



H A L F

F U L L

M I T H

U S E N



to my parents
Nivedita Sen and
Sasanka Sekhar Sen





H **AL** **F**

F **UL** **L**

M **IT** **H**

U **SE** **N**

BOSE PACIA
NATURE MORTE



This Book  was published
on the occasion  of

HALF / FULL



Exhibition



at



Bose Pacia, New York
Nature Morte, New Delhi





THE KITCHEN TABLE

The ageless paradox of the glass half-full or empty illustrates the idea that there are at least two ways to view any situation. It identifies a point of logical dissonance where rationality based on perception breaks down and one is forced to make a willful choice about how to interpret a given set of information. Yet there are many other possibilities inherent in the image of the glass of water. What if, for example, the glass was designed to be filled halfway? What role do culture and context play in perception and how we determine meaning? I remember visiting relatives in Singapore after I graduated college. One day, my uncle and I were sitting at a round table in my grandfather's kitchen. My uncle was showing me how to go to the beach. He took his glass and pulled it towards his edge of the table, and then with his other hand drew an imaginary line in front of it. After he walked away, the glass remained where it was on the table, with no one else the wiser that it was not just a glass but also a point on a map. It struck me as a profound moment: how many other maps are out there in our environment?

At her artist talk coinciding with "Half Full: Part I" at Bose Pacia Gallery, which follows in transcript below, Mithu Sen sported a small tattoo on the back of her hand. It was a simple blue-black line that curled in a spiral, infinitely moving outward or inward, depending on one's viewpoint. The tattoo was the result of a black-and-white video work, *The Tattoo* (2007), filmed at a residency in Bahia, Brazil, in 2006. In the work, we see Mithu from the neck up, framed against a wall, as she stares impassively at the camera, wincing occasionally in pain, while off-screen we hear the sound of the tattoo gun's buzz and strange voices. Few people who see the work will ever get to see Mithu's tattoo, but its existence as both an actual mark on the artist's body and an imaginary void in viewers' minds reinforces the sense that perception has its limits; there is always a backstory or a missing piece of information. The title of Mithu's two-part solo exhibition at Bose Pacia in New York and Nature Morte in New Delhi, "Half Full," could simply represent the artist's position on how to interpret the world. Yet it could also be a cipher to a map, a key to unlocking alternate realities. Moving fluidly through different identities, as represented in her drawings, photographs and videos included in the exhibition, Mithu explores the limits of her self, but also challenges viewers to complete the picture by stepping beyond the realm of logic or rationality and the preconceptions inherent in those thought processes.

The conversation recorded below, featuring Mithu Sen, the curator and critic Nancy Adajania and myself, may provide more answers, or it may lead readers astray. The fun thing about Mithu's work is that it welcomes such ambiguities.

**Andrew Maerkle
New York, April 2008**



**LAI D OPEN
BETWEEN
DESIRE AND
DISGUST:**

**MITHU SEN'S
THRESHOLD POETICS**

**BY
ALEXANDAR
KEEFEE**

*The she-ghouls have made bracelets from intestines
and red lotus ornaments of women's hands;
have woven necklaces of human hearts
and rouged themselves with blood in place of saffron.
(Bhavabhuti)*

"Half Full: Part II" reads like a dance of the half dead, a cremation ground lyric, a glasshouse of tropical plants whose skeletal roots are dipped in blood, a dirty joke screamed from the gallows, and a celebration of the turbulent potentialities unlocked by vivisection, dismemberment and display.

There is a candor unfit for the dinner table, an indelicacy unwelcome in mixed company. Like a pornographic SMS, or a threat, or a wink of the eye, some messages deliver more than information, carrying with them non-verbal gifts, incitements, provocation. No wonder these sorts of messages are so often prone to impolite indiscretion, to theft and misuse, to misunderstanding and concealment; if not kept in their place, defanged by convention and politesse, they create awkward moments. More egregiously, they lay bare an intrinsic potential for disobedience latent in all messages—albeit one that typically remains barely manifest, half-hidden beneath the surface. They leave us stripped of the comforting reassurances that polite forms of expression try so hard to deliver: that the means we use to express our innermost selves are no more than the corruptible, external body that we give to the pure, interior soul of our thoughts. But fantasies about controlling our living utterances are just as utopian as fantasies about controlling our bodies: insubordinate messages take on a life of their own, stepping out of line to reach out and touch us without being asked,

tickling and provoking us, violating unspoken and unspeakable rules of behavior, whispering dirty secrets about what all messages are always doing, no matter their pretensions of respectability.

Classical Sanskrit aesthetic theorists were wise to warn about the dangerous results of mixing inappropriate and incompatible images—they counsel the poet never to use the word “vomit” when attempting to evoke an erotic mood, for example—because an ill-considered semiotic promiscuity results in bheda, or rupture of mood, just as surely as unregulated intercourse between the social orders disrupts society. But kept safely within the categorical constraints of genre, we enjoy and even invite the evocative power of images and language—everyone likes to cry at the sad scenes in movies, jump when the vampire appears on the screen and laugh at the dwarf and his pratfalls—there is a grammar of sorts that structures and categorizes these moods and, by doing so, renders them accessible for hygienic, aestheticized delectation. Constrained, they structure an inner emotional experience whose anxiously regulated order cooperates with the socially ordered external world our bodies move through. The experience of art so conceived generates the sense of an apparently stable self moving through an apparently stable world of enduring, appropriate, and natural institutions of discipline and control. An aesthetic rupture rips through the fabric of both.

Mithu Sen has created an aesthetic of contact and rupture, sending messages that refuse to stay politely in place, deploying instead an irreverent, disturbing new mythology based on transition and flux, a physics narrated in streams of consciousness that overflow their banks, that circle back and form eddies and whirlpools and sometimes, perversely, run uphill. Instead of the silence and restraint of the courtroom, we hear the jostling, disorderly street. The rules change and vanish in Ms. Sen’s threshold poetics: where we expect tears we find laughter, where we expect sacred, pompous awe we find satire and profanation, hierarchies overturned and parodied, rejuvenating violations of decorum, uncontrolled laughter and touching, a world half full and not half empty. Ms. Sen’s art defies simple description—she works in multiple media, combining anatomical abstraction, found art, collage, dark comedy, political polemic, and horrific beauty. Her latest canvases are large, and spill over their velveteen-fringed frames onto the wall. Many are self-portraits of the artist—terrifying half-skeletons dripping with gore, centaur werewomen with eyes fixed on the viewer, pasted with fuzzy paisley stickers, ringed by chattering choruses of hungry scavenging songbirds. Sen’s work conducts a sharp, insistent interrogation of the natural, of the taken for granted, of the coercive power latent in images that promise—but always fail to deliver—wholeness, completion, self-identity and repose.

Downstairs, a slippery pile of black, stuffed innards spills out across a wall, and a greedy looking cutout of a pariah kite lurks darkly in the corner, waiting for a mouthful. This installation piece recalls Sen’s use of hair as a medium in earlier shows, most notably her “Twilight Zone” installation at Khoj from 2003, and “no Star, no Land, no Word, no Commitment,” an installation done in New York in 2004. But here the line between artificial hair and viscera blackened by exposure is blurred—in subversive violation of the rules of the body, rules that keep some parts in and some parts out. Bodies in Sen’s work move between the erotic and the grotesque in an unstable, throbbing hum, leaving the viewer unsettled and open: skin melts into bone, into veins and blood that seep like tendrils, like flowers and hair. The artist tears at the line between desire and disgust, between thick, oiled hair and black, bloated guts—an oscillation between modes of being that won’t allow us to keep them comfortably separate, that won’t allow us the reassurances to be found in that separation.

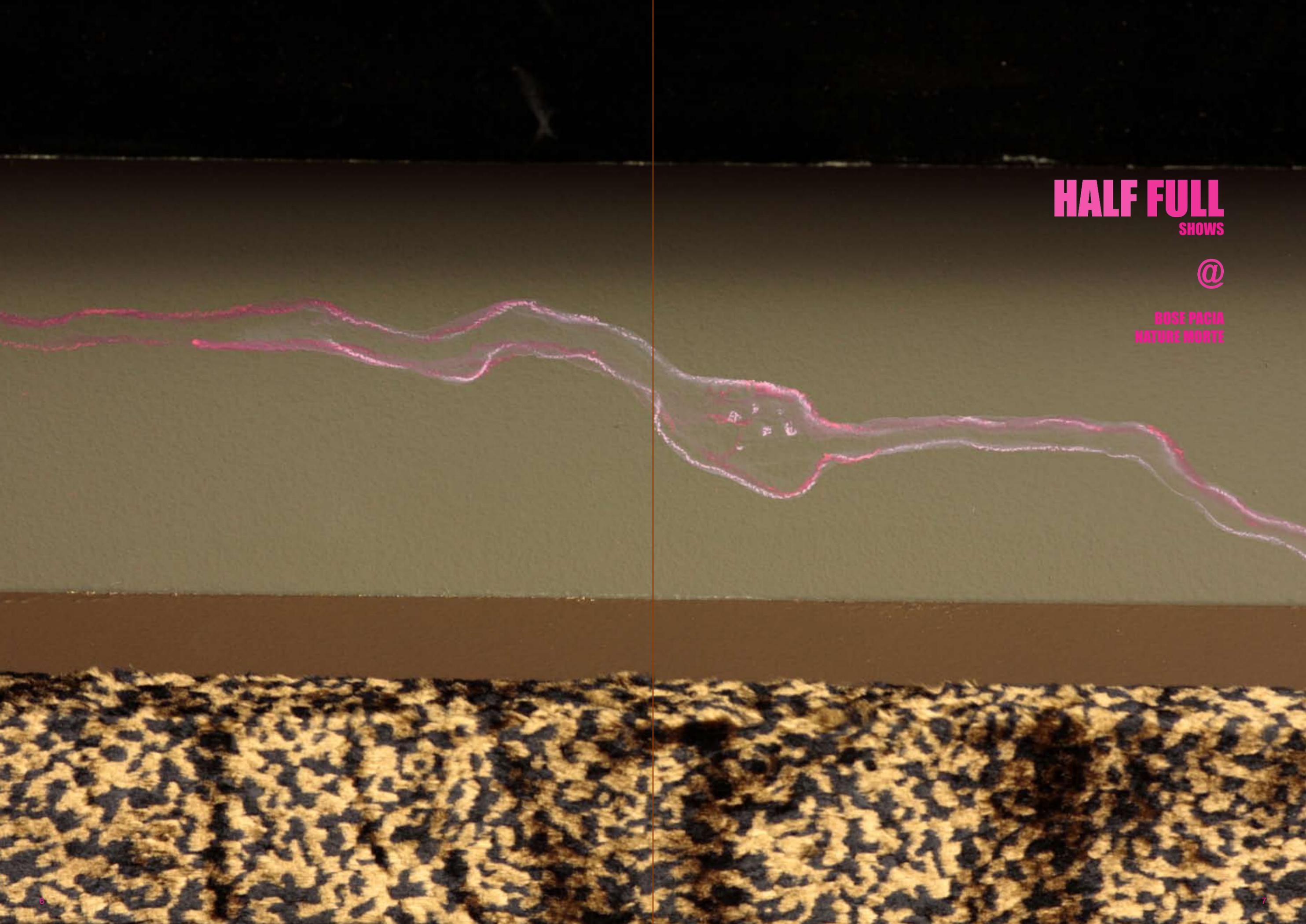
Upstairs a video projector illuminates the dark room, beaming a huge black-and-white close-up of the artist’s face in motion on the back wall. In it, her face moves in a slowly building set of expressions from relatively uneasy to pained and sick. The camera holds for a minute and then shifts slightly, creating a jarring blur before resuming its hold on the face, as her eyes widen in a wild stare out at the viewer, darting unsteadily to the side and her silent breathing heaves. Watching “Ephemeral Affair” feels like choosing the mosquito hum of a tattoo needle. There is a powerful polemic punch to this show, all the more effective for the artist’s remarkable ability to evoke feelings of incompleteness and even nausea, transgressing the boundaries of canvas and the spaces between the viewer and viewed.

Like all good subversives, she has a wicked sense of humor. In “False Friends 2”, a large installation with multiple screens presents an array of digitally altered, defaced and graffitied photographs, some of the artist traveling abroad, some self-portraits gored with fake blood and stick-on flowers, one of her facing us across a cafe table, a huge fake velvet tongue lolling out of her mouth onto the table. In the lower left corner, a video screen cycles through images set to a ridiculous ersatz Caribbean-ish party jam and we see the artist’s face with a bright blue digital mustache wiggling, with crude animations of lizards licking her eyeballs, with her head clumsily photoshopped onto the torso of an absurdly muscle-bound body builder, smiling and bobbing back and forth in time to the music. Here and there sexual organs pop out and disappear. There is comedy here—spoofing on travel photos, YouTube drivel, self-representation, eroticism and disgust—there is a potent anger, and there is madness.

