



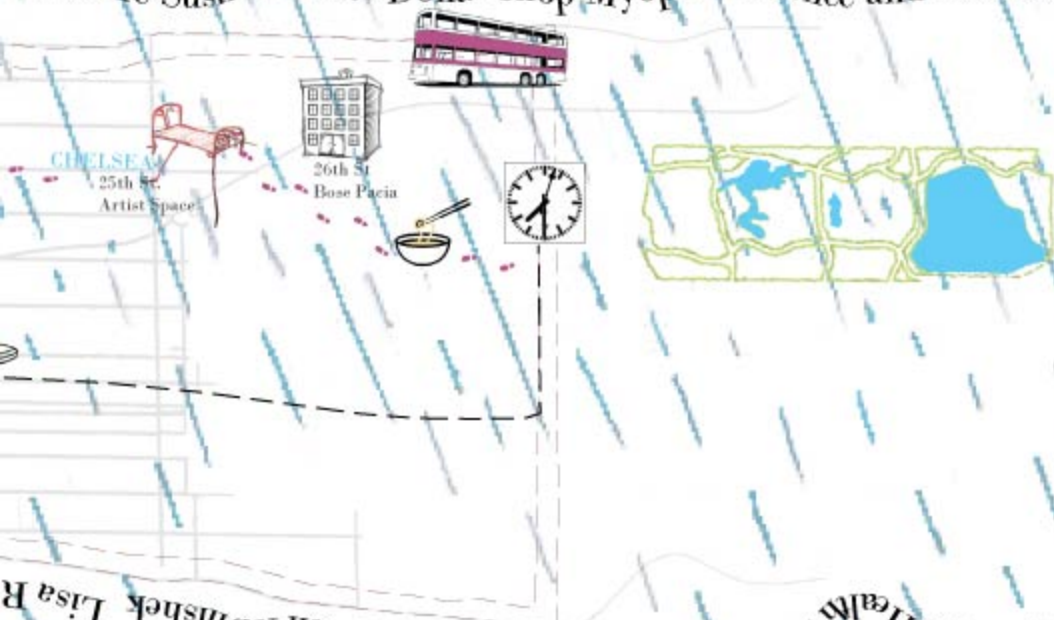




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too much. Plastic flowers Bird scissors Nails Salable Work Health Insurance Quen bee Drama queen Abhishek Lisa R

g. Betiro at Hair. It's remind me of mother too much. Another no much. Plastic flowers Bird scissors Nails Salable Work Health Insurance Quen bee Drama queen Abhishek Lisa R

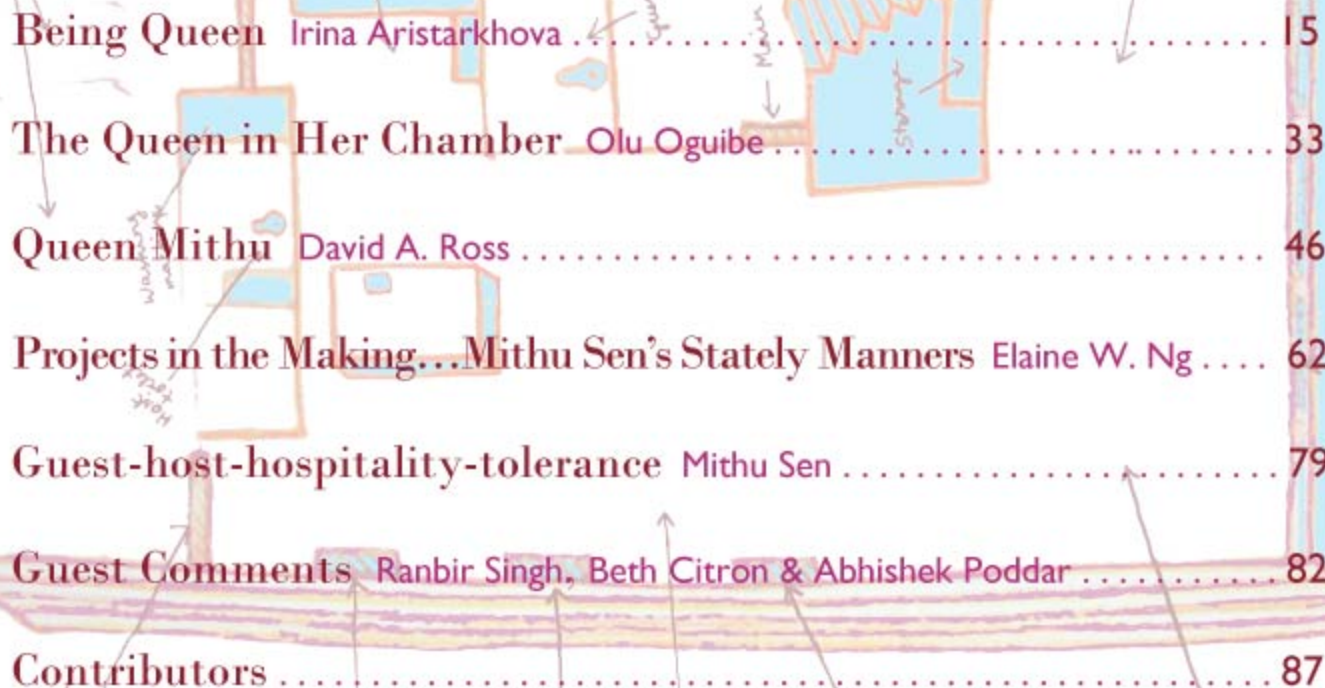
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Its Good to be

Mithu Sen

Bose Pacia Artist Space
Chelsea, New York
June 2 – July 28, 2006



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514...4th floor...between rooms.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



Pink kitchen.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 11 x 15 in.



