

WHERE I WORK

MITHU SEN

PROJECTS BY HEMANT SAREEN FROM MAY/JUNE 2011

An escalator ushers me into the silent, empty corridors of the upscale, high-rise apartment building where Mithu Sen shares an eighth-floor studio with her husband, artist Samit Das.

It took a half-hour drive over a congested overpass, past a vast, crowded, working-class neighborhood, to reach the gates of this suburban oasis wedged between South Delhi and a bordering industrial town. The sense of having escaped the city below is complete as Sen shows me around the well-lit, airy rooms brimming with an organized, cosmopolitan clutter of books, artworks, paint, brushes, paper, canvases and curios. The view from her west-facing balcony, which looks over an unmistakably Indian, dusty, brush-covered landscape dotted with brooding mesquite trees, dispels the momentary disorientation one has in this lofty space.

Over black coffee and cookies I congratulate her for winning the Skoda Prize for contemporary Indian art in January for her series of large, mixed-media and watercolor drawings on paper, "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)" (2010), her stinging, lurid, psychosomatic take on masculinity. She bested two of her peers—Kiran Subbaiah and A. Balasubramaniam—to take home one million rupees (USD22,000), and she is earmarking this sum for large-scale projects that until now have languished on her drawing board for want of funding.

Sen's studio seems the perfect solution to a city-dweller's conflicted desire for a quiet space for oneself and connection with others. But even here, she feels the need to buffer herself from the external world. She likes to create her own immediate environment, she says, drawing my attention to the many handmade things in the room. Among them is a large, stuffed Bengal tiger sitting on the shelf next to a portrait of a younger Sen with a painted-over, Daliesque moustache and a black-and-white photograph of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

Yet rather than controlling the neurosis of Sen's work, this buffering appears to have intensified it. The resultant interiority gushes out as a messy and troubled hodgepodge strewn onto impeccable canvases and spaces—a crazed jumble of human-animal tissue, phalli, hybrid creatures, lewdly wagging tongues, fragments of personal and popular images, and her works in which ferocious tigers roar out of human crotches. Sen explains that before starting on a new work, she spends weeks writing free-associative thoughts in a

notebook. Later, she sits down and goes into a state of intense focus, what she calls a "trance," and it's from this state of mind that her subliminal work emerges.

Her fondest personal project began in 2007 when she was afflicted with moral anxiety, having realized that the smallest of her works was worth more than her father's yearly salary—for which, she says, he toils very hard. She decided to give away a portion of her works to counterbalance the market's greed with a sense of altruism. Since then she has invited people to write her an endearing letter in exchange for an original work of art. Without eroding her loyalty to her galleries, the project has brought her closer to the idealism and rebellion of her youth—the very spirit that led her to enroll in the art school at the Visva Bharti, Kala Bhaven in Santiniketan.

I left Sen's studio aware of having met a very complex individual, well adjusted yet producing works of deep alienation. Days later, at the opening of a group show titled "The Idea of Fashion" at Khoj Studios, I watched her squat down and gently wipe the dust off the top of her parents' feet and smear it on the top of her head in an antiquated gesture of seeking their blessing, before lovingly shepherding them into a small room whose walls she had badly scraped and scarred as an act of metaphorical striptease. The complexity of Sen's art will no doubt grow along with its creator, whose deft mind holds her conservative, small-town conditioning and cosmopolitan broad-mindedness and free-spiritedness in a precarious balance.

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