The paintings in this exhibition are no less provocative and complex; in “Perhaps You 3” Ms. Sen’s smiling face is painted on the shoulders of the decomposing body of a bird surrounded and pecked at by hungry songbirds, its pink entrails exposed to the air and, as though transforming through a kind of oxygen alchemy, they appear gilt with gold. It is a story of halves: the half-dead half-bird with an indecipherable smile allows for no false promises of identity and completion: forms pass from one into the other, moving between self and other, death and life, high and low, guts and gold. This is the radical laughter of the mela grounds, where violations of decorum and proportion shatter the awed silence that is supposed to accompany death, the same awed silence and supernatural terror that greet the arrival of the king and his men, the priest and his books; the grotesque body refuses to cooperate with this solemnity, decrowning it with fantastic transformation and monstrous play. The artist’s body is the theatre for this transformation, but not her body imaged as a series of solid, stable, smooth surfaces; instead, we see a fluxing set of edges, convexities, openings and orifices. The grotesque body is not a completed object; it is something in motion, actively engaged in an unpredictable, incorrigible process of becoming, liberating itself and its viewer from the confines of a world of stable, completed bodies and institutions, estranging her from that apparently finished world guarded by kings and priests where all pretends to remain stable and sane.

The pieces in “Half Full” are hybrids of the present, half-finished, half-humans clawing their way off the wall towards the viewer. Sen’s angry graveyard goddesses are moving and hungry, dismembered and dismembering portraits of the dancing undead that reanimate the fertile, liminal landscape of the cremation ground, where once upon a time anonymous lyric poets composed Sanskrit hymns to corpses, and found beauty in scavenging dogs.





HALF FULL

SHOWS



BOSE PACIA
NATURE MORTE

a ↗

day ↻

without X

me 👤

mixed media
with water colour
drawing, photo
collage, fabric, ink,
metal leaf on acid
free handmade paper

9.84 x 42 inches

2007

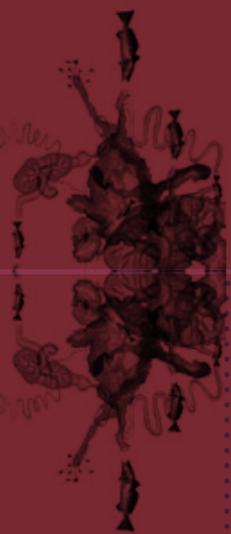




details &



installation view
at bose pacia
new york



a ↗

day ♀

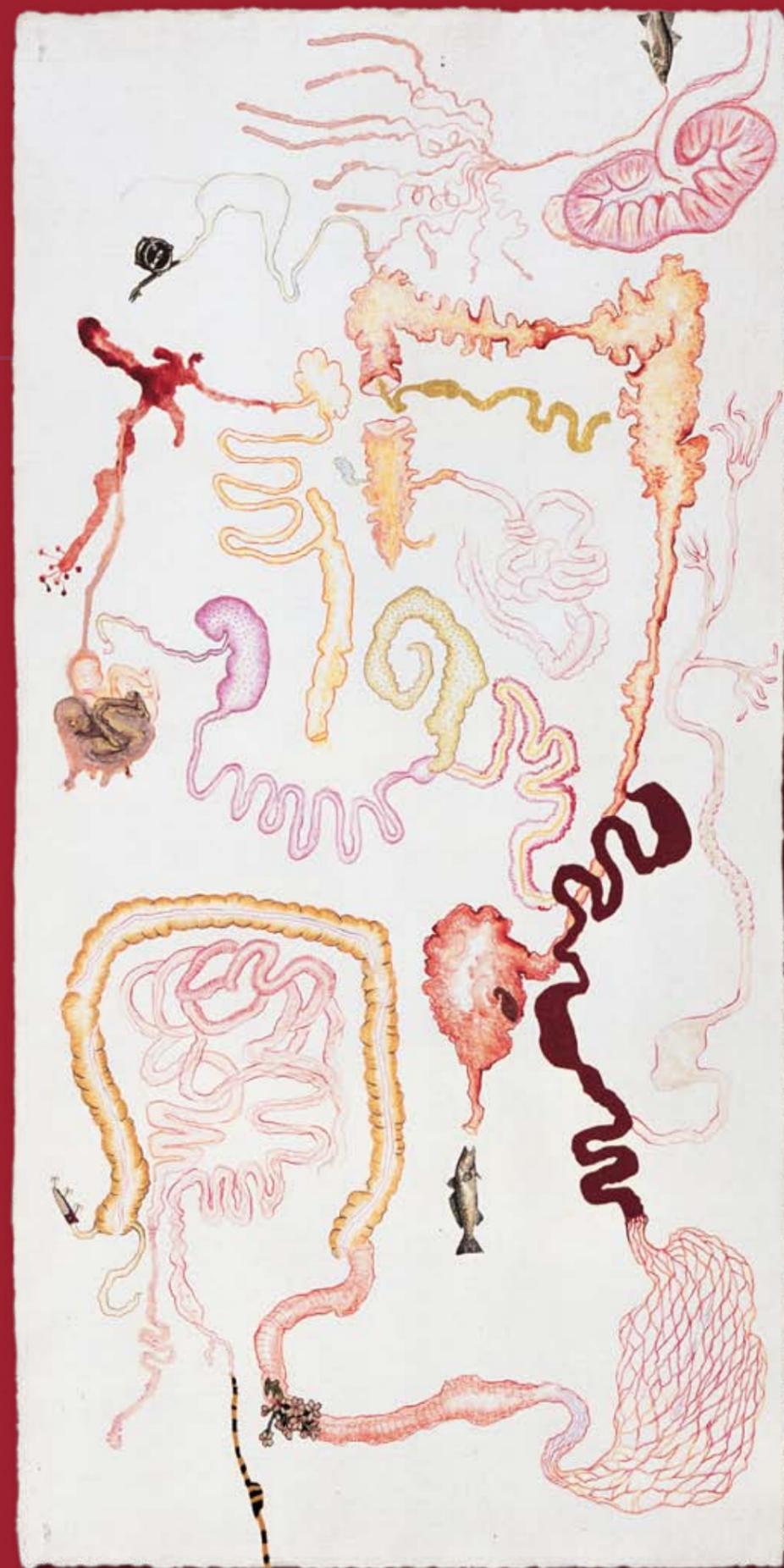
without ✕

me
too ♀

**mixed media
drawing with photo
collage, water
colour, gold leaf,
fabric on acid free
indian handmade
paper**

84 x 42 inches

2007



 angel

still 

ugly 1

mixed media
drawing with photo
collage, water
colour, gold leaf,
fabric on acid free
indian handmade
paper

84 x 42 inches

2007






**installation
view at bose pacia
new york**





angel 

still 

ugly 2

**mixed media with
water colour drawing,
photo collage, fabric,
ink, metal leaf on acid
free handmade paper**

84 x 42 inches

2007



 **dance after
depression 1** 

**mixed media with
water colour drawing,
photo collage, fabric,
ink, metal leaf on acid
free handmade paper**

84 x 42 inches

2007





details &



installation view
at bose pacia
new york



dance after depression 2

mixed media drawing
with photo collage,
water colour, gold
leaf, fabric on acid free
indian handmade paper
with a velvet covered
collaged frame

84 x 42 inches

2007

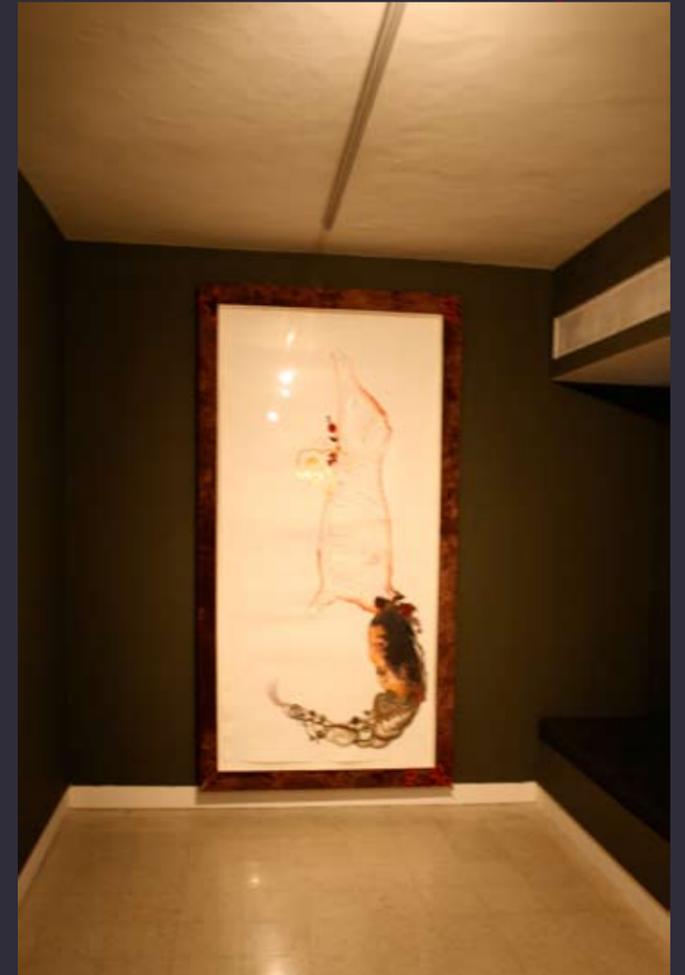




details &



installation view
at nature morte
new delhi





**destroyed
labarynth**



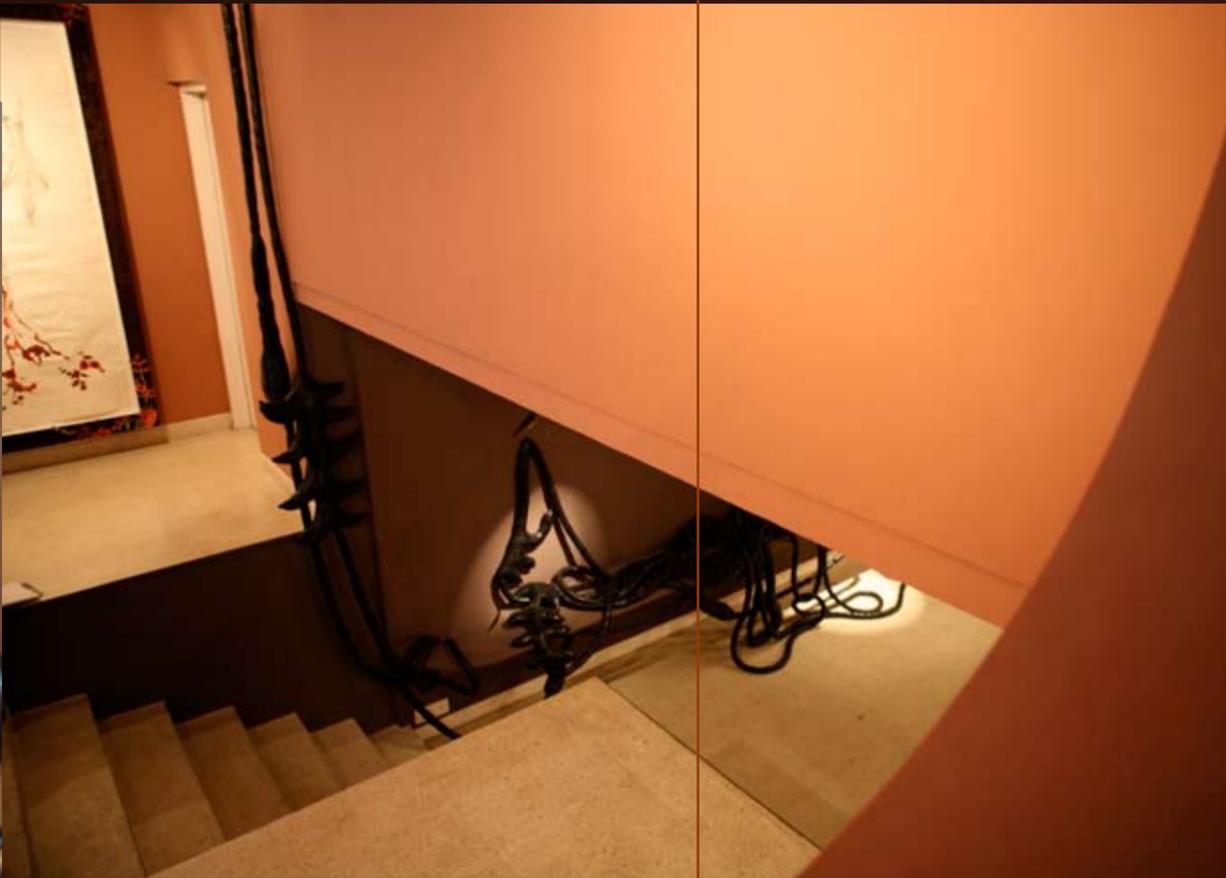
**soft sculpture with
leather skinned
fabric, velvet, cotton,
beads**

