



PROJECTS IN THE MAKING... MITHU SEN'S STATELY MANNERS

"I am a queen here!" Mithu Sen proclaims as she makes me a cup of tea. It is a Darjeeling, she explains, which she brought here to her temporary residence, a shared studio space in New York. She is warm, welcoming and perfectly mannered. But then she unexpectedly places the tea bag, not on the saucer, but on the wall, fixing it with tape alongside a row of older, now-dry bags.

I am clearly not her first guest. She sews each visitor's initials into the curious decorations lining the wall, materializing the accumulated memories of a score of afternoon teas. These become an ever-present reminder for Sen of her role as hostess—a role underpinned by her own status as a guest in a foreign country and foreign space—and of the temporary intimacies such situations engender.

Bose Pacia Gallery invited the 35-year-old artist Mithu Sen to New York last April, offering her a two-month residency and a liberating lack of obligations. The gallery simply encouraged her to explore the city and meet people. Sen, Calcutta-born, Delhi-resident, New York-sojourner, used her stay to create an evolving installation, *It's Good to Be Queen* (2006), tracing her fascination with the boundaries of quotidian interactions and the delicate balance of the guest-host relationship.

Leaving India for America, she brought mementos, items of reassurance that would ease her into her temporary "home"—tea, a rose pillow, a family of "children" (all of them dolls) and her favorite handmade paper. And as soon as she arrived, she found other items to add to her bounty. A bathroom sink top—an icon of domesticity—made of marble with extravagant brass taps. Her husband, Samit Das, pleaded with her not to buy anything during her stay—but she could not resist. Piles of gold-colored safety pins, scatterings of fake fingernails. Sequins. Pieces of cloth. If an object seemed redolent of the normality of other lives,

she snatched it up. Artifacts from her life in Delhi as well as those recently acquired in New York filled her studio, ultimately comprising the final installation.

This had its downside. One morning her studio-mate left her a note, "Dear guest, Please use one set of bed covers/pillows etc., what's on the bed for your use. Make sure the bedroom does not have hair on the floor. We will keep everything tidy for your use (also). Thanks." Initially horrified that she was impolite, Sen realized that the note was also a hallmark of the ordinary, a watermark of her role as tenant, and she pinned it to her trophy wall, alongside the crisping sacks of tea.

Mithu Sen's fascination with the banal, the rules, rituals and gentler spiritual confrontations that arise from being alien to a locality and its customs underlies her discovery of the particular liberation a guest-visitor enjoys as both benign curiosity and threatening intruder. Often times, she notes, we find ourselves freely engaged in intimate conversations with the person in the seat next to us (or taking tea, sitting invited on the bed, as one does with Mithu Sen) knowing we will likely never meet him or her again.

By opening her studio to all to see what could happen by reversing the equation, abandoning her Delhi privacy for New York candor, she placed herself in a dual role. Sen is a queen who constantly caters and is catered to, negotiating private and public boundaries and personas. How to make a guest feel at ease? How to break away from the ingrained habits of restrained hospitality during brief encounters? Sen chooses to do the unexpected, such as jump up and down for 20 minutes excitedly in front of her visitor. Such moments, etched into an afternoon's passing, are another shared offering, relics for herself and others, like tea bags collecting on a cluttered wall. ■ ELAINE W. NG

■ Mithu Sen — *It's Good to Be Queen* (2006) Installation view, mixed media. Courtesy Bose Pacia Gallery, New York.