

Suspended on rectangular expanses of snow-white hand-made paper, Mithu Sen's drawings are sweetly charming – from a distance. Pink and cherry-red watercolours mingle with bits of silk, silver and gold leaf to float in girly abandon amongst minute green plants, velvety roses and wispily delineated figures. Dangling over these paper works are sturdy headphones. Put them on and your perceptions shift: you inadvertently eavesdrop on a startlingly intimate conversation between two men, Rum and Vum, who discuss their sexual anxieties in whiny tones (Sen's voice in disguise). You then realize that the pinky-red images ('the colour of flesh and blood,' Sen underscores) are more down-and-dirty than they initially appear. Careful observation of one work, for example, reveals two men struggling in a violent embrace, a tiger emanating from a vermilion-tipped hand and a bird-faced male examining his bum.

✍ Welcome to Delhi-based Sen's *Black Candy (iforgot-mypenisathome)* (2010) – the series that won her the prestigious Skoda Prize (India's version of the Turner Prize) in 2011. Sen sees herself as tackling the marginal in art history and society, and the very medium of these sound-assisted drawings embodies a crusade for Sen. Brought up in an educated, middle-class Bengali family (her mother is an established poet), she is bent on rebellion. 'Drawing is not considered a "pure" form of art but a secondary practice. My subconscious will not accept this. I could call my work "mixed media painting", but I won't. The word "drawing" gives me a charge – like I'm pulling out something from within me.' 🐾 *Black Candy* marked a departure for Sen, who had been typecast as an explorer of female identity, because it was stimulated by homoerotic masculinity. 'It's my tribute to Bhupen Khakhar,' says Sen, referring to the late Gujarati painter, celebrated for his depictions of gay love. His spectre haunts the display in more ways than one. In *Handle With Care But Do Handle* (2009–10), a man clutches a bunch of crimson flowers. Not only does the grinning gentleman resemble Khakhar, but his blooms are imbued with symbolic significance too: one of Khakhar's best-loved portraits is titled *Man with Bouquet of Plastic Flowers* (1975). ✍ And yet – with characteristic slipperiness – Sen slides away from her description of *Black Candy* as a straightforward tribute. It explores her 'inner self,' she confides, 'where my maleness is very strong.' Indeed, excavating hidden truths about the Self is a longstanding preoccupation for the artist, whose solo show at Albion Gallery, London, 'I Dig, I Look Down', in 2008, recalled an archeological site. More recently, at a Khaj Residency in New Delhi, Sen was instructed to focus on fashion. Her performance *För(e)Play* (2011) dealt with the painful pleasures of undressing. Using her fingernails and domestic utensils she peeled off coats of paint from the walls of her room as if they were layers of clothing. The resulting amorphous shapes and web-like fissures also recalled flaking skin. Was Sen alluding to the lines drawn by time that clothes and cosmetics cannot conceal? 🐾 Zehra Jumabhoy





Handle With Care But Do Handle, 2009-10. Mixed media, watercolour, ink, fabric and metal leaf on handmade paper, 213 x 106.5 cm

An Away Bride, 2009-10. Mixed media, watercolour, ink, fabric and metal leaf on handmade paper, 213 x 106.5 cm

Who's Better Between Us, 2009-10. Mixed media, watercolour, ink, fabric and metal leaf on handmade paper, 213 x 106.5 cm