**variable dimension
(each pipe
approximately 40
feet in length)**

2007







previous pages &
this page :

details &  
installation view at
nature morte
new delhi



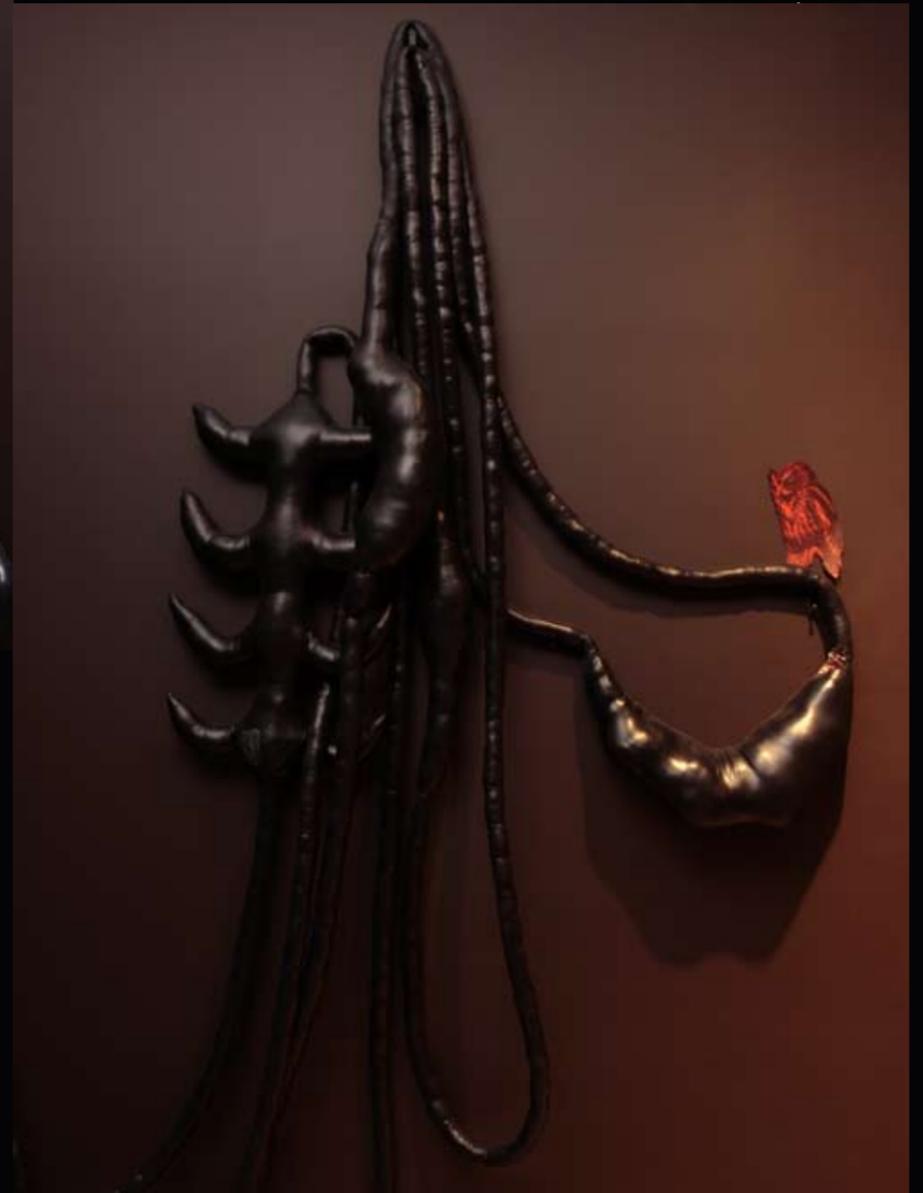



details &


installation view
at bose pacia
new york

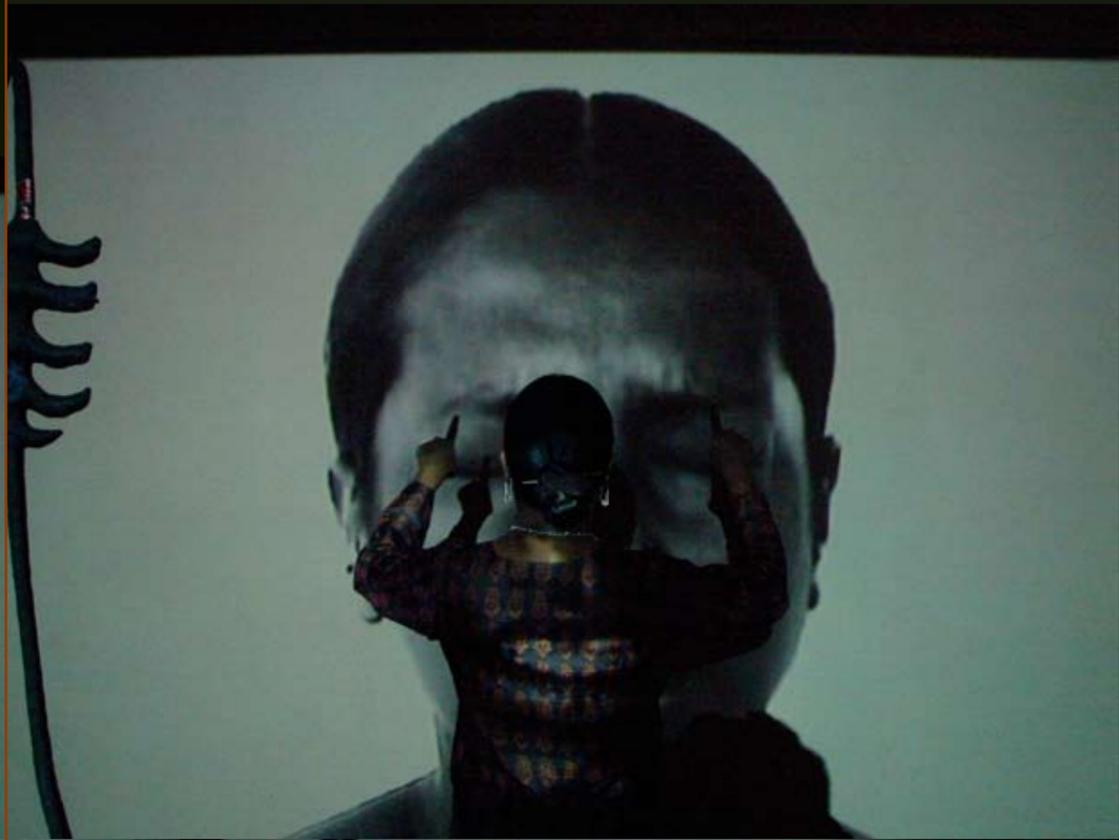
installation with
4 mins video
(tattoo) looping,
soft sculpture,
mix media
collaged photo
montages

variable
dimension





artist at the
Installation



**installation
with a 4 mins
vedeo (tattoo)
looping, soft
sculpture, mix
media collaged
photo montages**

**variable
dimension**





False Friends 1

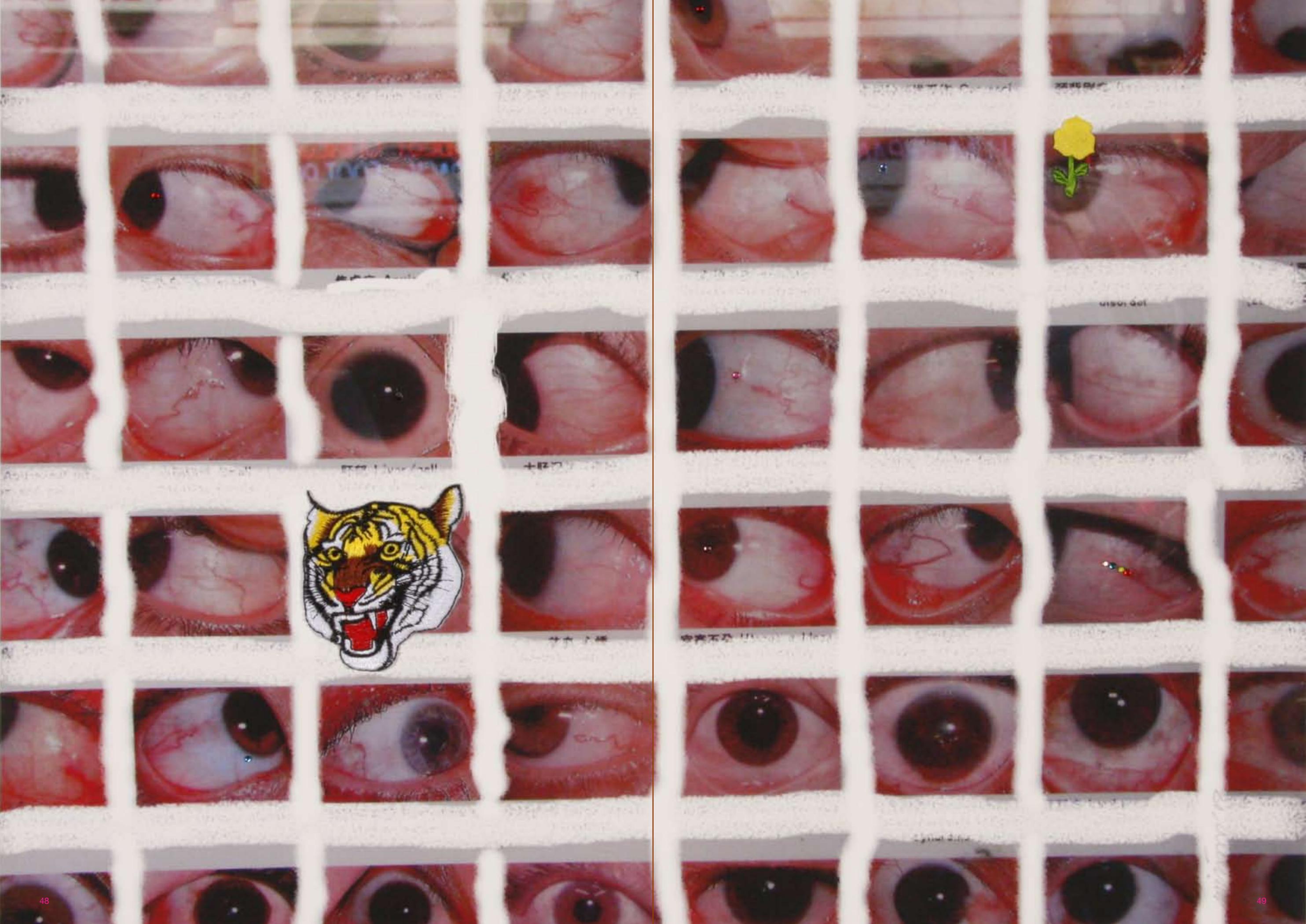
installation
with a grid of
11 mix media
collaged photo
montages, a 3
mins animation
film (half
full) looping,
soft sculpture
garlands around
the grid

variable
dimension











False Friends 2

installation with a grid of 11 mix media collaged photo montages, a 3 mins animation film(half full) looping, soft sculpture garlands around the grid in a room made with false wall lifted from the back ground









previous pages
(62-65):
details

this page:

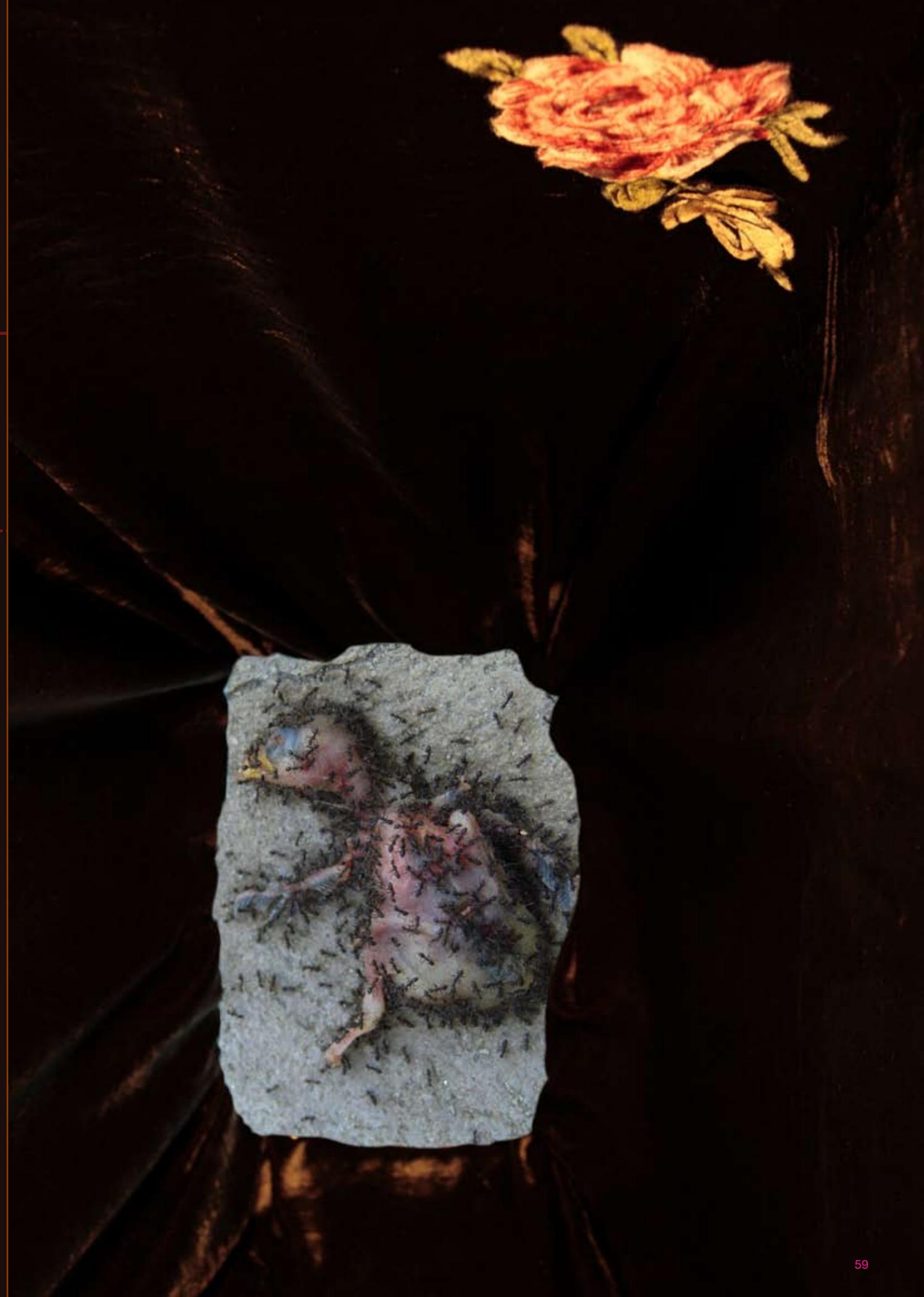


installation
views at
nature morte
new delhi





**installation with
a 3 mins video
(icarus) projected
on the floor
inside 3.5 feet tall
box, covered with
velvet**





incapable of being unnoticed 1

**mixed media
drawing with photo
collage, water
colour, gold leaf,
fabric on acid free
indian handmade
paper with a velvet
covered collaged
frame**

