

## Not so sweet candy

Shailaja Tripathi

*CHATLINE Artist Mithu Sen, the first winner of the Skoda Prize for Contemporary Art 2010, talks to SHAILAJA TRIPATHI about her complex thought process and controversial imagery*



CREATIVITY UNLIMITED Artist Mithu Sen at her residence in Delhi PHOTOS : S.SUBRAMANIUM

Quite contrary to her name Mithu, which means sweet, Delhi-based artist Mithu Sen's art is bitter to swallow. She challenges the set notions of society, questions and rejects them employing a language laced with sardonic humour and wit. Sen's canvases are adorned with sexually explicit and erotic imagery that can't be easily fathomed by all. But then art is about creating a unique powerful voice, which was recognised by the jury of the Skoda Prize for Contemporary Art 2010. The jury comprised Tasneem Mehta, honorary director of the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum; Rajshree Pathy, industrialist and founder of Contemplate, an arts initiative; and Kavita Singh, a well-known art historian and associate professor, JNU.

She pipped the majority's favourites Balasubramaniam Alwar and Kiran Subbaiah to the prize, which she received at the ceremony held last week at Delhi. It's the first time that the car manufacturer has instituted an art award in any country to recognise the talent of mid-career artists below the age of 45. The prize was given to Mithu's series "Black Candy". Along with loads of adulation, Mithu has also received one million rupees in cash. The money, she says, will go back to the art projects which remained unrealised owing primarily to the financial hiccups. "In India, there is big lacuna of sponsorship for the artists. You get money when your work is sold. But how to do large-scale projects like

animation films, big installations that have been on my mind for a while? So, this money earned from art will go towards the same cause," says the artist who has been fiddling with sound of late in her art and is contemplating expanding further in the discipline. The coveted series of work "Black Candy" also had a sound installation and she says she plans to have a sound studio.

A product of Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, Mithu has been actively exhibiting her art in the Capital for the last 12 years. As if drawing her cue from the basis of nava rasas, viewing Mithu's work elicits a range of reactions from disgust to shock to amusement. Practising in a city like Delhi where the general public is yet to become artistically aware and tolerant hasn't been deterrent to her style and language. "If there are some who feel that I do it just for the sake of doing it or to shock people just for the heck of fun or to give them cheap thrills, let them think that. It is like a shock therapy which I use as a tool to attract the viewer to my works. Only when he/she is drawn, will he ask questions as to why I have painted a particular thing," says Mithu, whose work once was invited to Korea and subsequently not allowed to be exhibited due to the controversial subject and the treatment.

"It was a take on Manga porn comics, hugely popular in Japan. Everybody reads it quietly but when you ask people there, they will outright deny its presence and say, 'Oh it's not part of Japanese culture and we don't read them.' The exhibition titled 'Nothing Lost in Transition' was showcased in Japan in 2008 from where it travelled to Korea which refused to exhibit the works," she recalls with a smirk. Mithu for a long time has been preoccupied with issues of femininity, beauty and has often painted on the subject of sexual and domestic violence.

"I am not a feminist. My work is an effort to probe the human psyche," says the artist who is represented by Peter Nagy's Nature Morte Gallery.

There was a time when Mithu resorted to using human hair and blood in her artworks. Clarifying immediately, she quips, "It was my own hair and my own blood. The idea of using my blood came to me during a residency in Bangalore and I called a doctor to draw some blood. The second time around, while my blood was being drawn, I fainted." Blood, reveals Mithu, became a metaphor for not just the violence committed against women but violence against humanity.

With "Black Candy", a set of 12 paper drawings and one sound installation, she has turned her gaze to male sexuality and anxiety. "It's a voyeuristic look that I cast at the men's world with male genitals and male figures. There are these taboos that men don't cry and I question such notions," says Mithu who in one of her works uses sound as well. "A painting is accompanied by two male voices discussing contraceptive pills, pregnancy. It's my voice that I have digitally manipulated. I even created a soundscript for the piece," elaborates

Mithu who first showcased this body of work at Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai in 2010 followed by the second exhibition in Delhi at JNU.

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