

# Interview with Mithu Sen

by Sophia Powers

*India, Oct. 2010* - Back in 2007, the Delhi-based artist Mithu Sen had achieved what most art graduates only dream of: financial success and critical recognition. She had had solo shows abroad and was represented by India's top galleries...but she was increasingly disillusioned by the market-centric logic of the art world. Such angst is not new, but Mithu's solution was. She decided to begin a new project called "Free Mithu," in which she offered free works of art—with authenticity certificates and market estimates included—in exchange for letters hand written "with love."

ArtSlant's International Editor for India, Sophia Powers, had the pleasure of joining Mithu in her house for a cup of tea and a long chat about love letters, language, and her "Free Mithu" project.



**Mithu Sen**, *Untitled (Hanging Flyed Arm)* , Mixed media with collaged fabric, printed paper, water colour, ink, metal leaf and needle holes on handmade paper with a velvet collaged frame , 41" x 28" , 2008; Courtesy Vadehra Art Gallery (VAG)

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***Sophia Powers: How did you first find people to write you letters for "Free Mithu"?***

***Mithu Sen:*** In the beginning, I contacted 100 people that I knew personally—people who either liked me or liked my work, telling them that I would give them a free piece of my art in exchange for a love letter of some kind. But it had to be hand-written—no e-mail. A letter is so tactile and demands time. Hardly anyone writes letters anymore.

I set up a website as well ([www.freemithu.com](http://www.freemithu.com)), and told each of the 100 people that they could contact one of their friends and get them involved in the project too. People signed up by answering a few simple questions online.

*(Questions that ranged from what one considers precious in life to whether one prefers Shahrukh Khan or a Jackfruit.)*

I wanted the project to be both serious and funny.

***SP: I was so intrigued to realize that people send you gifts as well as letters. Can you tell me about some of the gifts that you received?***

***MS:*** Certainly. I really couldn't believe some of the things that people sent me. Things just started showing up at my house, like a box of mangoes! Or, one woman in her 50's sent me a diary from her 20's. She had written it over a period of two years, and it detailed a sort of "unfinished love story." Can you imagine?

Another woman—a psychologist friend, gave me a completely different sort of gift. At that time I was working about 18 hours a day in the studio. I was really over-working myself to the point of exhaustion, but I just wouldn't let myself slow down. This woman called me over to her house. At first I said "no, no" there was no way I could stop my work and come over. But she absolutely insisted. She said she had something to give me, and she couldn't drop it off. So I finally gave in and came over. She had made a lemon cake, and we sat and had tea and chatted. It took me awhile to just calm down and relax, but when I finally did I realized how hard I had been working myself and how much I needed a break like that. She made me spend four hours in her house, and when I went home I felt like a different person. She gave me a book as I was leaving, but she said really my gift was those four hours to just relax.

Two of my other close friends also knew how hard I was working, and that I had been developing some back problems at the time. Both of them told me that their gift would be literally for me to take a break in the time that I would otherwise spend making their gift.

I was really amazed, also, at how invested some people became. At times I was actually overwhelmed. Either I really underestimated people or really overestimated myself—thinking, you know, that it was my project and I was in control. That wasn't the case at all. Other people put so much of themselves into it and at times we were really playing with each other's feelings.

One person sent me one letter each month for two years! He expressed his outmost passion and love for somebody virtual...not necessarily me! It was important to him. I must say, I don't know where it comes from, such an emotion and respect for my project on the part of people who often don't even know me.



**Mithu Sen**, *Fall Fall Fallen 2*, Mono Prints with hair Impression 17" x 13" 2004; Courtesy Harrington Street Arts Center

*SP: How would you decide what sort of piece to give to each person?*

*MS:* Mostly I knew the people personally, and I understood their likings and connections with me and my works...so in a very small way, I tried to follow that, respecting those personal relationships (whatever they were). Also, over the two years I exchanged thoughts with people I had not known at all, and so I would try to create something special for that unknown sender of a love letter from the other side of the world.