84 x 42 inches

2007

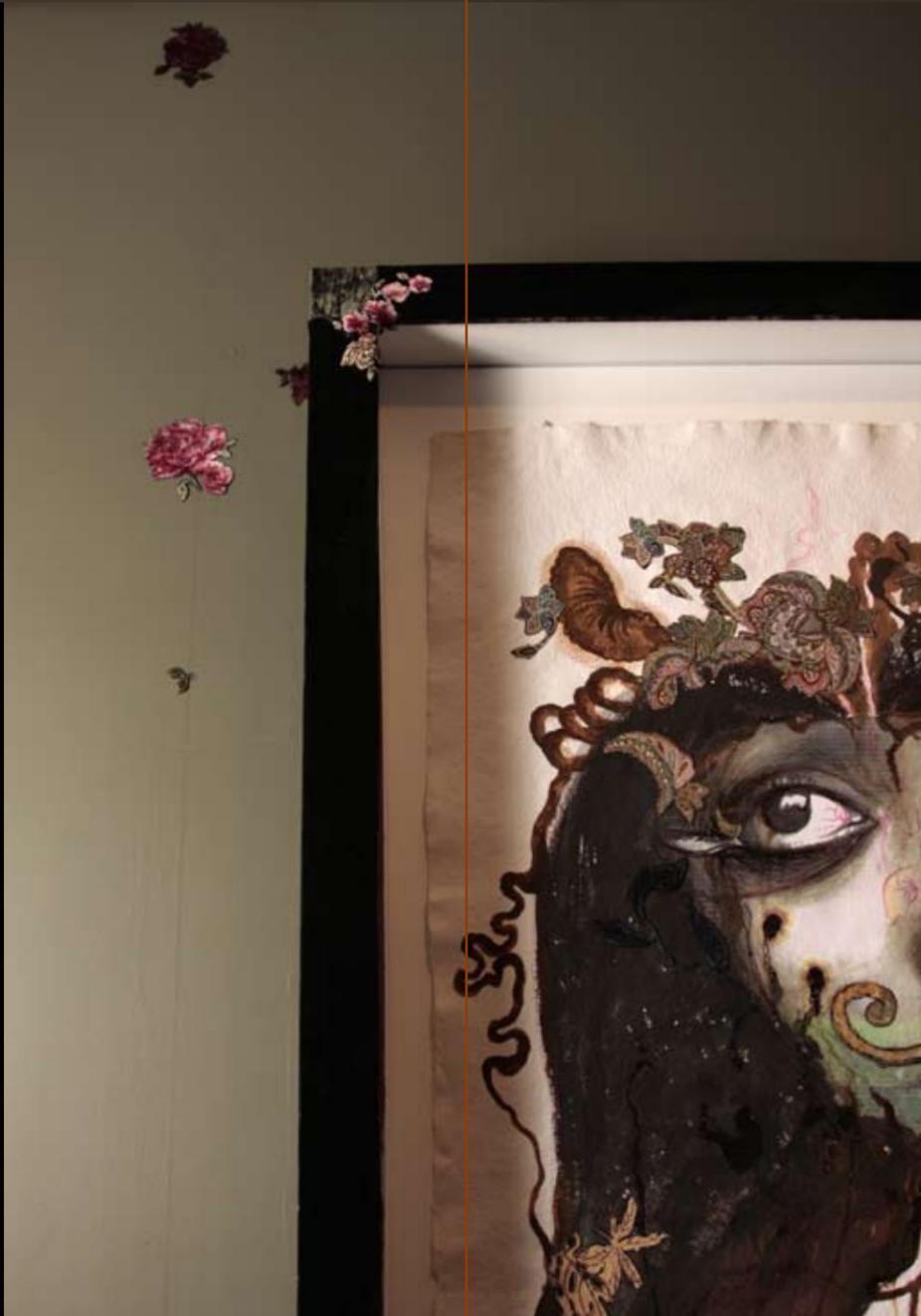




details &



installation view
at bose pacia
new york





incapable of being unnoticed 2

**mixed media drawing
with photo collage,
water colour, gold leaf,
fabric on acid free
indian handmade paper
with a velvet covered
collaged frame**

84 x 42 inches

2007



mixed media
with water colour
drawing, photo
collage, fabric, ink,
metal leaf on acid
free handmade
paper

84 x 42 inches

2007





ULTIMATE QUALITY

Play

AN ISO 9001



previous
pages
(60-61): work
in progress

this page:
details
&
installation
view at
bose pacia
new york

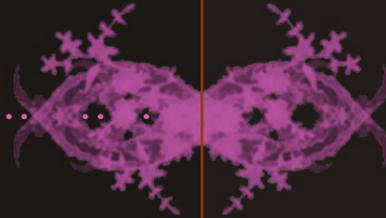


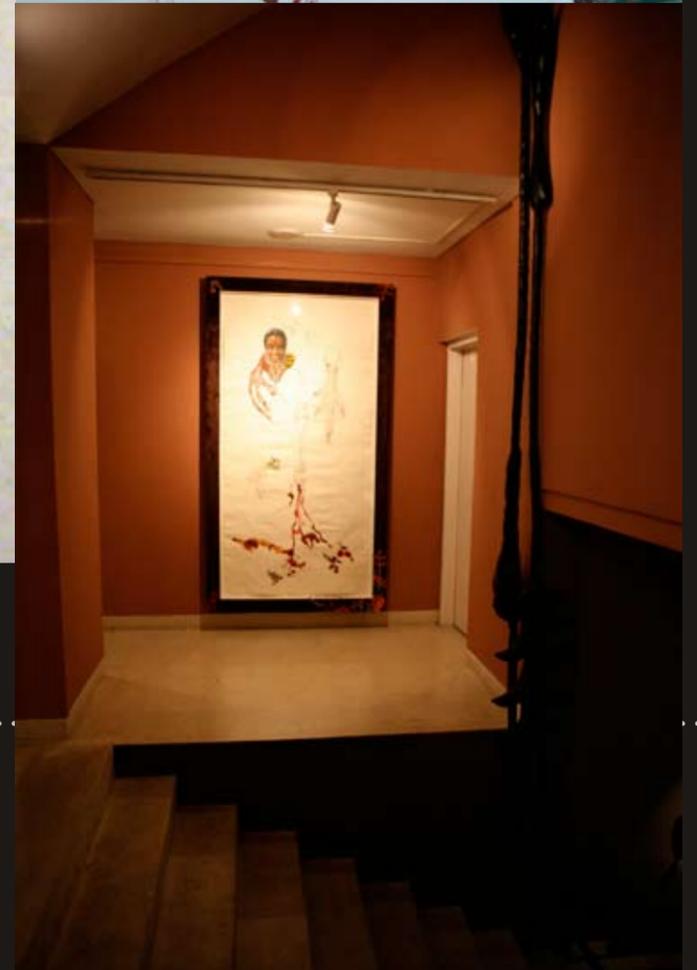
mercy killing 2

**mixed media
with water colour
drawing, photo
collage, fabric, ink,
metal leaf on acid free
handmade paper**

84 x 42 inches

2007





**details &
work in progress
at the artist's
studio**

&

**installation view
at nature morte
new delhi**

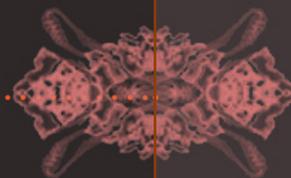


occasional disagreement 1

**mixed media
drawing with
photo collage,
water colour, ink,
gold leaf, fabric
on acid free
indian handmade
paper**

84 x 42 inches

2007



occasional disagreement 2

mixed media drawing with photo collage, water colour, gold leaf, fabric on acid free indian handmade paper with a velvet covered collaged frame

42 x 84 inches

2007

following pages (92-93):
work in progress



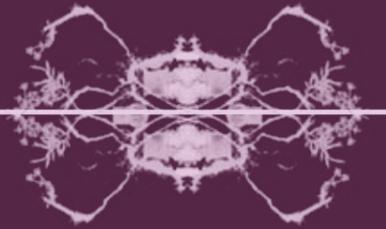


oddly enough

mixed media drawing with photo collage, water colour, gold leaf, fabric on acid free indian handmade paper with a velvet covered collaged frame

42 x 84 inches

2007



perhaps u 

digital photo montage
with collage and
drawing on archival
photo paper

36 x 24 inches



mixed media drawing
with photo collage,
water colour, gold leaf,
fabric on acid free
indian handmade paper

84 x 42 inches

2007



mixed media drawing with photo collage, water colour, gold leaf, fabric on acid free indian handmade paper with a velvet covered collaged frame

42 x 84 inches

2007





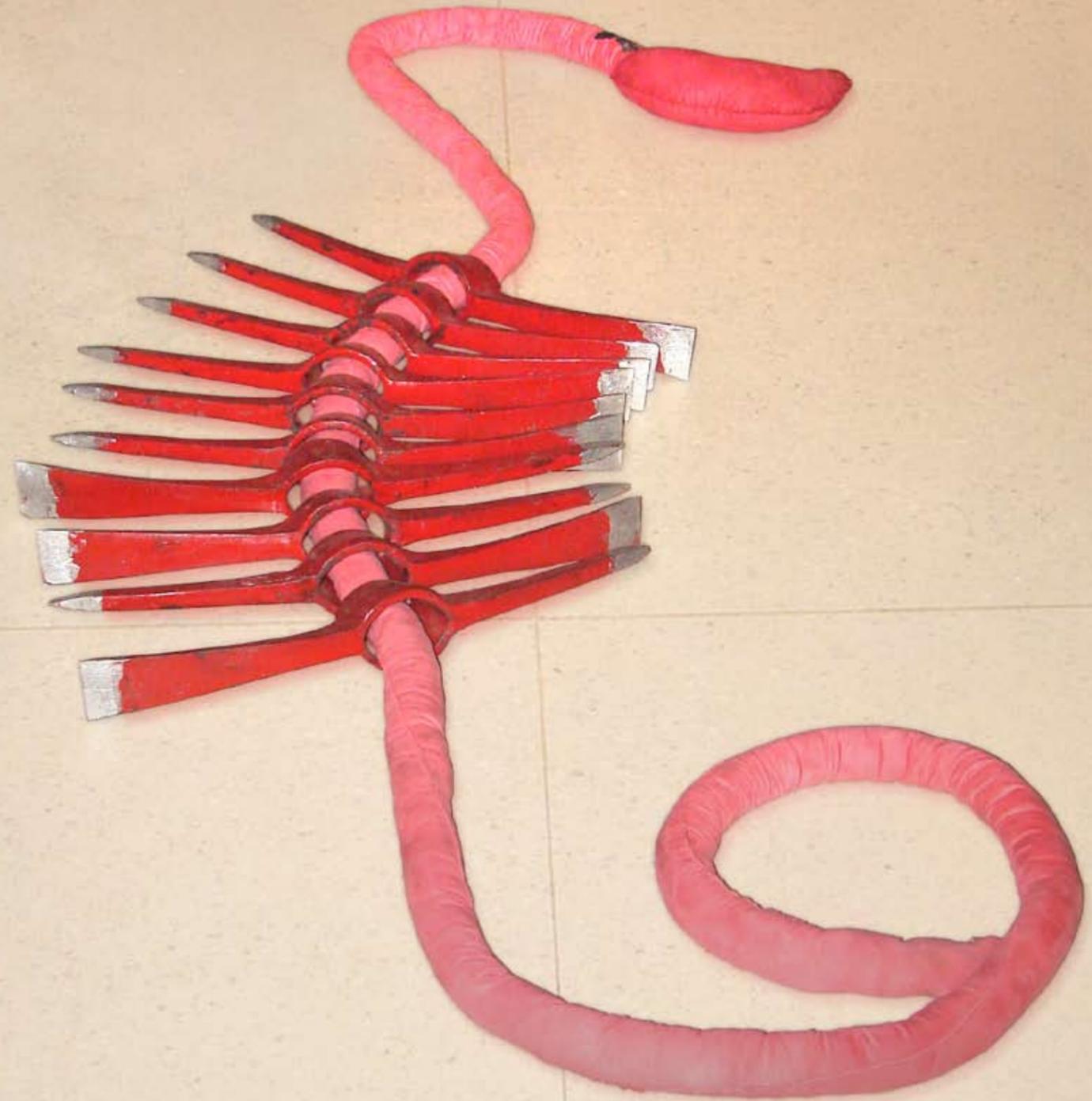
Deeper Digger



»

sculpture with
velvet, cotton,
fabric, iron
digging tool,
fabric and metal
colour

variable
dimension



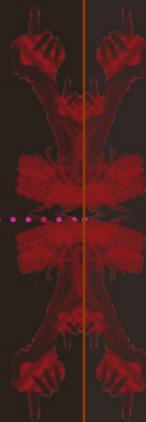
 **working class hero 1**


mixed media with water
colour drawing, photo
collage, fabric, ink,
metal leaf on acid free
handmade paper

84 x 42 inches

2007

following pages
(108-109)
work in progress at the
artist's studio





 **working class hero 2**


**mixed media drawing
with photo collage, water
colour, gold leaf, fabric
on acid free indian
handmade paper with a
velvet covered collaged
frame**

84 x 42 inches

2007





The Weight of Nightmares: A Meditation on Mithu Sen's Self-portraits

**by
Nancy Adajania**

In her recent suite of works, 'Half Full', Mithu Sen surrounds us with self-portraits that confess, even proclaim secrets that are normally held behind the polite envelope of the skin. It is as though the cadaver lying on the slab in Dr Tulp's anatomy lesson had leaped past the apprentice surgeons hovering around it and begun to address us with orgiastic glee in the first person. [1]

The anatomy lesson was one of the great topoi of the Northern Baroque, a group portrait of the explorers of the body's interior spaces. In Sen's version, the all-male assembly of spectators is dismissed and the subject of the anatomy lesson assumes centre-stage in all its outrageous complexity. Her mixed-media paintings, photo-montages, sculptures and video installation are all animated by the presence of the viscera, the looped organs, the conduits and spectres of the female body.

