

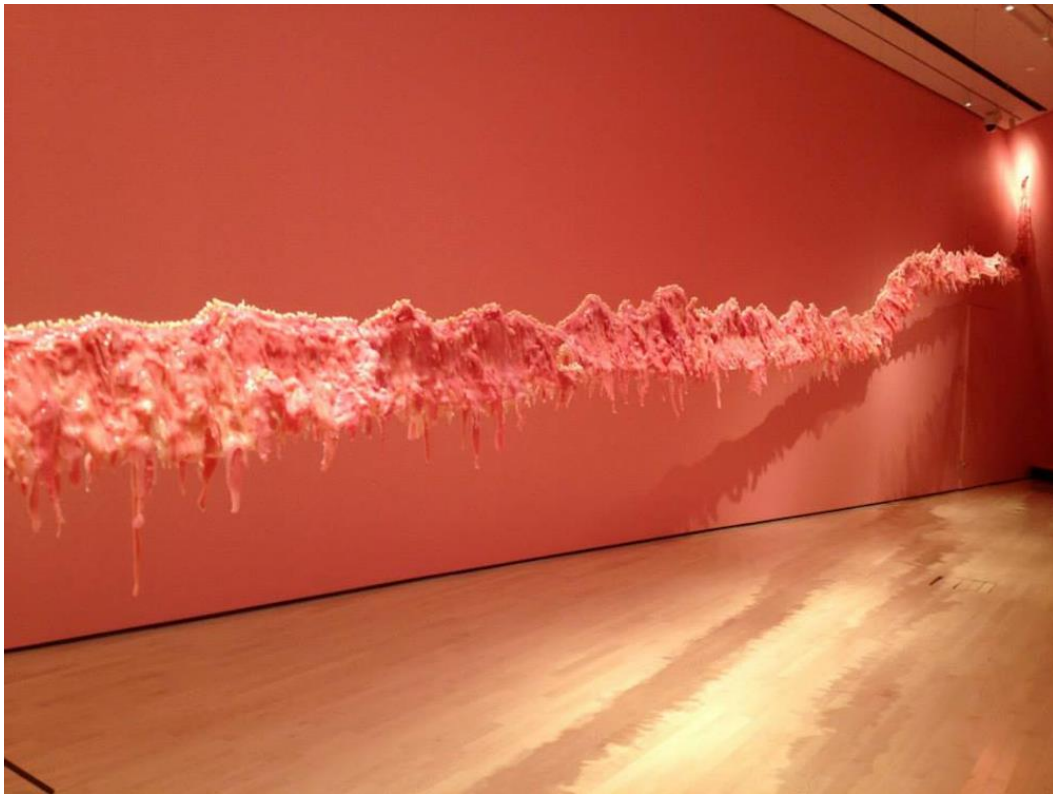
# Mithu Sen

by Lee Ann Norman

BOMB

— Artists in Conversation

*Life as medium: Physical and conceptual notions of the body, sexuality, and identity.*  
<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000202/mithu-sen>



*Border Unseen*, 2014. False teeth and dental polymer sculpture, 82 feet. Courtesy of Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan.

New Delhi-based artist Mithu Sen makes sculptures, installations, drawings, and texts that critique ideas around desire, sex and sexuality, representation, the body, and what it means to be an Indian woman in contemporary society. Sen feels a deep kinship with the legacy of feminism and often infuses elements like hair and blood from her own body into

her art as a way of examining our relationship to the material world. The historical legacy her work carries through its subject matter may be heavy, but she manages to convey the lighter side of the human condition through humor and sharp wit. For her first solo museum exhibition in the United States, Sen created a large-scale installation of false teeth and dental polymer to question the visible and invisible dividing lines among human beings. During her travels to the US, as she worked to finish and install her work at the Broad Museum, Sen shared more with me about her work and practice that spans genres and disciplines.

Lee Ann Norman Your work takes on issues of representation, mostly around what it means to be a woman from India. How and where did you grow up? How did you get interested in art and feminism?

Mithu Sen My art practice revolves around the reclamation of socio-political, linguistic, historical, cultural, sexual, and psychological margins. I try to engage with these sensitive issues in a playful manner, punctuating it with sentimentality and dark humor.

LAN How does your upbringing play into that?

MS I am a small-town girl coming from an educated Bengali family. My mother is a poet, and since childhood, I too wanted to be a poet in my language. I started writing at a very early age and got a few books published before confronting the world and its politics with other languages.

LAN You mean visually?

