

Mithu Sen at the Broad

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***Karin Zitzewitz**, Assistant Professor of Art History & Visual Culture and Curator of Border Unseen at Michigan State University discusses Mithu Sen's new show with 3rd Dimension.*

Could you tell me how the exhibition came about, the genesis and the conception?

The Broad Art Museum at MSU is a fairly new institution in a beautiful building designed by Zaha Hadid. The Director of the Museum, Michael Rush, was hired before it was constructed with the imprimatur to make this a global contemporary art museum. He was asked to showcase works from around the world. One of the main commitments of our university is to engage globally, and the Broad/MSU is the art wing of that initiative.

The Director approached me because I was already on the faculty teaching Asian modern and contemporary art history, and my research specialty is Indian and Pakistani art. He asked me to develop two shows that would give Asian artists, one from India and one from Pakistan, their first museum solo exhibitions in the United States.

The idea was to use my knowledge of the Asian art world to find artists who deserved to have more exposure. The first show I organised was of the work of the Pakistani artist, Naiza Khan, which was presented last year. The Mithu Sen show was the second. Our intention is to show work in a museum setting which has perhaps only been shown in galleries before, and to give the artists this beautiful museum space to work with.

Why did you choose Mithu Sen for a solo show?

I first saw her work in a show in New York in 2006, which was called *It's good to be Queen*, where she completely took over an apartment, installing her work throughout. There was a work in the bathroom on the shower-head, the bed became a work, she made a kind of closet with drawings on hangers, and she also made little knickknacks. This inspired me, as I was hoping to find an Indian artist to work with who could really transform a space. She had also put on two other shows where she had worked really imaginatively with the gallery space. I found her work arresting and absorbing on so many levels and I knew she would be able to engage with Zaha Hadid's building really well, so that was what drew me to her work.



Mithu Sen, *Border Unseen* (detail), 2014, dental polymer approx. length 80', installation at the Broad Art Museum, MSU, USA
(photo: © Mithu Sen & The Broad Art Museum)

How did you come upon the title?

Although she works in drawing, performance and text, as well as installation, I was

interested in having Mithu create an installation for us. She has been working with dental polymer to create lines of teeth for a number of years. What she wanted to do for the Broad/MSU was to split the long, thin space we were given in two, and suspend these teeth down the entire length of the room, which amounts to about 80 feet of sculpture. The sculpture creates a kind of

invisible wall, so that's the 'border unseen.' The title works on many levels. On the most concrete level, the teeth themselves create a kind of ridge that resembles the top of walls of every non-western place I have ever visited, where there is a concrete wall round someone's house with broken glass embedded in it. It's all through Africa and Asia as a way of keeping people out, it's very cheap but effective. These teeth create that kind of visual effect. The teeth are also the border between the inside and the outside of the body and Sen wants us to think about the way that certain types of borders are experienced interpersonally, or even within the self, so it becomes a kind of metaphor, a metaphor for 'border'.



Mithu Sen, *Border Unseen*, 2014, dental polymer approx. length 80', installation at the Broad Art Museum, MSU, USA
(photo: © Mithu Sen & The Broad Art Museum)

How did Sen respond to the Hadid space?

She doesn't shy away from unease, which is one reaction people have to Hadid's architecture. Mithu is interested in creating effects that viewers often find hard to talk about and put into words. She is after the intangible. *Border Unseen* creates those effects, if only because of the sheer monumentality of the work. We have found that it affects the viewer's experience of Hadid's space in a very visceral, immediate way. Sen's installation demonstrates how little you need to do in order to create a large effect. A lot of meaning comes out of what is really a single long line. She works within Hadid's dramatic space to surprise and, in a way, manipulate her viewers into feeling things they would not normally feel.

Can you talk more about her attitude to materials? She has an interesting dada-like subversion of materials, like a Surrealist 'object of desire'.

She is really funny, and one of the features that attracted me to her work is that it is lighthearted, yet has an edge as well. In this case with the polymer, her interest in in the dental polymer comes in its status as a prosthesis that doesn't just visually mimic the body, but also extends it. Polymer is one of the few materials that we accept within our bodies, as a replacement for what is lacking. That sort of material is really evocative to her, as something simultaneously natural and unnatural. If you think about her hair work, that is similar. Such materials are linked to her idea of self and to her notion of identity.