At New York's Bose Pacia Art Gallery, the artist set up an elaborate masquerade which, while ostensibly entertaining its viewers, carried sinister undertones. In one frame, Sen performed an unsettling striptease, undressing right down to the skeleton. A tiger sprang from her vagina, just as in another frame, her brain spilled out of her skull as a lush forest of slithering, snaky creatures.

Sen's art is a test of endurance. She is perpetually pushing the limits of the viewer's capacity to tolerate the onslaught of her imagination. While the artist rationalises the current series as "a distortion that spreads the spirit thin... a rogue self-critique that attempts to present an extended self", this does not explain why she would leave herself open to mockery and ridicule. The only way we can make sense of such self-caricature is by drawing out a phenomenology of the act of viewing an artist's self-portrait.

The most dramatic tension that we experience when looking at a conventional self-portrait inheres in the fact that nothing separates us from the artist's nightmares except a thin cordon of painted skin, a skin of paint. Sen rips apart that thin cordon. She does not just invite her viewers in, but obliges them to share confidences which are disturbing and even shocking. When the orthodox pictorial conventions are broken, the ideas of order, measure, proportion, beauty and propriety that underwrite the world of civility are shattered. The psychic discontents and emotional disturbances spill out, taking the form of chimeras, skeletons and freaks.

Sen's work affects us precisely at a visceral level, because she brings the viscera out into public view and hangs them before us like festoons.

Our curiosity is whetted by those works in which Sen combines her photographed face with anatomical drawings. In these, she holds out the illusion of a recognisable identity – guaranteed by the photograph – but withdraws it through a series of feints and sleights. Her identity morphs constantly, as she shuttles between playing a traditional Indian woman with her hair tied in a bun and playing a glamorous fashion model, when she isn't doing a Duchamp on herself by adorning her self-portrait with a Dali moustache.

Each of these personae participates in a carnival of polymorphous progenitiveness, impelled by an irresistible principle of growth: body parts bloom like plants, and patches of animal skin develop on an exposed organ. The artist grows wild in these images, linking herself organically to the natural cycles of growth, extinction and regeneration. In speaking of Sen's artistic position, I would borrow the term 'wild woman' from the feminist Clarissa Pinkola Estes, who rejects its more common derogatory usage and uses it to indicate a woman who flouts social conventions related to gender and domesticity while flaunting her appetite for life, sex and independence. The wild woman is not subject to the rules that govern gender behaviour in society: she abandons the regularity of norm in favour of the unpredictability of performance.

Indeed, the performative is built into the very structure of this exhibition. Sen extends the medium of drawing, lets her lines climb over the frames and across the walls. Soft sculptures crawl on the wall or are assigned to the ceiling. The exhibition thus communicates the character of a living organism, midway between theatre and forest.

Sen's conspiracy with the elements of nature could also be seen as a camouflage for power politics. Take for instance, her composite self-portrait as predator and prey, with the tiger and the deer competing for attention in the same body. Is she a tigress dreaming of antlered peace, or a deer masking herself in a tigerskin? There is a constant conflict in Sen's self-portraits between the loss and gain involved in acts of (self-)translation. But as the title of the exhibition suggests, these acts of translation never start from a tabula rasa, and do not aim for complete erasure or a radically new rebirth.

While the condition of being half-full may suggest, a passive state of incompleteness in common parlance, the term has a very different connotation in Sufi circles. There, it points us towards the condition of transitivity between emptiness and fullness, a constant state of becoming. I would think that Sen's restlessness aspires to such a transitive state of being: she is a self in transit.

This thought gathers strength when we reflect on Sen's choice of medium in these self-portraits, and the relationships among them. No medium has the frame entirely to itself here. The photograph defers to the drawing, which takes up the task of completing the image, only to open it up in various directions and leave it dynamically unresolved.

II.

In a grid of photo-montages titled 'False Friends', Sen lampoons portraits of herself taken during her travels around the world. Impromptu commissions, these portraits were taken by acquaintances or strangers she happened to meet abroad. Being conscious of the manner in which they responded to her 'foreign looks', she manipulated the images in Photoshop to express the intersection at which their respective gazes crossed. Some of their exoticising tendencies overlap with some of her caricatural excesses: what is produced is an emotional complex of seduction and repulsion. Sen plays with common prejudices, such as those involved when tourists look at locals and vice versa. Lizards crawl over her head while she takes a siesta; her mouth explodes into a simian maw; she entertains us by entering into the body of a muscleman.

The artist-tourist as the collector of exotic worlds is herself subjected to the scrutiny of the local eye, as if she is an animal in a mobile zoo. One of the frames is filled, intriguingly, with a chart of abnormal-looking eyes. Sen found this chart in a calendar hanging in the clinic of a Chinese doctor in Soho, New York. Is Sen cautioning us against the jaundiced view that reflects the biases of class, race and gender? When does looking shade over into voyeurism, and when does self-consciousness turn into the pathology of narcissism?

Along the way, Sen creates her own canons of beauty through three fictive *nayikas* or *sundaris*, mock-academically equipped with dates of birth and death: Jamunarani (1814-1864), Amodrani (1751-2003) and Anadsundari (2070-2071). None of these figures follow the norms of classical Indian beauty, poise, grace and measured expression of feeling that the Sanskrit aesthetic canon lays down for the ideal woman. Rather, they parody the *nayikas* ('heroines') and *sundaris* ('beauties') of epic literature and the art, literature and theatre of the 19th-century nationalist revival. In 'Jamunarani', Sen plays a water nymph with her face out of whack. In 'Amodrani', she expresses her pleasure by going squint-eyed over a glass of wine. In 'Anadsundari', literally the 'pomegranate beauty', she does not symbolise fertility or immortality in a classical fashion but instead plays the part of a Balthusian child sitting on a phallic cannon that sends shivers up her plaits.

Historically, names such as the ones Sen allots to her characters are found among courtesans in Bengal from the late 19th century. Such names are also used primarily for the characters of courtesans in 19th-century Kalighat pats, Bat-tala woodcuts, oleographs and chromolithographs. [2] Although the artist is unaware of this historical context and claims to have used these terms because of their lyrical resonance, we cannot discount the fact that she has unwittingly deployed the names of women characters who occupied a liminal and transgressive position in colonial Bengal society. [3]

Sen's drawings and photographs not only ironise conventional ways of looking but also defy the authoritative act of labelling and naming. She resists what the political philosopher Althusser termed 'interpellation'.

[4] Any person who is 'interpellated' becomes an ontological captive, because the ground of her being is defined by the summoner or interpellator. In Sen's mercurial works, we may imagine a voice that reverberates: "I don't become the 'me' you have in mind when you summon me." Her extreme self-representations are a means of breaking down the hegemony of ideological apparatuses that narrowly confine women, and women-artists (that problematic hyphenated identity). In fact, in her everyday dealings with journalists, she evades those who look for ways to interpellate her, responding to their questions in a bizarre, nonsensical manner, befuddling them. "Why do you use the photograph of your face in your mixed-media self-portraits?" she was once asked. Her answer: "To avoid copyright issues!"

III.

Sen turns the viewer into a chronic voyeur, either providing an X-ray vision of her body or leaving peep-holes in the walls to provide us with an overture before the drama unfolds. The finale of the exhibition unfolds in a dark womb space. Disembowelled, orphaned intestinal loops hang on the wall like the remains of a mysterious architecture. This work, 'Destroyed Labyrinth', reminds us of Kiki Smith's wall sculpture 'Digestive System' (1988). But while Smith's digestive system is a precise representation of its shape and length from tongue to anus, Sen makes the intestinal loops larger than life and infinitely long, a labyrinth that no thread can penetrate or heal.

We have barely recovered from the remains of the labyrinth when we are faced with a video animation which shows the artist with her favourite piece of sculpture: a banana studded with teeth slides up and down her mouth, which is covered with a hair piece to simulate the vagina. We are not sure whether she is being bitten or choked by her own artworks. Or on the other hand, whether she wishes to consume her own art like Chronos eating his children? Or could this be a recurrent sexual nightmare provoked by a *penis dentatus*.

This tragicomic animation acts as a relevant pause before we gather ourselves to confront the most haunting work in this exhibition. In the video installation, 'Ephemeral Affair', the artist sheds all the baroque

exhibitionism of her performances and allows her bare face and shoulders to fill the screen. We watch her wince in pain. The disturbing off-screen noise of a drill cues us: perhaps a hole is being bored into her skin? But who is the perpetrator of this wound? Why does the artist wish to hide the source of her pain?

We are seized by the paradoxical rapture of this pain, naked and repeated in such a manner as almost to become musical. Our eyes moisten in the same manner as when we hear a pure passage of classical music. And yet we have before us the living image of suffering, what the philosopher Levinas would call the brimming face of the Other. The origin of the word 'aesthetics' lies in the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning 'feeling', especially the responses to the external stimuli that we call pain and pleasure. The opposite term, found in medical practice, is *anaesthesia*: the numbing of the responses of pain and pleasure. Thus, art and pain, healing and numbness, have their origins in the same complex mechanism of the self's response to the world's stimuli. This little etymological meditation is vindicated when we are told that the off-screen action in 'Ephemeral Affair' is the tattooing of a spiral motif on the artist's hand. [5] The image must balance between the acknowledgement of the pain that has shaped it, and a necessary forgetting of that pain so that it can signify other truths, other futures.

Notes & References

[1] 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp' (1632), usually called 'The Anatomy Lesson', is one of Rembrandt's finest and best known paintings.

[2] I am grateful to the artist and art historian Paula Sengupta for this information.

[3] Many of the photomontages featured in 'False Friends' were first shown as a site-specific installation titled 'Indubala and her Unbelongings' 2007 at the Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi. Indubala was a well-known Bengali actress and singer who made her presence felt on stage and in films. Born in 1899 to a circus artist who had to become a courtesan to survive, Indubala was not ashamed of her origins and continued to use the suffix '-bala' in her name, which would make her social background immediately recognisable. Later in life, she worked towards the uplift of socially disadvantaged women. [See www.screen.india.com] While the artwork does not address this historical figure directly, Sen has subconsciously conflated her persona with that of the performing artiste Indubala, who had the courage to confront social hypocrisy and live her life with dignity.

[4] See Donald E Hall, *Subjectivity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004).

[5] To understand the dynamics of masking/unmasking and the bearing/baring of pain in Sen's work, we must explore the deeper history of 'Ephemeral Affair'. This video is part of an installation titled 'Being Anastacia' 2006, which Sen made during her residency in Brazil. The series was inspired by the bust of the 17th-century slave and martyr, the Afro-Brazilian goddess Anastacia, which she saw in a shrine in Salvador, Bahia. Anastacia's defining feature is a mask, a torture device, which covers her mouth. It is believed that she was forced to wear this mask as a punishment for rejecting her master's sexual advances. The mask gradually eroded her mouth and she died of gangrene. Although Anastacia has not been officially canonised by the Church, she is considered a saint and healer at the folk-religious level. The masked Anastacia became a symbol of resistance for the black consciousness movement in the 1980s. [See Shayna Samuels, 'Both a Slave and a Saint, She Lives On', *New York Times*, May 21, 2000.]