There was one person I knew who wanted to start a gallery, but was looking for a really nice piece to put in their window—I was able to gift them that. Other times I knew a particular collector really liked my work, but they couldn't afford it on the market. In that case I would say "go spent the money you were willing to pay for my piece to support some younger artist" and I would send them the invite for the project.



**Mithu Sen**, "Nothing Lost in Translation" (#5) on Japanese Kozo paper, 3.5m x 2.5m painting; Courtesy Nature Morte Berlin

**SP:** Do you know what people have done with the works you have given them?

**MS:** I have a memory scanner in my mind where each and every work I have given is stored....so if I find one someday some other place...I can think back about the relationship I had formed in past with the person who I had given the piece to.

I was very clear from the beginning of the project, though, that people could do whatever they liked with their gift. Each picture came with an authenticity certificate stating that

they could hang it, re-work it, gift it, destroy it or sell it if they wanted, but always with *LOVE*.

I think of it a bit like a sociological project—watching to see what happens to the works over the years, and the ideas I built up, and the relationships I had...whether they were ephemeral or eternal. I've even dreamed of writing some sort of a book about it.

*SP: I know you had an exhibition of the exchange in 2009 at Khoj. It looked spectacular from the pictures! Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?*

*MS:* Sure. The first thing to know is that the exhibition was a gift from Khoj. I wanted to show all the letters people had sent me, but I also wanted to be careful to protect their anonymity. Some people didn't want their letters displayed at all, and some people just asked that their name be covered, which of course I did. Then there was a slide show of all the gifts that I had made for them in return. The thing was, nobody knew who received which gift. I had made these gift bags out of pillowcases, and they were all hanging up on one wall. I told people not to open their gifts there, and not to show each other what they had received. But, of course, some people didn't follow my instructions. Some people even told me they liked other people's gifts more and wanted to return theirs. I was pretty surprised, because I made each on differently depending on the letter I received. I'd say that for that reason the experience was probably about 20% negative.

*SP: How did you decide on the aesthetic for the show? Everything pink, and the gift bags made of pillowcases...?*

*MS:* Oh, I used pillowcases because this was my dream project! And, I loved carrying the bags around—I would take them with me everywhere. I had a show in Zurich, I remember, and this collector flew in from Amsterdam to see me. I had a gift to give him, and I loved hand-delivering gifts whenever I could, so I carried it across in the plane in one of my pink pillowcase bags. It drew a lot of attention!



**Mithu Sen**, *Black candy*, Mixed media on custom made, handmade acid free paper, 83 x 43 inches, 2009; Courtesy Chemould Prescott Road

**SP:** *Was it hard to move on when you finished this project?*

**MS:** Well, I'm not done! I still owe people lots of works. And, because my website is still up, I still get people who write me wanting to participate in the project. But I just don't have enough time anymore to make something for everyone. So, what I do is start a dialogue with the person who writes me, asking how they got interested, and what it means

to them to participate...and as I told you, am silently making a book on my journey through peoples' minds based on notions like 'love,' 'gift,' and 'free' etc...

But I did start other projects—like the “Black Candy” show that I had at Chemould in February. This was an interesting challenge because I paired my drawings with audio clips—little snippets of dialogues.

*(I listened to a few of the bites on her computer as she shows me images from the show.)*

**SP:** *I see that a lot of the captions you're writing are in English. How did you make that choice? Why not in Hindi or Bengali?*

**MS:** For the last twelve years the English language has been my mode of survival, existence, and identity. So, I struggle with it as opposed to using always Bengali, my mother tongue. And writing through my 'own' English is fun and ironic too...it has a morbid side of existential crisis-- now I like the struggle that it takes to express myself in English. Sometimes it's difficult because I must accept the accent...but I like the discomfort, honestly. And I find I say different things. This is true with Hindi too—some of my Hindi captions used rough slang to express things that I never would have thought to in Bengali. I liked that—the unexpected self-release.

**SP:** *What was the meaning of the show's name? “Black Candy?”*

**MS:** That was because my name means sweet, and I am black! Ha ha ha!

*ArtSlant would like to thank Mithu Sen for her assistance in making this interview possible.*

--Sophia Powers

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