

## Mithu Sen: 'I constantly change my mediums so the market will not be able to trap me'

Indian artist Mithu Sen has a quicksilver practice that is difficult to categorise or maintain as a singular narrative. This, she says, is intentional - it is her effort to defy the demands of the market



by SKYE ARUNDHATI THOMAS

Mithu Sen's earliest work consist of a series of self-portraits - post-human bodies that show Sen morphing into bird-like, fawning creatures, all the while locking their gaze pointedly at the viewing audience. Her work is confrontational, and yet it is delicate - infused with a deeply intellectual and affective understanding of the subjects it chooses to take on. Sen started her career as a poet, but quickly moved away from language, with what she likes to call an "un-languaging" of her practice; she often breaks up words in this way, such as "de-void", or "sub-way", all in an effort to undo them, and with language, to undo herself, too. Her work rigorously continues with such deconstructions, both of the semiotic and the pedagogic.

Born in 1971 in West Bengal, Sen studied painting at the prestigious Kala Bhavana Institute of Fine Arts at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, which was founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1919. Sen is easily one of the most internationally recognised and widely respected artists of the Indian subcontinent, with a career that extends over the past two decades. She makes drawings, sculptures, performance work, film, multimedia installations and more, as her practice is in a process of constant evolution. Perhaps one of Sen's most endearing qualities is that she maintains an unabashed critique of the art world, the market and its inherent politics.

**Skye Arundhati Thomas:** In a recent work on display at the Kathmandu Triennale 2017, you removed your name from the show as a gesture to critique the privilege and access that your position as an artist allows. Your criticism of the art world and the market has always been strong. Is this a difficult position to maintain?

**Mithu Sen:** While I was doing the Kathmandu project, one of the artists said to me: "Everyone knows that this is your work, so what is the meaning of being anonymous? We all know." But I questioned her, who is we? This "we" means a very limited, little, elite, art circle. You go out from this bubble, and this "we" dissolves ... We are all trapped inside our own self-establishment and the identities that we try on. Everyone is talking about identity, or trying to create a signature style of identity, and "artist" has become like a pattern or a mannerism for producing work for a market that creates the demand.

My idea is to constantly change my mediums so that the market will not be able to trap me. If I have a show in the beginning of the year with drawings, then the next one will have sculptures, and then maybe in between I will do some performance. Maybe it is a very emotional or romantic way of trying to change market politics, but this demand and supply, this is the system I want to break. I know that there will be another counter-question that I could come out from the market circuit and make work outside of that ... But why? I want to criticise and talk about these things by being a part of them. I don't want to be isolated and I am not an escapist. So, yes, I am straightforward. If I feel something in my eyes and in my knowledge, and experience it to be unfair, I say it. People get upset over what I'm saying, but how can I help that? Politics happens in the home: these are not abstract things. We do not fully understand what is abuse, what is exploitation, what is incorrect. I think if we can be hyperconscious, and start feeling it in our body and mind, the world will change, no?

**SAT:** I don't know about change. I think about the apocalypse a lot. There is all this neoliberal rhetoric around change and progress, that things are "going to get better", but they are getting worse instead. What role do you think artists play in such a historical moment?

**MS:** I can only speak for myself, and I feel extremely responsible. If I see somebody is suffering, my nerves and my emotions will make me react, so I'm trying to go back to all those primordial states where very basic things are the most important, and the most profound and fundamental. I think that this is a very political way of thinking - I don't want to say I'm a political artist, but I'm saying this is why I have taken this path, why I am trying to undo myself this way. Because, more and more, I am trying to undo myself from the baggage that I have. It started with simple things, such as language, because I feel that information and knowledge systems soon become a baggage and a burden. Instead, I want to take everything in my body - in my skin - so that I feel everything, because I think life is so intensely physical.

**SAT:** The body played a major role in your early work, particularly with the drawings and self-portraiture. Your earliest work explicitly references the female body, but quickly moved away from this identification. Why?

**MS:** It was too easy. It made a huge impact on my career or market or whatever, but that is why I did not continue that sexual, female identification. I am privileged to be able not to continue that work, because it would have soon become a cliché, too exotic - and that is not my politics. Just one series, just one year. If I had fallen into making more exotic and grotesque figures, visually it would be quite interesting, and also for feminist writers it would be interesting to justify and create comments on my position. Two years ago, I gave a talk at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) in New Delhi, and was asked to talk about the body. But I made the body into no-body, where no-body meant being identity-less or neutral, an asexual body, an androgynous body, a transgender body, but also a complete no-body, a vanishing.

**SAT:** In the current group show *Stretched Terrains* at the KNMA, your work engages with a series of erotic drawings by Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003). Visitors enter a circular room of dimming lights and watch as small drawings shift from your own to those by Khakhar. It is a daring act - you place yourself directly into Khakhar's work. Is it a way of showing how such narratives are continuous and evolving?

**MS:** You are seeing it as evolving, but at the same time it is also dissolving - or disappearing. Why is the image not constant? Why is it so ephemeral? I feel the optical illusion challenges many sides of our tolerance. It is a revisiting of history in today's new landscape and maybe it looks a little abstract, a little bland and incomplete. But it is not a complete blankness, it is not a complete void, it is a de-void - there was something that was taken away or gone, but the memory of it is still there, and that is creating a new landscape. I am trying to hold that ephemerality and its momentary existence, and I think this desire comes from a desperation, a hopelessness. So people see it - it was there - there was a scene of lovemaking by two men, but then it disappears and you see a landscape with some flowers or maybe a moon ... But which one is the subject? The two men who just appear for a moment, or a blank landscape? I have been doing this for the past five years, I have done a couple of series of the de-void works, two solo shows. In this case, the subject matter was Khakhar, an examination of the artist and how I take his legacy, which I feel was strong and local, and what he could paint directly on to one layer is undeniable, but I wanted to move through the layers.