On being told the story of this martyr-saint, Sen began to discuss it with young girls she met at a local fashion show on a nearby island. Many of them, who were poor and wanted to become fashion models, did not seem to know of her existence. Sen struck a deal with them: she would make their portfolios and in return they would wear her hair

masks and pose for her. Sen turned her trademark hair sculptures into masks recalling Anastacia's captivity and resistance. Her attempt was to align the desires and silences of these young girls from the margins of society with those of the slave-saint, who could perhaps have served as their ideal. Eventually, she seems to have decided to incarnate Anastacia in a performance of her own, as an exploration of the complex of pain, silence, resilience and glory that the martyr-saint embodies. Here as elsewhere, Sen has been satisfied with nothing less than the risking of her own mind and body, rather than working through proxies.

NANCY ADAJANIA is a cultural theorist, art critic and independent curator. She has written and lectured extensively on extended sculpture, new media and public art (including at Documenta 11, Kassel, ZKM, Karlsruhe, and Transmediale, Berlin). Her theoretical concerns include the effects of mediatic reality on painting ('a new mediatic realism'); the postcolonial location of video and net-based practices ('new-context media'); the politicisation of visual culture ('a new urban sociology of self-representation'); and the illusion of democratic performativity produced by contemporary mass media ('televsual assemblies'). Adajania co-curated 'Zoom! Art in Contemporary India' (Lisbon, 2004) and curated 'Avatars of the Object: Sculptural Projections' (Bombay, 2006).



**digital photo
work with pasted
artificial nails on
archival photo
paper**

36 x 24 inches





 **half full** 

**digital photo
montage with
collage on
archival photo
paper**

36 x 24 inches

**following pages
(124-125):
Installation view
at bose pacia, new
york**



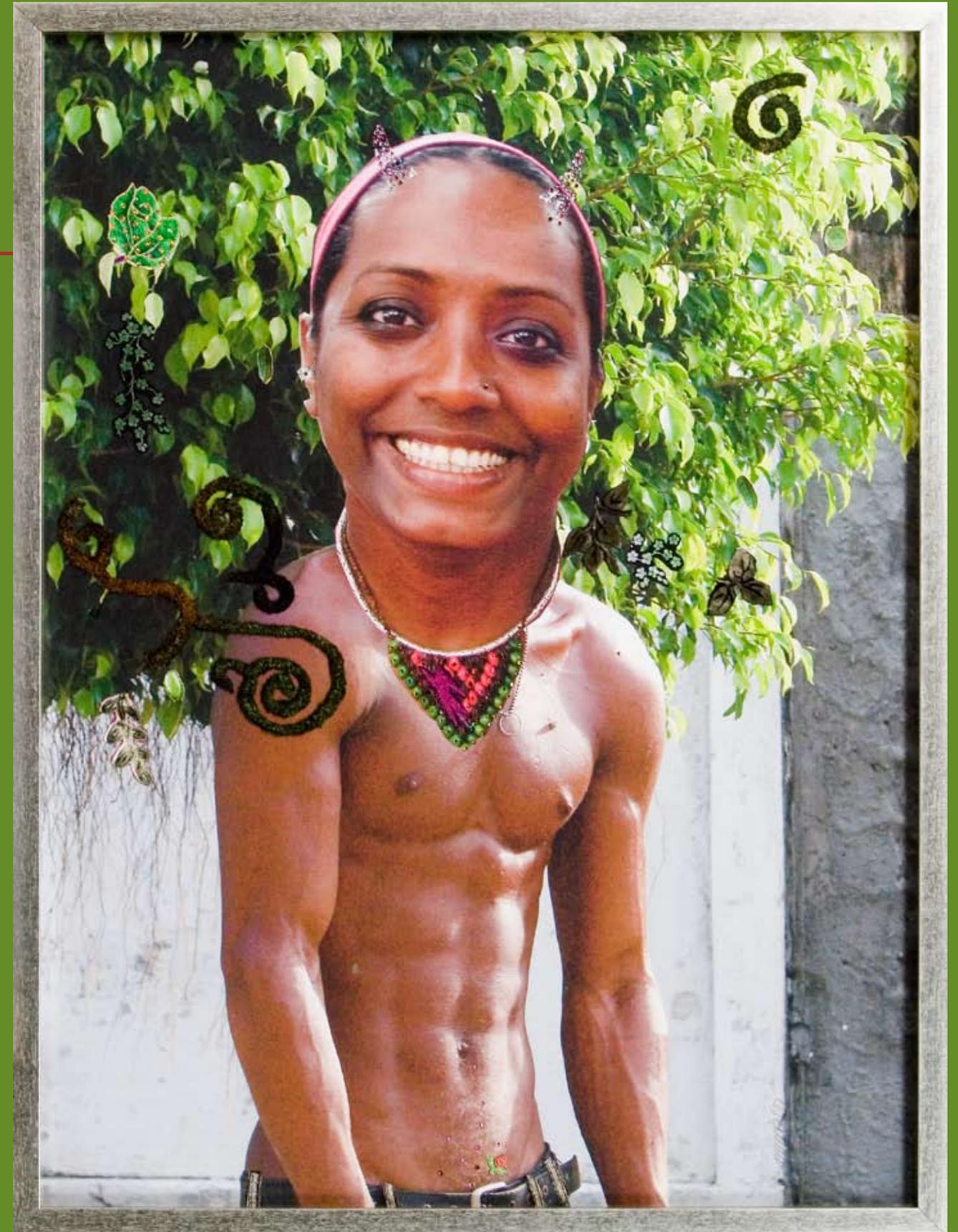




MAP (when M meets AP)

**digital photo
montage with
collage and
drawing on
archival photo
paper**

36 x 24 inches



Mali (when mithu meets Dali)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Manju (when mithu meets Anju)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Messy (when mithu meets the sea)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MANon (when mithu meets the canon)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Mine (when mithu meets wine)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MANANA (when mithu drops the banana)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Milli

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Chilli

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MY (when mithu meets her bye)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MY 2 (when mithu meets the eye)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Mean (when mithu means the pin)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

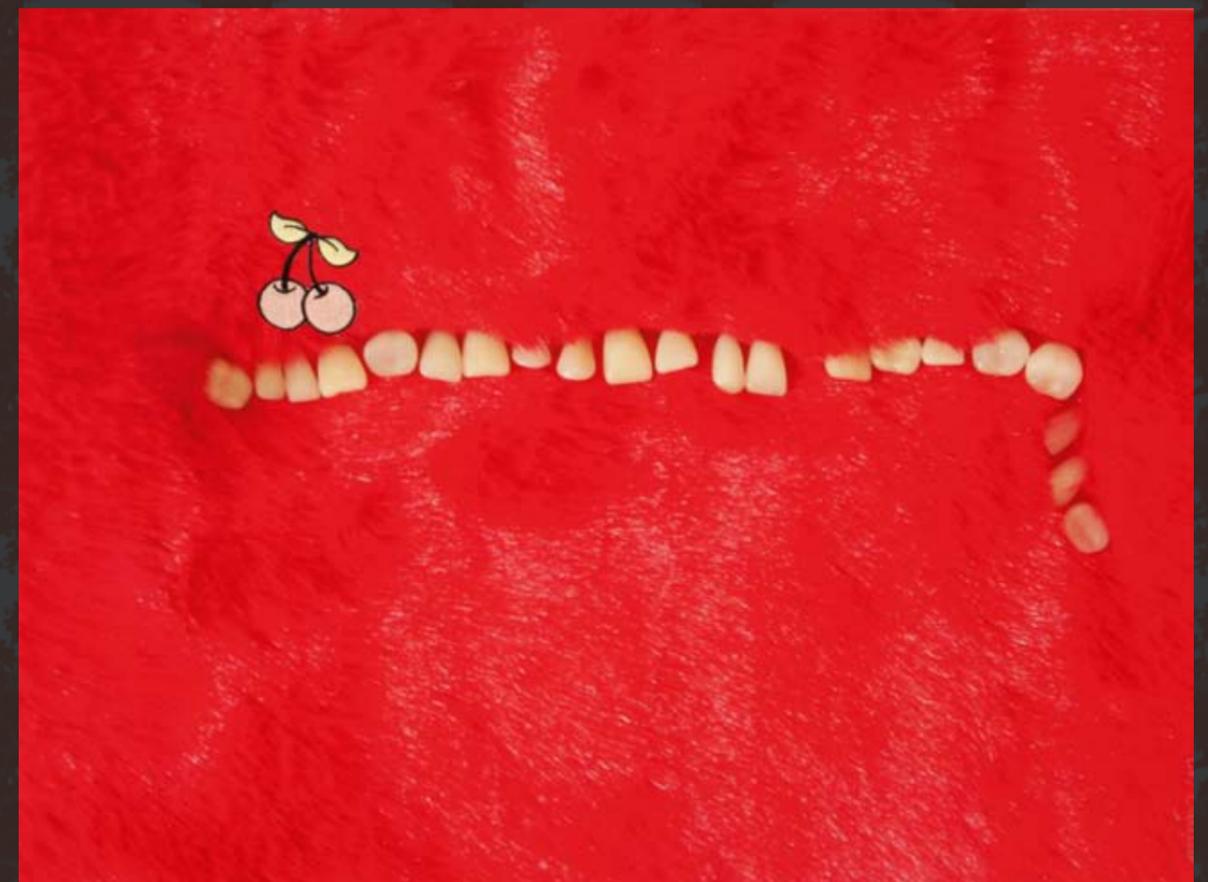
18 x 24 inches



Myth (when mithu eats the teeth)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MITTOO (when mithu names the tattoo)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

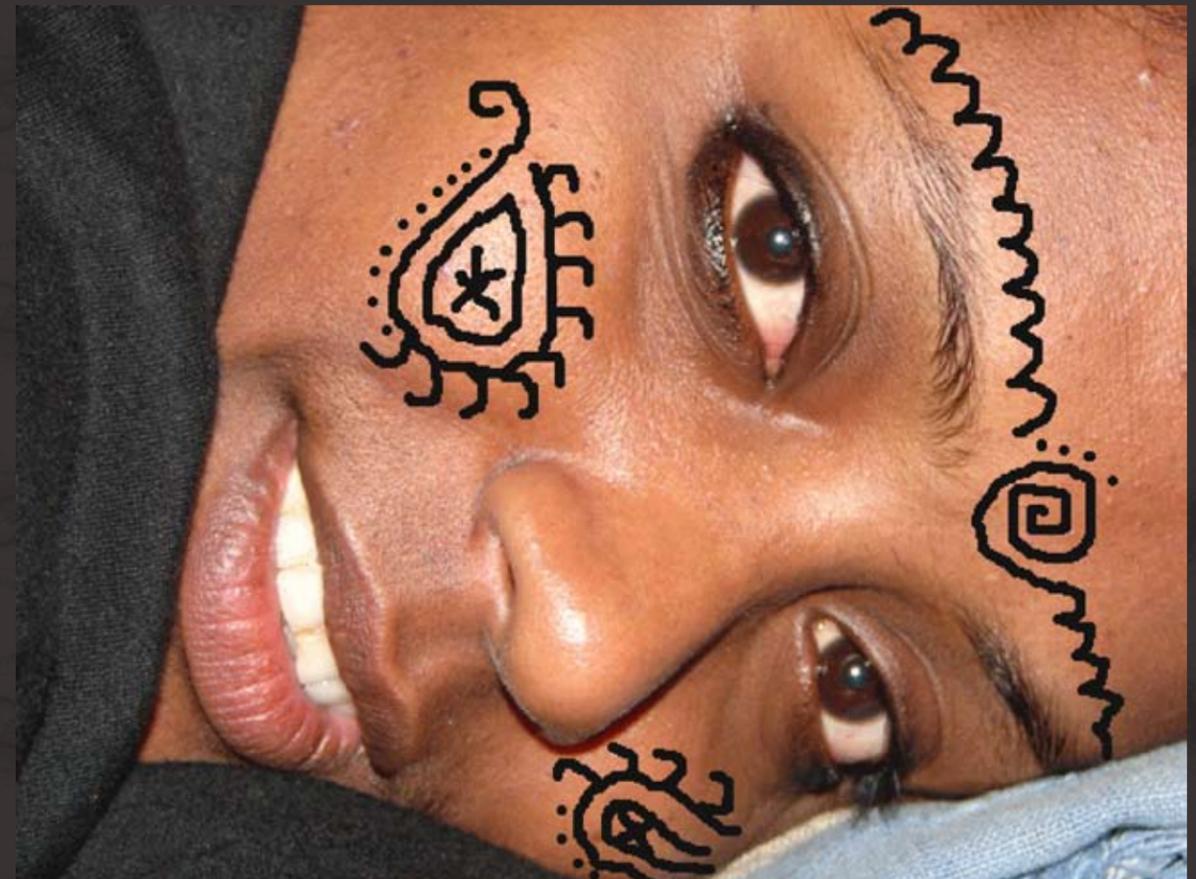
18 x 24 inches



MITTOO 2 (when mithu dreams tattoo)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MOLE (when mithu meets the kohl)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



MOOTH (when mithu golds the tooth)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Deep Dig

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches



Icarus (wings to fly)

digital photo montage with collage and drawing on archival photo paper

18 x 24 inches





**THE ARTIST IN
CONVERSATION:
MITHU SEN
NANCY ADAJANIA
&
ANDREW MAERKLE**

ANDREW MAERKLE: I first came across Mithu's work when she was here in New York for the residency with Bose Pacia. I remember it was raining during the opening and Mithu didn't show up, as was her plan all along. But I think the installation was much more effective that way, as she had scattered drawings and sketches all over the apartment, a typical New York domestic space. There were bits of wigs and hair hanging from the shower stall and tiny artifacts either pinned to the walls or scattered on tabletops. It gave you the sense that you were stumbling into a forensic site; the investigation was amplified with Mithu not being there. I have since been keeping an eye on Mithu's work and she manages to consistently surprise me.