Bed in wall.



Double bed, separate frames, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 82 x 42 in (two panels).



Black dress.



ABOVE: *Day by day*, 2006. Plastic pill case with coins, 4½ x 7 x 1 in.

BELOW: *Day by day*, 2006. Necklace velvet case, hair mould in shoelace ring, safety pins and needle made of hair, foil and string, 2½ x 9 x 3 in.

Being Queen

Irina Aristarkhova

A handwritten note was left for the artist Mithu Sen in an apartment in New York that she was co-inhabiting during her artist-in-residence project. The apartment was provided by Bose Pacia Gallery, for the artist to spend a portion of Spring 2006 working on her art during her stay in New York.

Until this note came along Mithu Sen was, at least ostensibly, to focus her attention on what was outside of that apartment – New York with its inhabitants and constant flow of visitors – than what was within it. The space inside was meant to be a repository, a collection of things to come, of people to come, and, ultimately, of this creative process – making an art work and presenting it at the end of her stay, with the apartment substituting for “the gallery”.

Mithu Sen was to be a guest in New York, hosted by the Bose Pacia Gallery staff and the person who wrote the above-cited note. This hosting was meant to be not much more than affording a space for her to work. The owner of the apartment who wrote the note was crucial to the project, it seemed, only insofar as he agreed to rent the apartment to the gallery for the artist to use during her stay. He was important, too, as he was present at the apartment for a couple of days a week, while Mithu Sen was there for the rest of the week. Sharing a living space with a stranger is awkward, even

Dear Guest

Please use one set of bed covers/pillows etc. what's on the bed for your use.

Make sure the bed room does not have hair on the floor.

We will keep everything tidy for your use also.

Thanks.



ABOVE: *Night lamp*, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.
BELOW: Woven hair sculpture.



when one is always taking turns and not being there at the same time. It is partaking from another person's willingness (for whatever reason) to share at all. Especially in Manhattan (do we need to add?) where access to and having a space defines more than it does in many other cities in the world.

This note, received in the early days of the artist's stay, I would argue, unwittingly defined the direction of *her* installation, focusing the multitude of potentialities of her being in New York. As the *It's Good to be Queen* exhibition evolved and especially when it opened, it became clearer that this note was a gift, an unusual, risky offering, like the hospitality of Bose Pacia Gallery in furnishing the artist with this residence.

In a situation, where a message could be more easily rendered in person, via a phone, electronically, or through a gallery staff, all these easily accessible albeit varying in privacy options, one chooses to write a letter, by hand, with (accidentally?) red pencil, to someone who shares his apartment for a few weeks. She became, by this note "in writing", converted from a not-so-defined status of an artist visiting and working in New York, to a painfully accentuated status of a guest. She was named a guest by an absent host, who was nevertheless setting a hospitality tradition in motion. He was claiming this tradition in America, where it might stand as something forced (even formal, lifeless, arbitrary) as well as intimate (secret known by a few who may belong, a marker of proper host/guest behavior differentiating us from them). His absence as a host proper, someone who continuously offers a welcoming smile, salutation, willingness to serve – all those attributes of hospitality that make a host's presence (or of his substitute) as essential as food and water – is compensated by others, whom he does not address in this letter directly, but who, as avatars, appear here and there through his silence and absence.

There is no hospitality without a guest, at least one guest. However, its most important rule says that one is doing it for one's own good and not for one's guest. Pleasing one's guest is meant, ironically, for one's own gain (material or spiritual), and those who claim otherwise do not fully understand the culture of hospitality. Mithu Sen, in her creative submission to the demands of her absent host, played her role too, as it is only a guest who makes a host a host. And she was a perfect guest, making her own set of bed covers and pillows, splendid, gorgeous, outlandish. She hosted her doll-daughter in it, creating an atmosphere of a palace for two, with two large drawings serving both as separators and openings into a sacred realm.

In some texts, the difference between a visitor and a guest is exactly an overnight stay: thus, preparing a bed and sleeping in another person's house sets up another possibility. It is a conversion from a guest to somebody else more intimate, precious, or maybe even less important than a guest: a relative, a friend, a family member. The same ancient texts clearly state that relatives and intimate friends are not guests proper and should be accorded much lesser attention than guests. However, while reference to making the bed on the part of an absent, but still clearly a caring and careful host, is established, the next line seems to be the *raison d'être* of this letter.

"Make sure the bedroom does not have hair on the floor."

There was a lot of hair in Mithu Sen's installation. It was absent on the floor, respectfully, but was very much present everywhere else. Almost as an excessive reversal of this request to keep hair in its proper place, the artist has insaturated a virulent proliferation of hair in every part of the apartment: beautiful balls of hair on two serving plates, hair hanging ominously in the bathroom, hair coming out of the torso of an ephemeral gorgeous dress, objects with hair on the wall.... Hair is no stranger to those familiar with contemporary art, and one might jump too quickly to comparisons and conclusions. However, a multitude of ways in which hair (made to look human, animal or from birds) has been presented and worked through in Sen's installation, seems to suggest that it was a preferred material by accident. With one person who might be able to read it as accidental with a greater chance. This motif of hair is not new to Sen's work, she



Grave garment, 2006. Lace and satin dress, hair, coat hangers, safety pins and paper, 84 x 42 in.

used it before in her installations and drawings, but here it has a special feel and meaning, known only to her as a guest, and to an absent host. We are left to stare at a larger than life drawing of a gigantic chocolate comb on the bathroom wall.