**SAT:** You said to me once that you use humour to introduce ambiguity, but that there is "never a confusion". Why make this distinction?

**MS:** I cannot just be a very sublime or romantic artist, so I try to provoke, to tease - whether it is with humour, or the subject matter, or the graphic, or the sound, whatever.

People are lazy these days; they are used to the convenience of the readymade. They forget to even question or read things through their own language. It is a contemplation that never arrives, unless you leave them midway - and I like to keep things a little bit ambiguous, with questions that they will have to answer. For me, it is a responsibility that all artworks should have. I like to create traps. I like to create questions, and, of course, you can criticise me - I am a catalyst.

All these tricks are for myself, but also for people who will experience the journey. Whether it's a painting or a poetry reading, they will experience a journey, and this is a continuous cultivation. All these tricks are non-language and I am constantly un-languaging things. People don't understand what I am saying, but I am still engaging people, saying: "Listen to me, try to understand me." I like creating different kinds of situations in which to indulge the brain, in which there are no final answers or ultimate statements. When there is a push, one that challenges people's tolerance, a consciousness opens up. We have to be very conscious and careful about what is happening: every second or next microsecond is being calculated beforehand. Everything is codified, constructed, and there is no neat way of reaching out.

**SAT:** "There is no neat way of reaching out." That's nice; it makes me think of your work around the idea of "radical hospitality" - maybe you could speak more about why that interests you so much.

**MS:** As part of a residency in New York, I was once given a beautiful apartment in Chelsea for three months, and I put a note on the door asking people to come in, visit me and spend some time. I was both documenting and not documenting all of the interactions that came up as a result: we were sharing moments and emotions, and yet I was playing the role of an artist in residence and making art. I was trying to question this institution and ideas around guest/host and hospitality/tolerance dynamics. I made the show in the apartment, and on the opening day, I vanished.

I cannot separate the things in my life, the way I live, from the way I make work. When I come to a gallery with my work, I also bring its accessories - and that is what brings the work to life. For my first solo show, Drawing Room, when Peter [Nagy of Nature Morte, New Delhi] first approached me, I said I would do the show but he had to give me one week, and he had to trust me, because I would close the gallery and do whatever I wanted. So I started painting the gallery, doing the furniture ... This is how I constantly push, and try to break existing perceptions. This is the angle of radical hospitality - where nothing is actually hospitable and you are never comforted, instead, you are always challenged.

Recently I was invited to give a presentation of my work in New York by the Asia Society, during Asia Week at the Guggenheim. They sent over a very detailed instruction booklet, the language of which was quite interesting. Instead of doing a presentation, I made a film

out of the instructions and spoke gibberish on stage. I just made total fun of the whole thing! The language of the booklet raised a lot of questions about how artists are asked to perform their identities, inhabit their work – so I broke everything down. You cannot believe how people responded. It was so serious from 10am to 7pm, and I took the last 10 minutes. No one laughed, and for the first five to six minutes, there was pin-drop silence. Now this is my radical hospitality.

**SAT: As an internationally recognised Indian artist, do you often find this to be true of the demands made by the western gaze?**

**MS:** A lot of international curators come to India, but they come with an agenda for an Indian show and at the last moment they drop me saying that they don't find a singular narrative in my work. It is as if they cannot put me in an Indian bracket, or in the marketing of an Indian show. For a group show at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Poland [Generation in Transition: New Art from India], in 2011, I promised the curator I would make something Indian. I sent in a proposal with a big drawing of the Taj Mahal, which was accepted. I arrived at a beautiful 200-year-old building in Warsaw and began by constructing the dome – more than 30-feet [9-metres] tall. After making it, I asked, could I go to the next room and make a little drawing of the Taj there? So I made little drawings in several rooms in the show. In each room, I found an unnoticed, un-exhibition space for my drawings, and I took over the whole museum like this. I deconstructed the identity, that Indian-ness of the Taj on to another body, into another architectural building and camouflaged it. I wanted to criticise the idea of "owning" identity, or cultural background, by taking a monolith icon and breaking it, and deconstructing its whole drawing. So when you see the drawings in their parts, you will never guess what their total image is. But that was our Taj.

**SAT: Do you still write poetry? Or have you fundamentally moved away from language?**

**MS:** I started writing in glitches instead, in computer glitches, and I called up the publisher of my first book and made him publish a book full of glitches. When I first called him and said that another book was ready, after 10 years, he said he knew it: "You are a poet, you are a born poet and a poet never dies." It took a few months to make him understand the work and I explained about the existential moment that existed for a single moment while it was being born, but how it did not take a shape outside of those glitches. That it was not documented in a way that could be codified. So this is how I continue my writing: nobody can read it, not even me. But what does that mean? Does it still mean that I have written something? I am questioning a part of myself that I cannot decode and that's what it means to me. Poetry is a medium where you have licence – where you have freedom – so I will always tell myself I am a poet.

• The group exhibition Stretched Terrains, which includes work by Mithu Sen, is at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, until 31 July 2017.



























