

Art Basel questionnaire: Mithu Sen, MOU (Museum of Unbelonging)

ArtReviewAsia

Online exclusive published on 13 June 2016.



(Sexualized) Museum of Unbelonging, 2014, vitrine with objects, diameter 244 cm. Photo: Hai Zhang. Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai and the artist.

The New Dehli-based artist tells us more about her installation project for Art Basel's Unlimited sector

(Sexualized) Museum of Unbelonging, 2014, vitrine with objects, diameter 244 cm. Photo: Hai Zhang. Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai and the artist

Mithu Sen is presenting an iteration of her MUO (Museum of Unbelonging), with Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna. The work is part of Art Basel's Unlimited sector, which is the fair's platform dedicated to large-scale artists' presentations, and this year curated by New York-based curator Gianni Jetzer.

ArtReview: You're showing a version of your MOU (Museum of Unbelonging) at Art Basel Unlimited, a circular vitrine of objects that have personal, physical or sexual associations. Can you tell us what ideas you were thinking about when you made this work, and how it relates to the meaning of its title?

Mithu Sen: My MOU (Museum of Unbelonging), a personal archive with no space in official history, abandoned, impermanent toys and unusual belongings, drawn together.

A popular archive of cultural memory beyond the objects historical identity... A record of a life, a history of a vernacular culture and a symbolic archive of impermanence, drawn together at a single point in time. The objects are possessed as my children and personalised by individual names, morphed, re arranged and entangled with each other, and question the ephemeral nature of existence.

An imagination of the world, which does not already exist...

MOU questions the politics around the idea of making history and archives. What is chosen to be part of the political, collective, popular history and what is suppressed.

MOU, which is my sister's name, with whom I shared my childhood playing dolls, making houses and creating stories... That was the beginning of me collecting my children (as you all call them objects)... In my museum I have some of those dolls, stones, feathers and memories from our childhood.

The collecting continues all my life. I never stopped playing; my child-centric attachment towards any 'unbelongings' is extremely active. I try to look at those marginalised areas where subtle hierarchical codes and hegemony imposed in the society (sexual, political, regional, emotional or lingual)... Where humanity becomes minority!

The round shape of my museum is to allow viewers to move in a circumambulation way and discover/rediscover the meaning of those 'unbelongings' in their own way. It's a memory, diary, child, carnival, reminder, nostalgia, discomfort, passion, possession, paradox and all those unseen, unheard, untouched, unknowns.

AR: Your sculptures can include actual body parts such as hair or teeth – what significance do these objects have within your sculptures and is there a specific fetish element?

MS: My collection questions the politics around the idea of making history and archives. What is chosen to be part of the political, collective, popular history and what is suppressed?

My idea of archiving lies in the collection of sensations and emotions driven by the subconscious and not manipulated by the burden of culture and learned knowledge.

I see objects as bodies full of unacknowledged, unseen memories and stories invested in them.

I am a collector – of images, words, emotions of a human kind, seemingly little, ephemeral things.

Preserving rare and 'authentic' objects, dedicated itself to deteriorating objects of no monetary value, but of immense ordinary-life consequence. They are banal but beloved objects of everyday.

Our desires or the paradox of our desires turn into fetishes.

Many of my children (calling them 'children', I experience the pleasures and burdens of attachment through these things, they come to constitute an archive of everyday life) in the Museum are erotic, hybrid and sexual by expression. They seem at times to convey purely private codes and to spring from a solipsistic sense of making yet they touch on public uses and operate on several levels of accessibility for everyone.

Maybe the repeated exploration of bodily forms is an inescapable path that every feminist or woman artist undertakes in one's art journey. To me as well, it came naturally to use materials and forms like blood, hair and dental prostheses among many others to explore the body. Body-based materiality in my art evokes the fundamental unit that unites me with my audience as humans.

I give the body pre-eminence – I value the intelligence of the body and the fetishes it seeks. For me the body is an existence: it interacts each and every moment with other bodies... sexually, non-sexually... body responses... body reacts...

AR: Can you describe some of the individual objects in MOU, and what their significance are, both to you personally and within the work?

MS:I try to play a new narrative of engagement that is democratic and open to multiple reading by the visitors.

Challenging and unpicking museum etiquette and taking visitors to an alternative and participatory tour of the museum where each object is not described by any labelling. This unsettles most people's ideas of art and artefacts. Offering them and the museum hierarchy a level of discomfort, that discomfort is the moment of transformation and questioning the pre-codified system. It is an opportunity to impose a personal narrative upon it with the universal emotion by the viewer. Leads that discomfort into responsibility.

However, each one in this museum is a part of my existence... each one is personalised by their own name and stories. But as a visual artist I don't feel like telling all those personal stories in words. Rather I keep that possibility open for each one who experiences this museum to make their own stories in it...

If I tell you some personal stories about them, it will make you more curious about my personal life but my intention is not focused on that, rather I want you to contemplate this museum with your own collective memories and experiences... Connect them with your personal self while being seduced and consumed by the irony of hierarchies and aesthetic vocabularies of this museum.

The theatricality is simultaneously liberating and terrifying. It allows to explore the potential of alternative lives and to remodel the world around us.

Viewing the installations is a process of discovery filled with unexpected surprises. An unidentified deity who cannot be historicised. A record of a life, a history of a vernacular culture and a symbolic archive of impermanence...

Imaginary environments, which variously recall interiors: the weddings, the school diary, the sickroom, deathbed, the gay pride, interracial marriage, exogamy, the places of loss and catastrophe or carnival, my life, my belief, my non-stories. My personal restlessness and unsettled psychological status. All these collective ideas and physical materials make my MOU sensitively political and socially aware.

The contemplative, sensorial experiences for which it stands.

The impossibility of a clear meaning or story of my personal life is unnecessary when the viewer collects their own from these objects therefore no individual documentation, research and related information concerning all exhibits.

It's a carnival. An imagination of the world, which does not already exist...

AR: Are the number and arrangement of objects in the vitrine fixed, or do you add or remove objects each time the work is shown? And what guides these decisions?

MS: Never the same. Every moment I touch them, they are in new dynamics... Always being edited and added, morphed, rearranged, shuffled. The narratives in display with their endless compositions grow organically.

It's an absolute way of life!

AR: Your experiences of the cities and countries where you have travelled often feeds into your work. What does it mean to show a work like this within the specific context of an international art fair?

MS: The work was not really conceived for its specific site or location as an art fair or museum. It organically evolved over time for years and years at my own home and studio.

Locating in a public space was a way of alerting us to value the personal and not just externalise marketable commodities.

I see museums everywhere... The idea/concept of storing some valuables is embedded in our heart and mind...

Our heart is a museum of memories.

Co-creation of all of us who live ordinary lives and have relationships with ordinary objects.

But definitely my years of travelling and collecting children as a surrogate mother from every part of this world brings a transnational mood which blurs the borders and boundaries of the human mind.

AR: Can you tell us something about what the focus of your next new project will be and what is exciting you most about it?

MS: I am working on an international site-specific project (Kenpoku art project) in Japan curated by Fumio Nanjo and his associate curators. I am working on an installation using sound and drawing based on virtual migration and emotional transnational space of human landscape between two different countries/cultures, conceived from our present-day circumstances in the contemporary world. I am conceptually trying to import human life from one country to another.