*"We will keep
everything tidy
for your use also."*

And "tidy" it was. In Mithu Sen's installation, a welcoming space is presented as a laboratory or a masquerade. One needed to use white gloves to touch objects, albums, family photos. This sense of gloves on one's hands was, once again, both liberating (like a mask during a carnival) and alienating (like protective gear one has to wear in a sterile room). You could touch almost everything, but you were not, really, at home. In this "perfectly" clean space, we are all presumably safe: guests and their hostess, the artist. Gloves provide a film over our hands, emphasizing even more the anxieties of separation and fusion involved in our rituals and routines of hospitality, whether in a laboratory or during a crowded show, and hoping for a safe and happy end of this exchange. Gloves invited us to touch, without them one would probably assume "please do not touch" status of exhibited objects, while in an apartment it was also out of place, as if we were not welcomed to feel "like at home".

The last line with "thank you", just like the exhibition space with its conflicting messages, ultimately refused the "hospitality" arrangement, and rightfully so. Hospitality is elusive. Though a lot has been written on its rules, laws, proper procedures, and paramount importance in making us what we are in this world, all attempts to rationalize it point to our anxiety over its failure, and even its real absence. The absent host refused to be a host in this case, naturally, and the artist did not claim to be his guest. Even though he was true owner of the apartment, it was just a transaction, and the hospitality was not, really, his. There were



Comb in the loo, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.

mediators between the two of them; even though they were not mentioned, the letter really is about the relation of exchange, with confusing references to host-guest terminology. If Mithu Sen was not there as a guest of this absent host, and she was not a host during the exhibition, since she did not own most of the things in that apartment or the apartment itself, *who was present?*

It's Good to Be Queen. Sen takes on the role of Queen. As queen, she is hosting and holding: people, guests, animals, birds, plants, and artifacts. A queen does what she wants, without reference to human laws of hospitality. There is something divine in royalty, it is a gift from above, by birth. Kings and queens are unlike mortals, "ordinary people", and they claim their special status in different ways in different places. Often it involves a special and usually privileged relationship to the laws of hospitality: to animals (hunting), to birds (caging), to people (ruling), to land (owning) and to gods and goddesses (kinship). In other words, the human law of hospitality does not bind a queen in the same way as an ordinary woman. She can leave her guests any time she wants, even at the most crucial time. She does not have to serve, to please or entertain. Is every artist, therefore, a queen? Or shall we say, wants to be queen? Indeed artists are often referred to as being "prima donna". The connection between arts and royalty is, as we all know, special. There is a mutual attraction as well as repulsion, one relying on what another one has or can provide uniquely, exceptionally – caught in a mutual bind of patronage.

Artists' residences are something of a luxury – of having the plentiful luxury of time, place and resources. More and more artists seek such opportunities, of being treated like a queen, that is, to be given these "luxuries" because they are "professional artists". Mithu Sen's reflexive mode in this work has helped her to make the concept of residence itself the very essence of the work generated by the residence. She announced her visit, her residence, invited others to visit, "received" them, and carefully documented those encounters. A powerful if somewhat discomfiting(for the guest) gesture was to ask for an "intimate" photo with her. It was intimate because she was taking pictures of herself with a guest, holding her camera in one hand extended away from her body, and her guest with another hand close to herself. Your face had to be close to hers; the proximity of camera induced that intimacy. You could refuse to take a picture, or remember that moment of intimacy with Mithu Sen, that moment when you felt close to her hair, her hand on your body....

She made an album out of these photographs and displayed it as part of the overall installation (again, you



could opt out of that display of your presence in her apartment). When she talks about her everyday activities, they are full of observation and waiting, like for a court lady-in-waiting, or a hunting plant that is waiting for its prey / inspiration:

I provoked and cocooned myself by different incidents and storms... I discovered each and every nook and corner in that flat with lots of stories... I watched the rain for hours from the window... I went for sushi and watered my ginger flower pot...

An art of doing nothing, or, as some claim, doing nothing as art. It's good to be an Artist-in-Residence!

A certain insistence on eclectic and whimsical choices from which to constitute the artist's "kunst-camera". Queen as a child with all whims and desires that must be attended to. I love whom I want (Sharukh Khan), and yes, of course, it is real love (what other is there?). I keep what I want (found objects, dirty little purchases from street vendors), and yes, your majesty, they are beautiful. I travel with whatever and whoever I want (with little dolls – her son and daughters), paraphernalia of pink roses and family portraits. Altogether, a material cacophony of paper, glass, hair, readymades, dresses, bits and pieces, arranged around the apartment with the eye of a queen, with the crisp elegance of a Parisian boutique.

The opening day: a perfect artist, as a perfect wife, or a perfect host, who does not care about the world, about "the crowd", only about her art, follows her own sense of duty. Sen played this out by leaving her guests. And the opening night "without the artist" was not the end, the end was her letter about it sent to most of the guests assembled in "her" apartment. That work – of hospitality – never ends, and being a queen as well as a well-known poet, prompted her to write to those who were subjected to this last whim of hers – her absence. This gesture, again, raises questions about the role of an artist after the work seems to have been completed. Her absence from a project such as this – on her hosting and being hosted – also reminds one of "art as memory", as a work of mourning over the ultimate absence of everything. Art is a kind of fetish, or prosthesis, that is always a substitute and therefore that which insists that art works without the artist. Does it? Mithu Sen could not leave her guests. The letter that she leaves for them, perhaps excessive in its repetition and confusion of exhibition time with artist's time, reincarnates those who make a queen, queen, her audience:

Dear,

I am sorry for not being sorry about my physical absence in my opening night. Let me textualize my thoughts and feelings regarding my absence on June 2nd. I am sad but not sorry for my act... it was a conscious decision



Queen's 'darbar' hall.

it was a part of my whole relationship (guest-host-hospitality-tolerance) project. I know it was announced in the invitation card of doing an artist discussion during that evening with my viewer... AND I was away. (I did not escape or run away)... I just took my physical presence off from that very gallery site on that evening.

