

I Dig, I Look Down

Mithu Sen

Reviews BY Zehra Jumabhoy from Nov/Dec 2008

Albion Gallery

UK India



MITHU SEN, *Digging Tool IV & I*, 2008, mixed media, 74.9 × 95.3 cm each. Photo by Ed Reeve. Courtesy Albion Gallery, London.

The first solo for Mithu Sen in London "I Dig, I Look Down" resembled an archeological site. Mixed-media collages on handmade paper, sculptural installations and a video were strewn with references to excavated remains and digging equipment: paintings and sculptures depicted human and animal bones, tattered toys (such as broken dolls) and iron tools.

As such, Sen's display was a gigantic metaphor for self-exploration and, as in her earlier shows, there were numerous autobiographical elements. "I suffered from a severe spinal cord problem, which has badly affected my right hand, my only digging tool!" she confided to *ArtAsiaPacific*. Some of the body parts on view supposedly belonged to Sen: a sculpture of a pair of skeletal hands ensconced in a small glass vitrine is titled *Mithu's Hands* (2008).

Fortunately, the inclusion of contrasting, visually pleasing elements rescued these depictions of physical anguish from appearing maudlin. In Sen's paintings and sculptures,

mutilated organs and bones are fetchingly embellished. *Non-spinal II* (2008), a gigantic sculptural installation in a glass case, resembles a bloody spinal column. But the sculpture isn't gruesome: it is composed of shiny red ice picks and silken beads embroidered with gold thread.

This juxtaposition of feminine baubles with sinister depictions of the body is characteristic of Sen's artworks. Her fascination with ornamentation is inspired by American feminist art from the 1970s, particularly Kiki Smith's installations, which combine tropes of so-called women's art such as embroidery and bead-work with references to the female body. However, Sen's domestic tropes sometimes appeared too sentimental. An especially misguided artwork was a toilet bowl that had been stuffed with a potted-plant and placed next to pretty silver-framed paintings. Presumably, this untitled ready-made is meant to disparage women's traditional associations with domesticity, but it only succeeds in looking crude.

Sen's works were most compelling when they mingled fragility with fearsome images, best exemplified by tracing the journey of the bird that flits through the large wall drawings and a film, with varying degrees of success. A charcoal sketch of a crow on one of the gallery walls is absorbing: its vicious-looking claws and beak inspire dread. Yet, this site-specific offering, sketched onto the silvery-gray walls, was faint enough for hurried observers to overlook given the many multi-colored paintings and sculptures jostling for attention. Once noticed, it captures viewers' interest for a while. The looped video *Icarus* (2008), depicting a dead bird being devoured by ants, however, is not memorable because it lacks this subtle appeal. The insects' swarming moves the carcass' wings up and down in a travesty of flight; Sen heavy-handedly proposes that as human beings we are trapped in our bodies. The dearth of seductive visuals on view in the exhibition offered few temptations to linger.