Mithu embodies an unhinged and unpredictable creativity. And her latest body of works address a whole range of themes. You see, obviously, Mithu on display and the question I would like to pose here is: to what extent is that Mithu herself, or is it a persona and what does it represent? Then also you see other scenes, such as the body, sexuality, internal organs and external trappings such as tiger skins, saris, ornamentation. These visceral themes come together in a strangely clinical way. I was struck by the video in the back room, "The Tattoo," in which much of the action occurs off camera and Mithu is in the middle of the frame, possibly naked, staring directly at the camera while unintelligible voices sound off screen. There's some direction such as an admonition not to turn the flash on. It is all very confusing and clinical at the same time. For any of those who have been in a hospital and sedated, there is this kind of ethereal awareness: you know people are circling you or doing things to you, but you're not sure what, and it doesn't really matter because you're not able to focus on it. It's sometimes scary but also very primal. You think of being a child and having that same experience. That is what is most revealing about this work.

The other element that comes into play is a sense of unease, or fear, as well as a kind of exploration, which brings the work into another realm; ultimately there's still a sense of play and pranksterism. Tattoos embody an impulsive rebellion against convention and that is echoed in the grid of collage photographs and the multi-media slide show of animated photographs on display. They open up a new level of spontaneity and transformation: weird, winking eyes, horse faces and tongues rolling in and out of Mithu's mouth. There's a certain excitement into which we can delve deeper as we talk tonight.

NANCY ADAJANIA: I recently discovered something in a museum gift shop called a “Ballistic Rose.” This was a brooch in the form of a rose made out of black bulletproof cloth. I was absolutely fascinated by this object. In a strange way, it brought to mind Mithu’s art. It symbolizes the dialectic of beauty and pain in her work, and also points to a spectrum of extreme emotions loaded towards romanticism and melodrama.

Certain leitmotifs recur in Mithu’s work, like the snake signifying the loss of innocence, or the bird referring to migratory flight as well as the desire to nest, and the rose symbolizing immortality as well as the deepening whorls of the subconscious. In Mithu’s earlier work, the drawings were bawdy and jocular. She shocked the viewer by repeatedly treating them to phallic body parts, especially the dark insides of the mouth, a stand-in for the vagina, and the slithering tongue. Her desire to communicate with the viewer about the unsayable, the ambiguous nature of female sexuality, was so intense that she alternately attracted and repelled them with her risqué attention-seeking devices. But these works are relatively subtle when compared to the present show, where the body entrails have spilled out. An unnaturally long garland of the intestine hangs loose in the inside room. The current works, both paintings and sculptures, recall the pathological compulsiveness of Yayoi Kusama. I think of Kusama because of her unstoppable need to convert the exhibition space into an edgy phallic field. Mithu, would you like to share with us your experience of (un) belonging, of always being ‘Half Full’?

MITHU SEN: I did think that today I might have to speak about the term ‘Half Full’ and thus went onto the Internet, where I came across so many connotations of the words ‘Half Full’. Some were pessimistic, others optimistic, and the rest mostly rational and theoretical, thus having very little to do with what I have actually done.

As an individual I have never been within a space that I wanted to leave. There is always something to grab and absorb me, and make the most of the time spent, as I have always felt that I will leave or be returning home the next day. Perhaps that makes me materialistic? Then again, home has its definition and I don’t necessarily know where it is, as once there I immediately start thinking of some other place, of where I can travel and explore through again.

During my residency stay in New York last year, I came here and was given a beautiful space, which was a large apartment big enough for an entire family, however I stayed there all alone. While staying in the space I slowly began to mull over the relationship between a guest and a host. I stayed within the apartment and thus was the host and everyone else beyond the four walls of the apartment thus became the guests. And then after that, I thought of another word: hospitality. Finally my mind ended up saying that period of guest, host, hospitality and tolerance.

Thus, my studio-cum-domestic space was open 24 hours, as an invitation, via mail or email, for everybody to come and spend time with me, make me feel I am not away from home. Although I still don’t know where my home is, who my actual family is, I still felt homesick. This sickness, however, at that moment was a kind of luxurious feeling, even though it may sound romanticized. Then again I am a romantic and as Nancy says, I carry my children with me, my daughters and sons, so I’m always carrying extra baggage stuffed with my children. And of course am overweight. That’s the way I set up my family always on the move and forever temporary. Being in this over grown, collective family and yet to be in this practical world, I make my existence as an artist in residency. I feel comfortable, honest about my identity and reciprocal towards my hosts.

But I never pretended to produce ‘art works’; rather, I was very honest with the people interested in my art. And mostly, I wanted to interact with the people I was inviting in my space. I wanted to make a journey through their lives and presence. I wanted to compose those sharing .We could be having a cup of tea, or looking at some catalogues or watching my favorite Shah Rukh Khan DVD.

I am more interested in relationships with each and everybody, with each and every thing. So my work is not just site specific, but time and site specific. And if I am asked today to talk about these things, it is difficult to bring all of them together in that perfect composition. I cannot exactly explain the feeling of being involved with everything there. I cannot even say it is a concrete body of work. It is just time and I’m working and things are passing at that point. I cannot segregate what is part of the work and what is part of my life. As I connect myself with each and everything, the plant grows and the flower blossoms. With time, some things are left over.

I was in a residency last year in Brazil where I made “The Tattoo.” I was working on a project called Being Anastasia, and I was producing a lot of drawings and photographs. For my new project I needed a painful expression and used my own body. I use self-images simply because I didn’t want to bother anybody for anything, like copyrights. But this Half-Full series is not autobiographical. Being a devotee of love, life and beauty, I could not hit myself and rather found a way of painning myself by having a temporary pain and a beautiful scar, and thus approached a tattoo artist who hardly spoke any English. (He spoke Portuguese. His friend was there as well, whose voice can be heard in the background of the video.) I sat in the chair and asked him which position was most comfortable for him, which part of the body is the most sensitive to have the tattoo so that I can get the maximum painful expression. He pointed at my palm, where the skin is so close to the bones and nerves. I still had no idea what imagery I wanted and so took my hairpin, which was a spiral shape, and decided to have that as my tattoo. My friend Diego was watching me next to the camera, in case I should go out of the frame due to the pain. He was worried that I might cry and give up. But my whole intention was not to cry. I wanted to get the whole expression of pain from somewhere deep within me, from my stomach. I wanted to resist the tears but not the pain; pain can sometimes act as a mask.

NANCY ADAJANIA: So you chose the spiral form for you tattoo?

MITHU SEN: Yes, because it was my hairpin. It is a beautiful, common image and I didn’t want something controversial, as this part will always be seen.

NANCY ADAJANIA: But does it also have to do with the cosmos?

MITHU SEN: Yes I like that it can relate to anything and is holistic in meaning and perception. It has less to do with these philosophical things. Some forms are just common and connected easily in life, like my using of roses, bananas, birds or penises in my works.

ANDREW MAERKLE: But do you make a lot of your decisions that way, spontaneously?

MITHU SEN: I’m not really an introspective person and all my thoughts and decisions just come spontaneously to me.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Do you ever do research, or think about things before you make art?

MITHU SEN: What is research? Is that something for which I sit separately in my study? Everything I do is going through a process of exploring the site and time through life. I “research” in my own way. I am constantly busy researching my “family,” my invisible sons and daughters and everybody I play with.

NANCY ADAJANIA: That is really a beautiful way of putting it and it is great to learn how you think and how you make your works. In the project space you were very happy to come and introduce your family with everyone, your dolls are your sons and daughters.

MITHU SEN: Yes, I introduced everybody there.

NANCY ADAJANIA: And tell us about these peepholes you have made in the exhibition walls. On the one hand, you are an exhibitionist projecting yourself in a tiger skin sari with a spiral tattoo and an Odalisque moustache. At the same time, you like to retreat into the inner chamber and dramatize an unidentifiable pain, as in The Tattoo video. You want people to enter into your work, but also hold them at a distance. The more you show of yourself, the more you are hiding something.

MITHU SEN: I love life. I cannot sleep because I think I might miss something. Something is constantly chasing me as if I am going to miss something by not being conscious.

These peepholes increase the level of curiosity, especially coupled with the sound in the background. It leads viewers to make the journey inside, upon which you discover an even more playful, ambiguous, darkly colorful world. You in fact reach somewhere that has no extra existence of pain. It is perhaps sad but not scary. A lot of people find my work and me scary; these notions of fear and beauty depend on perspective. But this can be changed. Everything’s changing and nothing is like yesterday. If I made a work even two or three months ago, I would say something contextually different about it today.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Is it about seduction too? The hole invites people to look in. On the other hand, in some of these works you are posing very glamorously. This could almost be a classic Brigitte Bardot pin-up. Over here, this work looks like a classic film star, an Andy Warhol silk screen. These images seduce but they also repel. It’s only a surface glamour.

MITHU SEN: References to Brigitte Bardot and Andy Warhol I believe reflect a problem with our knowledge: we always rely on references. They are necessary of course but I wonder if it is still possible to just see a work as it is? Because it is I, I know it is I and I did not intentionally make these links. I produced this work in Delhi and it is interesting to see how the work is transformed within its immediate context. I am sure if I showed it back home it would relate to different things, though I also don’t believe that Warhol or Brigit Bardot posters were not just the surface glamour

NANCY ADAJANIA: I get the sense that I am looking at a glamorous model but at the same time I am also encountering characters in a circus or freak show. It reminds me of animal masks, which are common in South Asia, in puppet theaters for example. It makes for a very animated image.

MITHU SEN: I was thinking more along the lines of the grotesque when making this work in my studio. I was in my tiny studio suddenly making this large-scale work with all around my hanging stuffed sons and daughters. In one work you can actually see the brain coming out with a child’s embryo.

NANCY ADAJANIA: The body is exposed, seen as if through an X-ray vision.

MITHU SEN: You can also see the inside of the ears.

ANDREW MAERKLE: How do you choose your images? This one with the black frame and roses looks very dreamy as you gaze out to the distance. Others look like celebrity snapshots with the flash on your forehead and nose and your smile. Of course there is the grotesque element, but have you thought of the other side of it, the glamorous side of it?

MITHU SEN: Actually it’s not so much glamour as it is exhibitionism. I would prefer to use that term. It’s actually the drama between exhibiting and diving deep into your subconscious. Words like glamour and celebrity could take you in a different direction. It is more as though I am a child-woman saying I’ll put up a performance and I’m doing the most wacky, edgy things to invite you. There is also the “Tiger Series.” The figure has the knee of a deer but is also wrapped with a tiger. It is about receiving and consuming and that dangerous invitation. These were my basic intentions but now she is starting to look so glamorous with the long ears and what not.....hmmmm, it’s hard to oppose the glamour aspect now!!

NANCY ADAJANIA: A power equation is underscored in this image. You think that the tiger might consume the deer, but there is an ambiguity about who will consume who.

MITHU SEN: It is obvious that the tiger will grab the deer but visually here the deer is predominant. They both display their beautiful skin, which is in large part their identity. There are, however, also the deer’s antlers.

NANCY ADAJANIA: There is a changing of skins.

MITHU SEN: The whole body of work is about ambiguous identity; who are we exactly, and who do we become, whether it is by the pressures of our surroundings or demands and desires, our own and others, we are defined by parents, siblings, partners, friends, neighbors, our identities are constantly changing, constantly moving. We are shuffling between our multiple identities and multiple outfits.

The photographs arranged in grids were taken while I was traveling. They were usually just photos of myself taken either by myself or my immediate acquaintances, playing the role of a foreigner in a different geography. When I returned to India I journeyed through my travels with these pictures. There I also found a desire to see myself in a different way. Maybe I cannot be a horse but I am here or that muscle man but..... Why not?

NANCY ADAJANIA: So you are putting on these various masks?

MITHU SEN: They are not masks to cover or hide you; it’s more like exploring other selves. Revealing the other sides because there is no definite me.

NANCY ADAJANIA: No, but that’s the whole point, masks are not about concealment but about expression and the performative. You’ve taken on various kinds of personae to talk about the issues that are close to your heart. You’re hiding something so to speak in plain sight, all the time in your work.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Do you think you’re hiding anything?

MITHU SEN: Hiding only in plain sight, playing different roles but not necessarily hiding emotions, but just simple and constant play.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Are viewers meant to understand it as a window into your psyche? Are you showing us something about yourself because, as you mentioned earlier, you use images of yourself not because you're exploring yourself but because it's convenient. So what's your relationship to using your own image?

MITHU SEN: When I ran away last year from the project space opening, I wrote a letter to Mita Bose saying that I'm not running away but just taking my physical self off site. I didn't want to interrupt the viewers' relationship with my work. I realize that people have approached my work as self-performative and so I thought that my presence would not be easily overlooked, positively or negatively. So sometimes I feel comfortable being physically present/absent next to my work. For me my presence in my work doesn't really carry any extra meaning. Still I have fun by my self-performances with my work. There is nothing more to translate about. It's a tool or clue for the viewer to peep up through.