In most art openings the artist's presence is needed to explain the intimate details of the artist's persona in order to put the art objects into context. In this case however all of my most intimate details were and are open for your viewing and I did not want my presence to interfere with your process of discovery of those very private and intimate details.

I truly hope you understand my project and support what I did. I love you all and ... believe me, I was overwhelmed when I came back completely soaked and drenched ... I found the wet footsteps all around my apartment... I found the white gloves filled up with touches of invisible friends... who visited my space in my absence....

It was hard for me to not to be there knowing that you are coming for me... I was sad... I walked all the way to the river and finally got into a New York site seeing bus, made a night trip in the city... believe me, it was so wonderful...I treated myself as a queen.

*I will try to meet you before I leave, I promise.
I again hope that you did not miss me that night because I was really with you...
Thank you for bearing with me. I love you.
Yours and only yours
Mithu
(via email)*

We were waiting for her, artist-Queen, and her absence – logical for a queen and an artist, painful for a friend and a host who abandoned her audience – was felt, once again, as a lesson in defining art, as a final gift of recognition. We were there, after all, for art, and ultimately it is not important who the artist is, even if she plays a queen. People travel, cross continents, change professions, because of art. They buy, sell, keep, preserve, enjoy, love and hate art, even when they are not fully sure why it is so important. In the history of thought aesthetics occupies a place that no other form of making does, and those who have means, traditionally turn to artists and art works to host them and support their making. An artist, then, does not really matter. They are means to have art works, masterpieces. Not really. Queen Mithu was an ultimate guest, the one who is mostly waited for, desired, the one who could only become, with luck, a goddess, and fulfill all the wishes of a perfect host. She was not there, but we had her gifts, and she was generous. After all, generosity etymologically derives from a notion of “noble birth”, being from a noble genus (kin, genre, gender, kind).



White gloves on living room window sill.

Artist as Queen, there is no accident here. It is a Guest who really gives as we all, albeit implicitly, know. There is anticipation and hope on both sides that more gifts will come, and more hosts will be there to welcome them.





A bloody bad bed, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



Stack of pillows.



Fishy pillow, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 18 x 27 x 6 in.



Greasy pillow, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 14 x 21 x 6 in.



The Queen in Her Chamber

Olu Oguibe

Queen Mithu steps into her chamber alone. There is no elaborate ritual accompanying her entry; no pomp and pageantry. There are no guards in sight, no courtiers, and no officers of the chancery. There are no ladies of the chamber bearing her jewelry or holding the hem of her dress. There is no costumed and plumed master of ceremony and no drum roll. She steps in as a queen might in the middle of the night through a secret door to relieve herself of the lugubrious spectacle and ceremony of court or the cacophony of nobility and gentry, and have a rather quiet moment with intimate friends.

The ornate and gilded exuberance that we associate with royal chambers is not in evidence. The floor is bare, the walls are spare and austere. But in this chamber the Queen has created a world of her own and peopled it with characters of her choice. Inanimate objects and found accoutrements are bestowed with names and attributes that give them life and seem to constitute them into an endearing microcosm of household deities and guardian spirits. There are elements of the light and frivolous also, and a gaiety that belies the customary gravity of royalty. The objects and characters that the Queen has peopled her chamber with are eccentric and colorful, coupling the spiritual and mysterious with the flirtatious and ordinary.

And the Queen is relaxed and in high spirits as she attends to her



Leftovers and readymade feather duster in the living room.



guests and conducts them around the animated cosmos that she has created, taking time to introduce and speak at length about each element; giving a patient ear to the responsive guest, offering the occasional gift in exchange for another.

Even with the inevitable reality that this enchanted, make-believe world and moment are not without their restrictions and prohibitions, there is freedom here, and none more important than the liberty to depart at will the shoulder-crushing condition of royalty. The Queen is only queen for a moment. Historically this is a freedom that many queens have pined for and found only one door to: at the gallows. From Anne Boleyn and Mary Stewart, Queen of the Scots, to Marie Antoinette d'Autriche, all of whom perished under the blade for having a taste of the crown, many a queen has discovered this freedom too late. Not even madness could save Isabel of Portugal from the prison of the crown.

Unlike Elizabeth II this queen has no reason to linger on the throne to endure an *annus horribilis*. She does not have to contend with the scrutiny and resentment of scornful subjects, or suffer the groveling of conniving politicians and conspiratorial courtiers. Not for her sleepless nights tangled up in paranoia, or the interminable torture of failure to bear an heir. Queen Mithu wears her crown lightly because she made it herself.