Do these notions of identity have a political aspect?

Her notion of identity is complicated. It's political, but she also has a sense of subjectivity and really prioritizes experience. Her interest in skin colour and the way that her own skin colour has placed her in an interesting position within India is directly political. It alludes to racial and caste politics in India. The parts of her work that are less transparently political are more about the self and psychology and the relationship between the body and the mind and how people relate to meaning and experience. *Border Unseen* really exemplifies the latter way that identity functions in her work.

Can you expand on the fetishistic and ideas of intimacy within of her work?

She is interested in intimacy between people, as in social relationships, but also the individual's intimate experience of the body and the body's relationship to space.

I completely agree with a fetishistic reading of her work. Her work with fetish, as in her ongoing project, *Museum of Unbelongings*, was one of the first things that drew me to her, and it has a very important place within Indian contemporary art. It connects her work to that of Bhupen Khakhar, who was an outstanding artist. He was a painter who was really interested in sexuality. His work was both sexy and about sex. It was very

erotic and charged. There were objects in his work that took on various levels of meaning, but he also had this incredible lightness of touch. Like Mithu, Bhupen's work is never didactic, it is always very subtle.

Does Sen feel a connection with other artists?

She and I have talked about the relationship between her work and Yoko Ono's. In our interview in the catalogue she explains how Ono's work is very conceptually driven, and that, like Ono, she was interested in conceptual work that had a material form. Mithu has used Ono's work to think through the relationship between concept and process, as well as viewer engagement.

I also think about Eva Hesse in relation to Sen, making a simple point about the relationship between painting and sculpture and the use of materials to bridge one medium to another. I have also thought about dental polymer as an industrial material, as in Hesse's work with engineered latex. The serious non-fetishistic aspect of Sen's work reveals a very minimal beauty, which is interesting as her works can be both minimal and maximal as we have seen. The critic Murtaza Vali also likened her work to Lynda Benglis's work in poured latex. In this sense, Sen's work is really imbedded in the long history of feminist art. That comes first of all in her engagement with the body. But the more interesting point of intersection has to do with her imaginative use of materials. She has picked up on how feminist artists have explored non-traditional materials for their ability to mimic the body and otherwise engage with the viewer's sense of sensuality.

How are her drawings regarded in relation to her conceptual work?

Sen's drawings are really valued for their virtuosity, which can sometimes really be overwhelming. But I think Sen has begun to distrust this reaction to her work, because of the highly commercial aspect of the art world in India. Her work is regarded as high quality and very interesting, but sometimes not as conceptually driven as it is sensual. So I think Sen wanted to demonstrate how conceptually sophisticated her work is, and

what we are seeing now is the fruit of that impulse. The Broad/MSU show was in part a response to a personal challenge to tighten the conceptual basis of her work.



Mithu Sen, *Border Unseen* (detail), 2014, dental polymer approx. length 80', installation at the Broad Art Museum, MSU, USA
(photo: © Mithu Sen & The Broad Art Museum)

What other themes emerge in her work and how are different materials integrated into her visual language?

She is interested in nature and artifice and held a show at the Albion Gallery based on the theme of archaeology, which featured a lot of bones and birds, where she transformed a crow's wing amongst others. She has the courage to use organic material in a way that is very provocative and thought provoking. Sen has a strong visual language that permeates her dramatic and arresting use of different materials. In the last decade she has built her language, working back and forth across different media and across different projects, so it is hard to trace an arc in her development. Instead, what I have found is that gradually the conceptual bases of her work have been more visible. Every time she returns to a medium in which she has previously worked, like the hair, she takes more control of it and it becomes more disciplined.

Indeed her work is very conceptually tight for an emerging artist...

I agree that it is a conceptually tight show and of course she and I are both proud of that. But more crucially I think this show is an opportunity to see her work at a very important moment. All her recent exhibitions represent a building of confidence and fluidity in her visual language, where the relationship between concept

and form is getting tighter and more efficient and so I'm very happy we are part of this wave of incredible work that she is producing right now.

Main image: Mithu Sen, [Border Unseen](#), 2014, dental polymer approx. length 80', installation at the Broad Art Museum, MSU, USA (photo: © Mithu Sen & The Broad Art Museum)

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