MS I was educated at Tagore's Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan. The environment was quite liberal and proved to be a nurturing experience of spirit and freedom. My destiny brought me to Delhi, though. As a migrant in a metropolitan city of twenty-two million people with hundreds of official and unofficial languages—but where English is still worshipped as the highest grade of sophistication—Delhi was like a new world. I was exposed to several hierarchical codes, and I struggled against all kinds of subtle hierarchies: social, sexual, political, regional, emotional, lingual, and so forth. After moving there, I was looking for a new medium of communication that was not as rigid and as elitist as the society around me.

LAN Is that when you started to move away from the written word toward images?

MS Slowly, I started losing my Bengali ... a kind of linguistic void appeared I think ... my poetry turned into something like blank pages. My last Bengali poetry book was published along with those blank pages to hold and acknowledge those desperate moments of utter silence. Through my struggle with linguistic identity, I began to make a few works such

as *No Star, No Land, No Word, and No Commitment*, which were shown at Art Omi when I was a resident in 2004. This gave me a visual beginning in the lifelong quest for a language that is beyond social, historical, and cultural hierarchies.

LAN I understand your need and desire for communication and language. I think it's so hard for us—women, women of color—to not only learn how to use our voices, in whatever form, but also to claim the right and space to use them. I also jumped between mediums in my own creative life in an attempt to figure out a way to say all of the things I wanted to say in ways that would allow them to feel true to me *and* be heard by others.

MS Over the years, I've tried to redefine language as communication itself, while at the same time attempting to overturn the power systems that oppress the marginalized. In my recent performance-based project, *I am a Poet*, I revisited a similar quest. I gave reading-performances of this work at Tate Modern last year as part of the Project Space series. I wanted the audience to embrace nonsense as a kind of resistance, so these poems didn't follow any known grammatical structure or syntax. I wanted people who read the poems to make their own meaning from the text.

LAN The body also seems to come up a lot for you, both in your visual and performative art. How does that focus make people view your work? Do you think people say, *She makes feminist—in a derogatory, stereotypical way—art, for example?*

MS My art has usually been seen as erotic, hybrid, and sexual. I don't really care if my sexual works are the reason people are looking. Sexuality is the means by which one can enter the self and the psyche. The so-called sexual overtone in my work is to provoke and trap people, to force them to see and contemplate. I've tried to bring tabooed sexuality out of the closet. My pieces are highly eroticized. Some viewers have found them even uncomfortably sexual, possibly because I try to draw sexuality from both living and inanimate objects. I don't deny the sexual aspects of my work but I do object to people dealing only with their surface value, overlooking the sensitivity and political acumen invested in my art practice. Many of my works deal with femininity, eroticism, and interiority in that sense. Sexuality is a way to enter the psyche—be it male or female. I'd rather like to conceive the body with an androgynous identity, where what is feminine and what is masculine is confined to the realm of ideology. In my month-long project *It's Good to be Queen* (2006), I worked on the idea of the relationship between guest and host, and the hospitality or tolerance level of each. In the series "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)," I created a parallel narrative of vulnerable masculinities as a way of reclaiming emotions for everybody irrespective of their socio-cultural and sexual identities. So yes, I'm also interested in relationships that aren't purely sexual. With "Black Candy," I wasn't particularly trying to focus on homosexual relationships, but tried to take an androgynous approach. In addition to examining the physical body, I also try to explore the conceptual body in my practice.



From "Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome)" (2010). Mixed media drawing with watercolor, ink, collage, metal leaf, fabric on custom-made acid free paper on chanel, sound scape on headphones, six drawings, each 83 x 42 inches, on a five-channel block, 20 x 6 feet.

LAN How does that manifest?

MS In *For(e)play* (2011), I transformed the physical body into the walls of a high-traffic gallery space. I created this metaphor through the act of chiseling the concrete. Layer by layer, the core of this body was unclothed and exposed. With that stripping, came a loss of a social identity—the body. I respect the legacy of feminist struggle that I have inherited. Feminism has a very personal definition to me. It is not an alternate or codified system. It is a way of life, to be able to make choices on our own, loving and respecting the self. It is crafting one's own personal and immediate relationship to the world.

LAN Your work is also very sensuous and tactile, sometimes using organic materials like hair or bone. You've also put yourself in the works a lot. What role does the concept of identity play in your art?