Of course, after our fifteen minutes or two hours of audience with Mithu Sen in her performance *Its Good to be Queen*, we are curious to understand the drama that we have been part of. Should we read it or read into it, and if so, what and how should we read? If the enactment or performance is to be understood as conceptual art or a drama of ideas, what ideas do we look for and what should we expect to find? How does it fit with the rest of the artist's growing oeuvre and if not, in what ways does it constitute a departure? How, if at all, may we relate or compare its genial, interactive availability to, say, Marina Abramovic's equally live-in but extremely austere and tense *House with an Ocean View* in the same neighbor-



ABOVE: *Half sickle*, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 20 x 27 in.

BELOW: *Iron*, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 20 x 15 in.

hood three years earlier, since in both cases the artist, a female, made herself available to strangers in a gallery space commandeered and reserved at the limn of the public and private space over a period of days? What difference does it make that Sen engaged her guests in social interaction and conversation that ranged from spiritual explorations to moments of vague flirtation in an environment that became increasingly cluttered as she produced and procured and added all manner of objects and elements to it over time, while Abramovic restrained her audience at a distance and preserved her clinical and monastic space shorn of all accoutrement, including at times her own apparel?

And what shall we make of Mithu Sen's choice of location for this performance in the Chelsea district of Manhattan, New York, the very heart of the slick and oily arcades of the contemporary global culture market? Shall we conclude from the location and title that this is an institutional critique in which we are complicit, a mild but serious satire of the often fleeting rewards and ceremony that attend recognition in the contemporary art world? Might this be a good-humored but wary reflection on the suspect nature of a growing personal reputation? Might it be a commentary on the itinerant appeal of global contemporary culture?



With the current frenzy for all art contemporary and postcolonial, and especially the quick turnover that has recently met contemporary art from India and China thanks to the emergence of a well-heeled *nouveau riche* keen to procure and patronize an equally emerging and excitingly exuberant creative fervor, does it say something that Sen's performance with all its little drawings and converted bric-a-brac in many ways still makes itself unavailable for easy procurement and market conversion?

Thinking again on the location of Sen's performance and her choice of theme and title, we are inescapably drawn to the inevitable cultural innocence that is part of the transcultural practice of global contemporary artists, because in New York cultural history the figure of "queen" is so heavily loaded, socially and sexually, in ways that may not have occurred to the artist. In New York to be queen has far less to do with the regular geopolitical resonance that it has in other places, and the metaphor of power and privilege that attach to it, than it does to sexual orientation, "attitude", and the tense and paradoxical politics of mores around sexual disposition that have afflicted the metropolis over the years. And so we wonder what the performance tells us about the lines that contemporary practice crosses in the age of globalization.

As we contemplate Mithu Sen's *Its Good to be Queen* and wander through the possibilities, another thought occurs to us: are we perhaps reading too much into the whole affair, and might it be the case that the work is no more than an elaborate and self-indulgent example of contemporary art lite?

All these questions take us nowhere if not into the captive and enraptured territory of speculation and wonder, and this is the strength of Mithu Sen's performance, for in art the room to speculate is the hallmark of depth and sophistication. In *Its Good to be Queen* Sen presents us with an alluring and much nuanced performance that leaves us torn between rigorous contemplation and having a mere good time, each guest welcome to their own interpretations and dispositions while the artist gives away so little and yet so much. What wondrous privilege to be Queen!



Arrow, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.





Buy a drawing and get a hanger free.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.



Wish my best friend was a monster, wish my best friend was a gay, 2006.
Mixed media on paper, 84 x 42 in.



Queen Mithu

David A. Ross

While the curious slowly made their way through the small Chelsea studio apartment that had been both home and studio for Mithu Sen, she was elsewhere. As people looked intently at the drawings, displayed on a clothes rack like blouses in a discount store, and carefully explored the objects that had been left lying about the studio apartment, the artist was riding the streets of Manhattan on the top deck of one of those ubiquitous red tourist buses, silently watching the city while the city was watching her.

In the apartment, Sen had left her work not only to be found and viewed, she was hoping each thing would find its own way in the world – would somehow connect with the person who needed it (not those who simply wanted to own an object or drawing, but those who found an irresistible force compelling them into a relationship). You don't simply acquire work by Mithu Sen, you adopt it. It enters your family. She could have nothing to do with this process directly, nor did she feel she should. Her work was done, and now these things had to be granted lives of their own, had to find their new homes – or not.



Paintings on hangers, magnolias and crow details from works.



To say the least, this was not a typical gallery exhibition – even though her New York dealers Bose Pacia Gallery had invited Sen to New York, and had provided her with the studio to live and work in for several months. But the artist did not yet want a gallery show; rather, she wanted to begin the process of establishing her family in New York, and by extension, establishing her dominion. For an artist like Sen, the act of making art is as much about constructing and then populating a private universe, as it is the process through which one makes images and objects.

Not unlike the painter Agnes Martin who noted that for her, each painting had to fend for itself in the world. Her happiest moments, like that of a proud parent, were when paintings left her studio to begin their independent lives. Sen has a similarly deep, complex and loving relationship with the things she puts into the world, and it is one of the things that sets her and her practice apart from many of her contemporaries.

In “The Gift”, Lewis Hyde’s landmark study of social relationships, the idea is put forward that a work of art can only be truly completed after the act of giving allows the connection from one human being to another. Now we may bring whatever economic approach to this transaction that we like (from traditional art gallery commerce to potlatch), but the essential message rings true. The artist’s intention to share something remarkably intimate and essentially personal with a stranger lies at the heart of the matter. And the artist’s powerful role in the creation of not only compelling and disturbing images and objects, but of value measured in the concrete world of trade, is made manifest and somehow poetic through this process.

When Yves Klein threw gold dust into the Seine, he illuminated the magical exchange that connects money with the essentially human act of art making. So pure. So insane. So perfect.