NANCY ADAJANIA: So are you allowing the viewers to peep into your inner world by doing this?

MITHU SEN: What is an inner world? What do they peep through? Is that my life? Everybody actually peeps through his or her own life. I let them use my work as a tool. It's just a diary of any life; readers read it and find connections or relate it to themselves. Sometimes not.

NANCY ADAJANIA: On the one hand, there is this exhibitionism and pranksterism. On the other hand, there are things that you leave behind, for instance your hair sculptures, which are excruciatingly beautiful, and yet they could also evoke fear. Would you like to talk about things that you leave behind? Is it a residue of your own body?

MITHU SEN: I don't leave anything behind. I think I have everything with me. I think everybody understands this. I really leave nothing behind.

NANCY ADAJANIA: What about all the objects you left behind in the Project Space for the viewers to interact with? What does it mean to take your body residue and turn it into a sculpture?

MITHU SEN: I still am making hair sculptures. I love my own hair. When I shower, comb my hair and lose my hair, I feel like I'm losing something to which I am strongly attached to for years. There is a whole history of losing hair and the insecurities behind it, especially for women. Losing hair is almost like losing your own identity, your youth and your femininity. So when I started working with hair in 2001, I had more of a metaphorical approach. When the hair is still with your body it is beautiful and desirable and people love to touch it. When you lose it, at that moment attachment and detachment makes the whole story. The lost hair becomes a most repulsive and irritating one and you don't know how to throw it out from your life. There is a contradiction: once with love and obsession and then with hatred and disgust. It is so subjective!

ANDREW MAERKLE: Do you think about voodoo or other occult practices at all?

MITHU SEN: It's more personal voodoo. But when I say personal, I do not mean myself. It's the people I meet and see; the life I experience.

NANCY ADAJANIA: We experience a moment of transcendence when we look at those hair forms. For one of the shows I curated, 'Avatars of the Object: Sculptural Projections', Mithu placed these hair sculptures in beautifully carved black boxes with the light filtering through.

MITHU SEN: I was trying to display them in a prized manner. I put them in a beautiful black, wooden carved box, put some lights inside and then covered them with white transparent silk, placing the hair pieces on top of that, like jewelry with the inside lighting.

NANCY ADAJANIA: Mithu has a way of subverting social and ritual taboos related to hair, body parts and especially to female body parts. Her language is not invested in sloganeering or feminist propaganda. Her approach is more transcendent. For instance, the light streaming through the holes of the fragile hair sculpture wrapped in the piece of silk that has the transparency of water. Again I locate two different extremes in your work. One is animation, edginess and the ever-wakeful eye. The eye that never sleeps is all-consuming as in the grid of photographs for example. As you travel around the world you are hungry for images and want to consume as much as you can. And at the same time, there's the painful aspect of the tattoo video, which moves towards a stillness. A stillness that I think finds an echo in your hair sculptures.

ANDREW MAERKLE: To what extent are you a self-consciously female artist? Do you think about making art from a woman's position, as opposed to just making art?

MITHU SEN: I definitely don't want to deny my femininity because I love being a woman. I have no regrets, no complaints, I don't know if I make art, or do anything else—cook, teach, write, drive— from a "woman's position." Does it really matter? When I make art, my gender does not really matter to me unless I am working on that very issue!

ANDREW MAERKLE: What made you pursue art, Mithu?

MITHU SEN: Going to an art school was actually embedded into a personal history. I did not start thinking about art school until I was in high school. Somehow I was feeling the pressure of not doing what the others were doing and defying the pressures of the middle class family and their urge to choose a degree for their kids that would lead to a smooth life. This meant my options were medical school or any other academic subject but I felt very suffocated by that idea. I scored great in all my subjects but preferred subjects like literature. I was also a good athlete. I had no idea what art college was about but when I sat for the entrance test and actually got in my parents were not thrilled but I asked my dad anyhow, "Can I just go and see what it is, since I have been given this chance?" They were quite liberal and so I went to university in Santiniketan. My first day at the university during the ragging period by seniors was the best. I was told by a girl, "Oh you're so beautiful! You have a beautiful complexion." At 17, this was the first time in my life that I had heard this from an outsider and I was dramatically touched.

Today when people say I am beautiful, I agree. Notions of beauty have changed in my life since then. I decided to stay in the college that day. It has less to do with the fact that someone thought I was beautiful and more with the acknowledgment of recognizing an existence.

NANCY ADAJANIA: Racial prejudices need to be resisted globally. You're constantly questioning caste and racist slurs.

ANDREW MAERKLE: Could you elaborate on the sub-text for people who might not know about Indian society?

NANCY ADAJANIA: On the one hand, when you think about India today, you think about computers and software. Or you think of the other extreme: bullock carts. But there is a middle ground, another India, which lives constantly in tension between the computers and the bullock, carts. And of course there is the burgeoning economy, but there are certain markers of identity — skin color, caste, class — that still determine who we are. So even if Mithu belongs to a particular class, let's say the middle class, where everybody in her family is educated and relatively well off, her skin color, within certain sections of society, matters. So art becomes a way of changing skins at will. And even if you cannot wear pink, you know you can rip open your skin and show your pink insides. Mithu's works turn social conventions inside out.

ANDREW MAERKLE: What do you think about that yourself Mithu? Are you willfully challenging social protocols?

MITHU SEN: Of course there is a will but I'm not an activist. It's more spontaneous. It's a mind game to me.



The Artist: Process & Studio



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Half empty or half full?

Variations

In **engineering** lore, the corollary to this rhetoric question is that, for an Engineer, the glass is neither half empty nor half full, it is just exactly twice as big as necessary.

Further reading

- McKenzie, Craig and Jonathan Nelson (2003). "What a speaker's choice of frame reveals: Reference points, frame selection, and framing effects". *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* **10**: 596–602.

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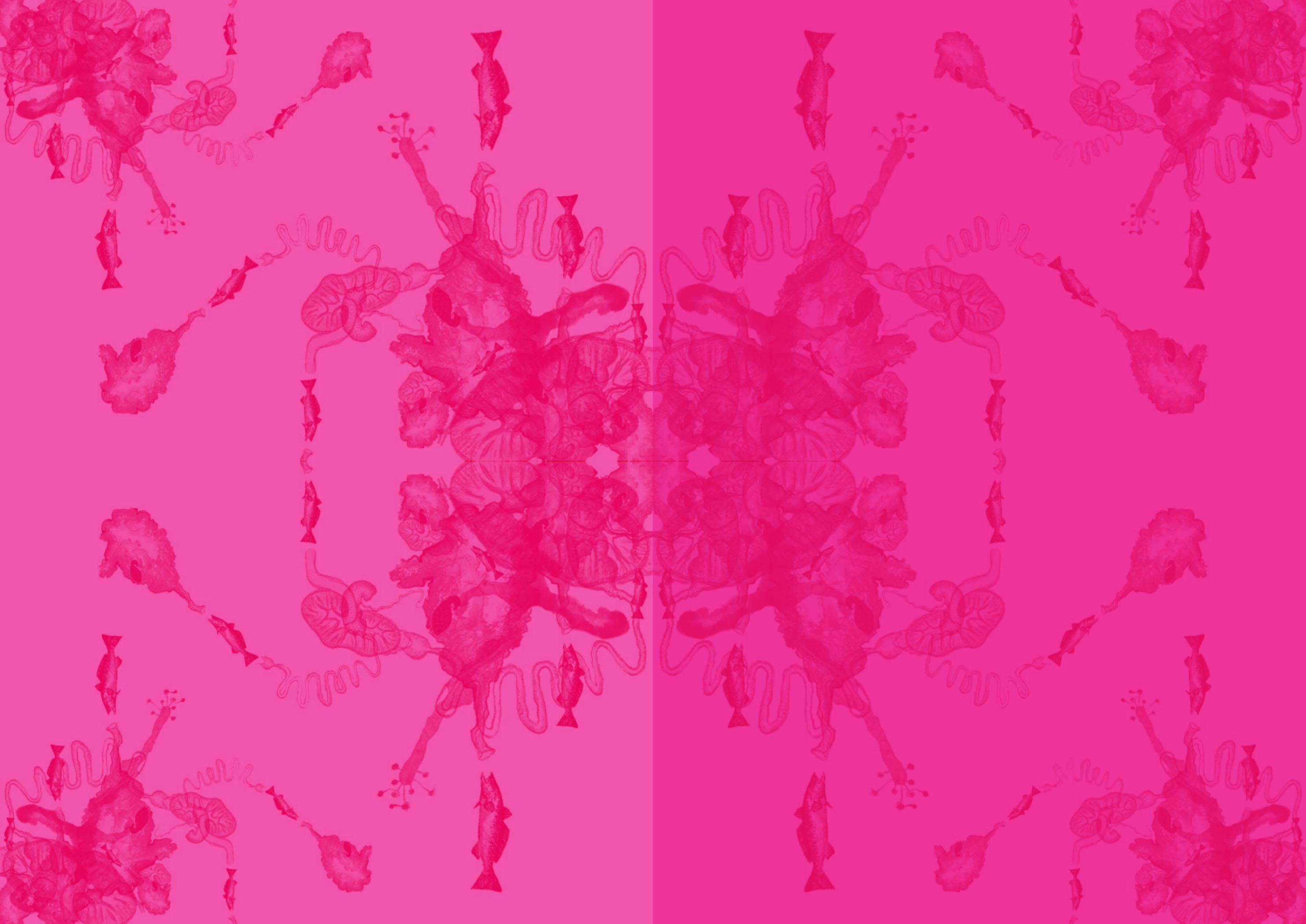
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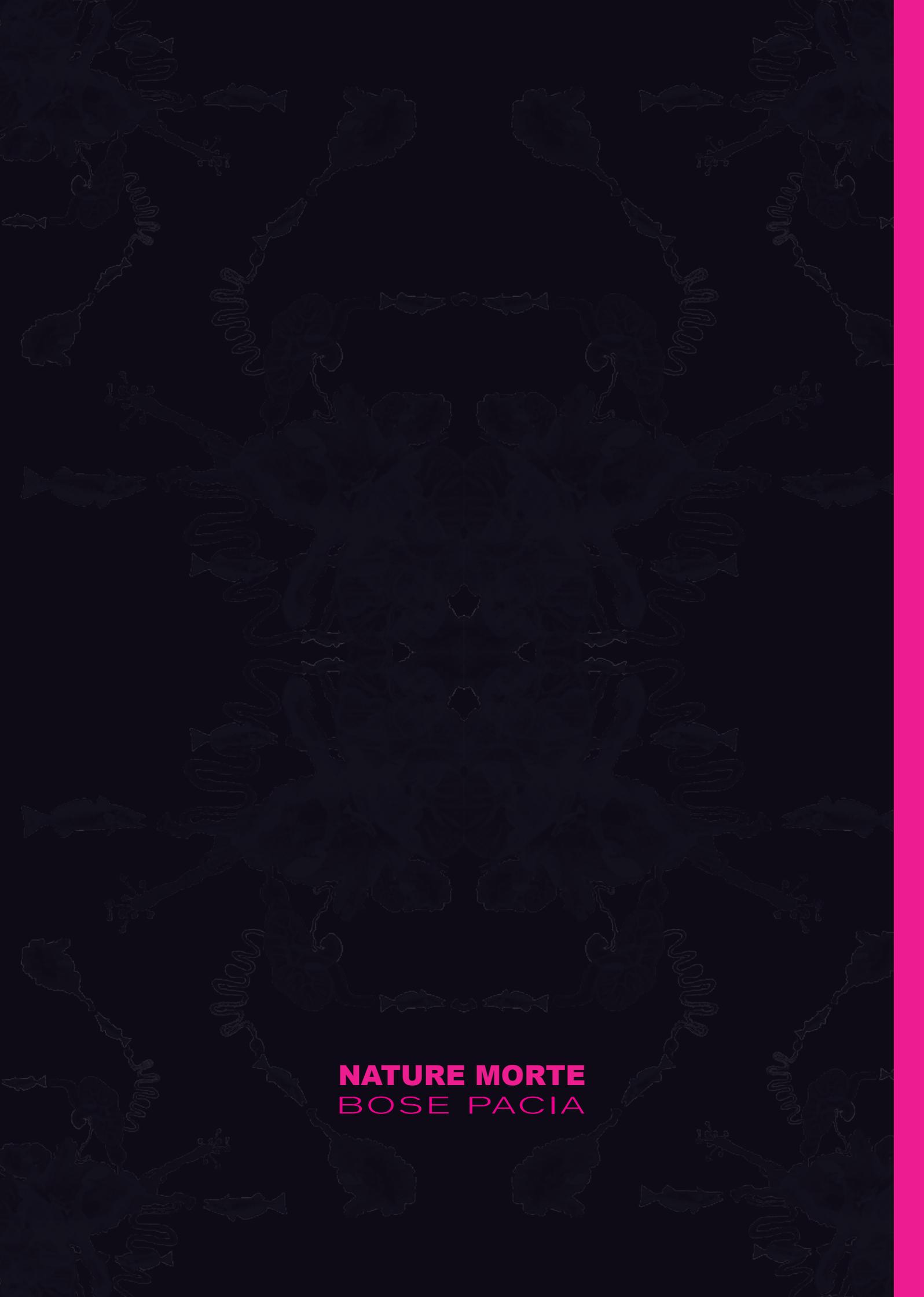
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