MS By using hair, teeth, and also my own blood, I tried to add a dimension of the organic to the overall materiality of my work. Teeth, hair, and blood are parts of the human body—very visceral and literal. They are common to all regardless of racial, regional, gender, class, or caste-based differences. By using them as material, I intended to make a

statement about the universality of human existence. It has been my response to all sorts of inequalities that exist around us. The use of hair also has another side to it. Hair is “unbelongings”—this was also a name of one of my shows. Hair is part of our identity as long as it is part of our body. Once hairs fall, they belong to no one; by using that as material in my work, I claimed those “unbelongings,” which may belong to anyone. My works also reflect my response to this interaction with society, or how we sometimes change and adapt our identity as we move about in the world. With the narcissistic presence of my image in *Half Full* (2007) or my physical absence from the opening of the exhibition *It’s Good to be Queen*, I’ve tried to understand myself in this keen play. In *Half Full*, I used my own body as a marker of complex sexuality, problematizing the codes that define a human’s sexual existence. It explored the concept of the self from many perspectives: from flirtatious to ambiguous and self-realization to psychosexual repression in power games to question the social norms. The hybrid figures operated on the interface of fantasy and reality. The idea was to draw the viewer’s attention to the permutations of identity with which we define ourselves and those parts that we choose to hide and repress.



Photo by Hemant Sareen.

LAN How is this role-playing or identity shifting perceived and received by the viewer? You seem to be creating a space where it's acceptable for people to try on a new persona or alter ego.

MS People have the opportunity to become open (or extroverted) through my role-play. They get to become playful, sexual, biographical, fantasist, bold, and layered through the work. I don't think the role-playing is so superficial, and in fact, the "play" is quite serious. I engage myself in a kind of exhibitionism that provokes the audience. It is a push-pull of sorts—a repulsive attraction—that seduces the voyeuristic gaze where the watcher is left in shock. That shock leads to contemplation. We're talking about identity, so I would like to mention my work *Ahh Taj!!* (2011). *Ahh Taj* was my response to foreign curators and audiences who constantly express this need for "Indian-ness" through some dismembered bleeding cliché. The Taj Mahal is a symbol of Indian architectural and cultural mastery, a symbol of love and identity. So in a show of Indian artists in Poland, I drew parts of the Taj Mahal onto different parts of the gallery to question the issue of cultural identity and exoticism. I gave people souvenirs of bits of marble at the exhibition. These were symbols not just of the broken Taj, but also symbols that critiqued the cliché of branding a national identity.

LAN For many artists in the feminist movement, material choices were important. I am thinking, for example, of Lynda Benglis, who used sparkles and bright colors in her early work as a response to the starkness and "masculine" feel of minimalism, or women who went back to making craft work like quilts and tapestries as fine art. Do you make a point of working with certain kinds of materials, colors, or processes, too?

MS My practice and medium may seem random in response to their immediate historical context subverted in my works like a matrix of various ideological issues, but it refers to a mundane, everyday existence. I believe that my medium is life. The rest are all byproducts and bonuses. (laughter) It contains all types of emotions like teasing, provocation, humor, humiliation, and anger. So it is eternal—from past to the present, it remains the same yet it evolves. Drawing has been my favorite medium for exploring and expressing myself. It is the very process of "pulling out" something from within oneself—of literal "drawing." In fact, for me, the contours of my thoughts get shaped in my works. These thoughts are pulled out through various media. Drawing on paper is just among many others. I use space and site, sculpture, sound, videos, poetry, and performance to express life—it's almost a compulsion. This variety defines my constant need to be expressive in whatever way possible and keep me free from any self-imposed restrictions.

LAN Your first museum solo show in the US opened in April.

MS Yes. *Border Unseen*, at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. I use false teeth and dental polymer in the installation to create a monumental



hanging sculpture that spans seventy feet, extending from the ceiling to the gallery floor. It kind of snakes through the museum organically in response to the architectural structure Zaha Hadid designed.



Detail from *Border Unseen*, 2014.

LAN Dental polymer and false teeth? Why?

MS (*laughter*) Yes! Dental prostheses have been an important part of my art practice for nearly a decade. For me, they always carry complex associations with the body—part of bodily desires and fears. They also symbolize pain and satisfaction. The fact that teeth have a sheer corporeality, and the functions that they perform—biting, chewing, grinding—have always fascinated me. Biting is an act of both defense and desire. Grinding is a result of both fear and childish excitement. I have always seen these functions as another aspect of human sexuality, violence, fear, and animalism.

Humans have lost touched with each other I think, because of the invisible walls that have forced us into smaller, fragmented groups. Even in these groups, individuals like to live in their own little cocoons. I'm hoping *Border Unseen* will symbolically explore these walls.

*Mithu Sen's Border Unseen is on view at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum until August 31.*

*Lee Ann Norman is a New York-based writer and culture maker whose interests lie in the ways others read the world, and how their reading(s) influence everything.*