When the sculptor Ed Kienholz made drawings that he would trade for specific amounts of money (the subject of each drawing) or a specific



Family desk.

object (like a suit from Monte Factor's clothing store), he takes direct control of the value creation process, and uses it shamelessly for his own benefit.

Twenty years later, when Chris Burden exchanged money for television airtime that he used simply to place his name in the context of other artists spanning the history of western art, he similarly twists the ideas of value.

Later, during the spring of 2007, when Mithu Sen tells a world of Internet users that she will exchange her work for love, for the simple expression of love, she takes the idea of how the value of these extraordinary things she makes can be re-purposed, re-imagined, perhaps returned to a state of grace.

Queen Mithu, she calls herself. Mithu Sen, queen of an imaginary place where the value associated with art could be freed from the quotidian forms of exchange that we use to convert labor into conventional wealth, and recuperated as something entirely different – something delicate and magical.

I imagine Queen Mithu sitting in the front row of seats on the top of that tour bus, her long hair streaming behind in the wind, subtly waving to her subjects with a gentle flick of her wrist, and smiling as she passed in front of and through their lives, leaving no trace of her presence and no claim to their loyalty or love.

At the same moment, I slowly leaf through the pages of a book of drawings left askew on a window ledge, and stare absently at a fragile hanging sculpture made from a weaving of the artist's own black hair. I'm thinking of Eva Hesse. I'm thinking of Richard Tuttle. I'm thinking of Zush.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.

Nine months later we sit in the lobby of a small hotel in London and record our conversation. We are watching a video that Sen made while an artist-in-residence in Brazil. She was fascinated by the life of Saint Anastasia – an early Christian martyr who was burned to death. In the video, we see only Sen's face as the back of her hand is tattooed with a drawing of a black spiral that she made for this purpose. In our conversation, Sen tells me that the back of the hand is the most painful part of the body you can tattoo, and she chose it expressly because of its sensitivity. Over the loud buzzing sound of the electric tattoo pen, we see the Sen as she stares directly into the camera, and silently works to control her facial expression.

DAR: Why did you want to feel pain?

MS: Because pain can be nice too. It is not always negative. It is an experience of life. If you can enjoy someone kissing you can also enjoy having some pain.

DAR: Was it a pure experience of pain?

MS: It was a desire to know and experience something new.

DAR: There are two experiences here. There is the experience of the tattoo, and your attempt to control your response.

MS: I am just controlling my tears, but not my expression, as you can see. I am not enjoying this, I am not laughing or smiling. I am just controlling myself.

DAR: Why?

MS: The highest expression of pain...why does it have to be shouting or crying – it can be something else. It can be controlling. If I cry or scream then the real experience of pain will come out, but if I consume it inside me, then I can feel it more.

If a viewer becomes a part of the art work, you create a bridge between your existence and that of the viewer. When I do something I first make a relationship to my work – it doesn't matter if I am cooking, washing clothes or making a video or drawing – because the work is not just something that



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 20 x 15 in.

comes from my physical body, but my spiritual body as well. Everything I do is something I love and enjoy, as I consider the entire of my day, the full 24 hours, to be one unified thing – all art (or all not-art). I have no division between art and life. Even when I sleep and awake, I see that my bed has changed, I recall dreams, it is all worthy of notice and contemplation.

DAR: You want to notice everything?

MS: Yes. I can feel the life spirit in everything. Even when I fight or cry. I am always hopeful.

DAR: How would you describe your work?

MS: My works are like a mediator between the consciousness of one person and another. It may begin as my work, but when you take it in, it becomes yours. And then you may pass it on to someone else, and it becomes theirs – and you may not even be aware that this has happened.

MS: Why do we always have to speak about art? Why not cooking or sports?

DAR: Could you teach me about cricket? I'm clueless about the sport and would love to be able to make sense of it.

MS: Wonderful, cricket is my great passion. Cricket is what got me into art school, because the men on the faculty could not believe that I knew so much about the sport, and were able to have a different idea of who I was because I seemed to know as much if not more than they did.

DAR: Why not start with your earliest memory of cricket?

MS: It is with my dad. He was a diehard fan. It was his only hobby. He never played, but watched.

DAR: Did you play?

MS: Yes, we played when I was in school. Small teams, games with our own rules. We were very happy. Like we would play a game in only half an hour.

DAR: What is it that you love about cricket? In baseball, I can relate to the orderliness of it. It is a 19th-century machine as much as it is a game. Is cricket also a machine?

MS: I never think of it that way. I only think of the passion, the team spirit, the trust between teammates, the love. The focus on the game and team above all. Complete involvement.

DAR: Baseball is a Zen sport. Lots of waiting. Silence. Anticipation. Pitch, catch, signal, throw back, wait, swing, step out of the box, wind-up, pitch, swing (or not), throw back, wait again, stare down between pitcher and batter, wait, windup, etc. etc.... It all becomes very psychological. It's not time-based, no clock. A war of nerves.

MS: In cricket it's about paying attention. A minimal misunderstanding can change everything. Everyone has to pay close attention. Communication between teammates is critical. It's like all the hidden relationships – like family relationships, and the need for communication and often, the need for forgiveness. Runners have to pay particular attention to the batsman. People hold their breath and concentrate.

DAR: How does the tension break? Are there fights?

