody and 'neglected' by the society. My project helped me understand the complexity of the construction of the domesticity through non-language communication."

The artist created Mago to understand the vulnerability and fragility of the children's past/life and offer them an unusual form of experience in life with strangers, using non-language communication/performance. "The semi-fictional character emerged and evolved during interactions with the kids during those days," she reveals.

"I offered Mago, who is different and an isolated being (like the kids to the society), to believe in a positive isolation. Mago is not only a positive fictional character, but a metaphor for hope and confidence for the kids," she says.

Sen concedes that the experience of children with Mago is more true and real than her as an artist (her original social identity). "The kids constituted me as Mago; they made me, I let them create me. I emerged in their eyes; Mago emerged from the real interaction from the biological dynamic between them and me."



Sen was extremely cautious about the identity of the children in the orphanage. "In my film, I have destroyed all the footage in a creative way. My film is not an

ethnographic documentary. It is more like a surreal or fantasy film on a reality set. It was not to document certain kind of logical living; instead, it was to condense their life into a series of small moments. Creating an alternative world within the set of a real world...in this space I wanted to intervene as an artist. I did not 'use' anybody's innocence; it is an experiment on a functional home."

The artist says she tried to protect the kid's identity by giving them anonymity to the world. The faces of neither the kids nor the actual space are identified in the film. Nobody will connect the identity of anything in the film but the human story had been told. And it was done with the help of technology.

The children were recently brought to the Biennale to experience another world and explore different forms of art. "I think it is our responsibility to introduce them with such experiences in life," she says. Ultimately India's most literate state is caught in the throes of alcoholism and sexual perversity.