

## Mithu Sen

Rank exhibitionism characterizes Mithu Sen's work. The surfaces of her drawings and paintings appear as if smeared with spit, semen, piss and menstrual blood. There are secretions, accretions, tumours and abscesses, blooming genitalia, mutilated monsters heaped in gore, and a mix of limbs and organs in morphed combinations.<sup>22</sup>

The category of the erotic involves elaborate psychosexual codes and meanings peculiar to every culture. In the modernist period, female artists (with Louise Bourgeois as high priestesses) scaled erotic spaces based on biographical causality. Their handling of object and image reshaped the categories of taboo and fetish, providing fresh understanding of plural, gay and transgender sexualities and redefining pornography. Feminist art imbues female desire with self-reflection, articulates feminist agency in distinct social systems and, more provocatively, turns the symbolic order inside-out.

Sen references castration fantasies and mocks the mythologized phobia of *vagina dentatae* by manufacturing a variety of tooth-studded objects, among them, a wall relief of pink gums arranged in the shape of a spine that curls into a jaw at the tail end, and a pair of simple cloth shoes (*Biting*, 2006). Her images of anal sex and fellatio (from her 2009 exhibition 'Black Candy') are both exuberant and abrasive, just as her female obscenities can be surrogates for human cruelty.<sup>23</sup> Her mimicry of Manga cult-comics – an inscription of the mangled figurines of a seemingly alien erotica – on large free-hanging paper scrolls is cleverly titled *Nothing*

*Lost in Translation* (made and exhibited in Japan, 2008). The work accentuates her loose-limbed drawings, rendered with penetrative and persistent manoeuvres; her stylus is like the tip of an erect penis worn on the finger, and her precociously perfected *écriture* a form of surrealist writing.

In Delhi, her home and studio are a mini-museum. Like a kleptomaniac, Sen hoards fetishes, porno trash and other precious artefacts. Her installation *Museum of Unbelongings* (2011) contains hundreds of these erotic toys and midget monsters; its voodoo figurines, skulls and skeletons feature as memento mori. Meticulously arranged in a large circular vitrine ringed with swishy grey curtains, the artist, as ring mistress of the doll circus, is only willing to part with the menagerie in its entirety – as if her already orphaned creatures, dislocated from their magical museum, would perish if separated into twos and fours.

Female eroticism alone cannot constitute an avant-garde. But Sen carries in her genes the bloodthirsty goddess Kali of her cultural motherland, Bengal.<sup>24</sup> She deploys the black mask of her beauty, with its wide grin, to both recuperate the lineage of the grotesque goddesses and to let the contact go viral, infecting the world with a mythologized lust. Through her vagabond residencies (from Brazil and South Africa to Japan), Sen makes an expansive claim on love but also cultivates secret affinities and canny liaisons. Never short of affect, her audacious South-South embrace of the world ups the ante on identity questions.



← *Biting*, 2006, acrylic teeth, dental polymer, cotton shoe, transparent glue, 30 × 25 × 10 cm

↑ *Nothing Lost in Translation*, 2008, drawing with ink, water colour, collage, gold and silver leaf and embedded digital prints on Japanese kozo paper, 5 panels, 400 × 300 cm each, installation view at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

→ *Museum of Unbelongings*, 2011, found objects collected over 35 years installed in round vitrine, 152 cm × 457 cm diameter