MS: In cricket, I don't think they fight. But sometimes players will be punished for saying something rude about an umpire. (They have microphones on the field these days.) But you do not really see players fighting with each other. Even when a team is defeated, the winners and losers pat each other on the back and shake their hands. But it is a sophisticated and peaceful game. The tension remains hidden. I like the fact that the tension is not violently expressed. A test can take at least one whole day, but sometimes as long as five days. Most people don't have the time to watch anymore, and that is a shame. There seems to be a general understanding that real sport needs to be primarily physical, but cricket also has the psychological aspect of chess. The bowler and the batsman in contest for long periods of time. It can be boring to some people.

It seems to me that Sen's love of cricket is about the ways in which the players relate passionately to the idea of family (team), and place those human relationships and interdependencies above everything else. If I understand correctly, it's not about winning, it's about pure play, and losing yourself in its complex midst. It seems to be to answer the question why the Queen would ride a tour bus through Lower Manhattan while



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.

her subjects (of the subjects of her work) found themselves lost in her small but dense 25th Street universe. OK, having made good on my promise to promote cricket in my contribution of this catalogue, I must return to what I feel is the real subject at hand. Why make art, when you can do so many other things? Why give when you can as easily take? Why connect when you can stay apart?

Mithu Sen would not answer these questions. She just smiled and turned away. But Sen's surrogate daughter Billie had the answer to these questions, for when I asked her she answered. But she swore me to secrecy. Sorry.



Guest host albums and the blind folder.





Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 27 x 39 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



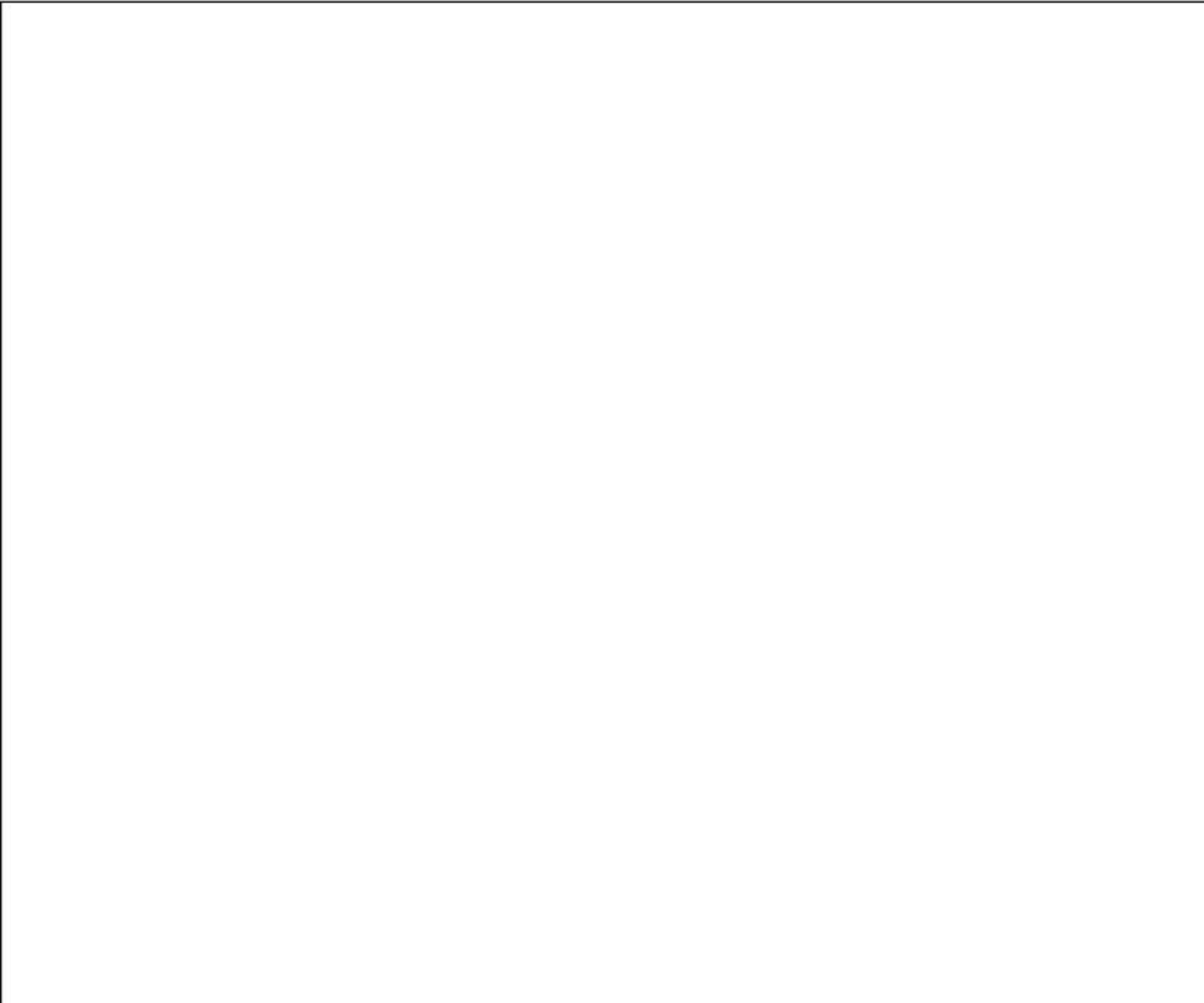
Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 22½ x 28 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 27½ x 20 in.



Projects In The Making... Mithu Sen's Stately Manners

Elaine W. Ng

"I am a queen here!" Mithu Sen proclaims as she makes me a cup of tea. It is a Darjeeling, she explains, which brought her 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 evolv-



Living room shelves and extended family with dream guy.



Broken crow and the peacock feather. Peacock feathers, taxidermy crow, beads and vinyl color tubes, 10½ x 15½ x 11 in.

ing installation, *Its 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 bought 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 others’ 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 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.



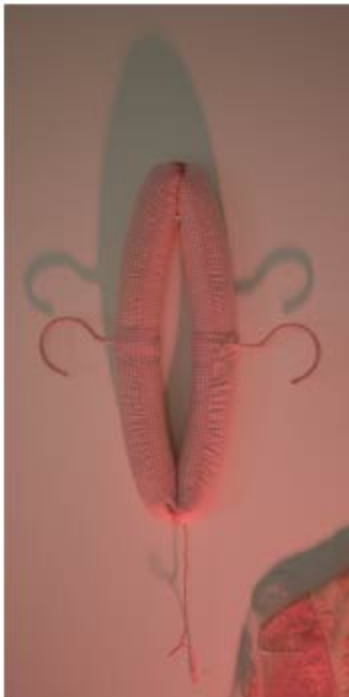




LEFT: Hair in plastic packet in the living room window.
 CENTER: China tray with booklet of photographs of eyes, flattened nails glued together and artificial chicken claw.
 RIGHT: Tea box, wire mesh book and gloves.

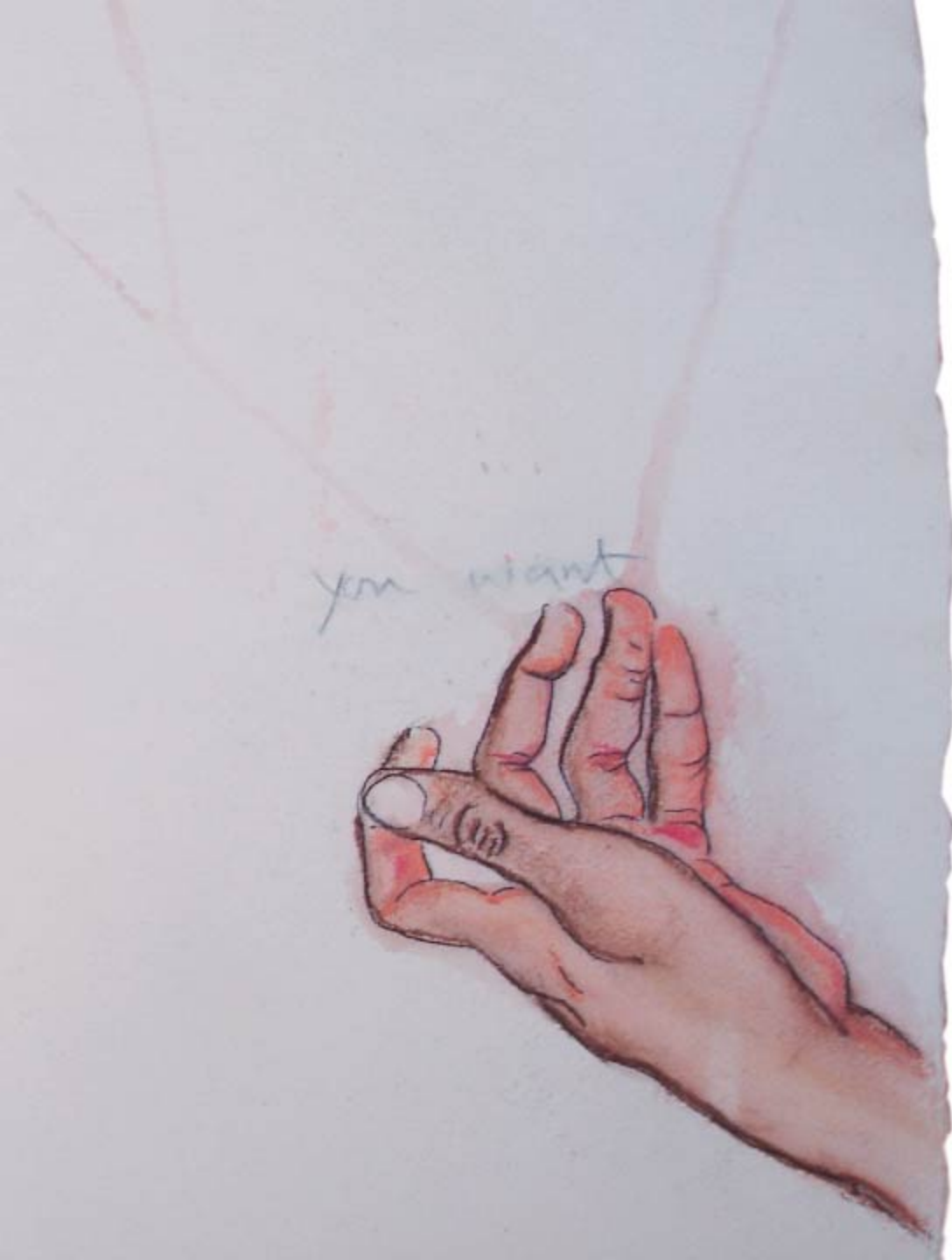


LEFT: Queen's food.
CENTER: Framed bird wing.
RIGHT: Broken crow.



Details of installations.

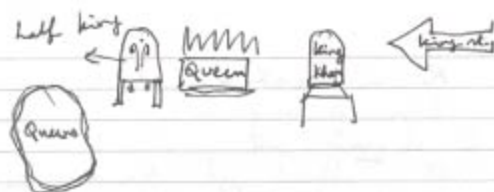
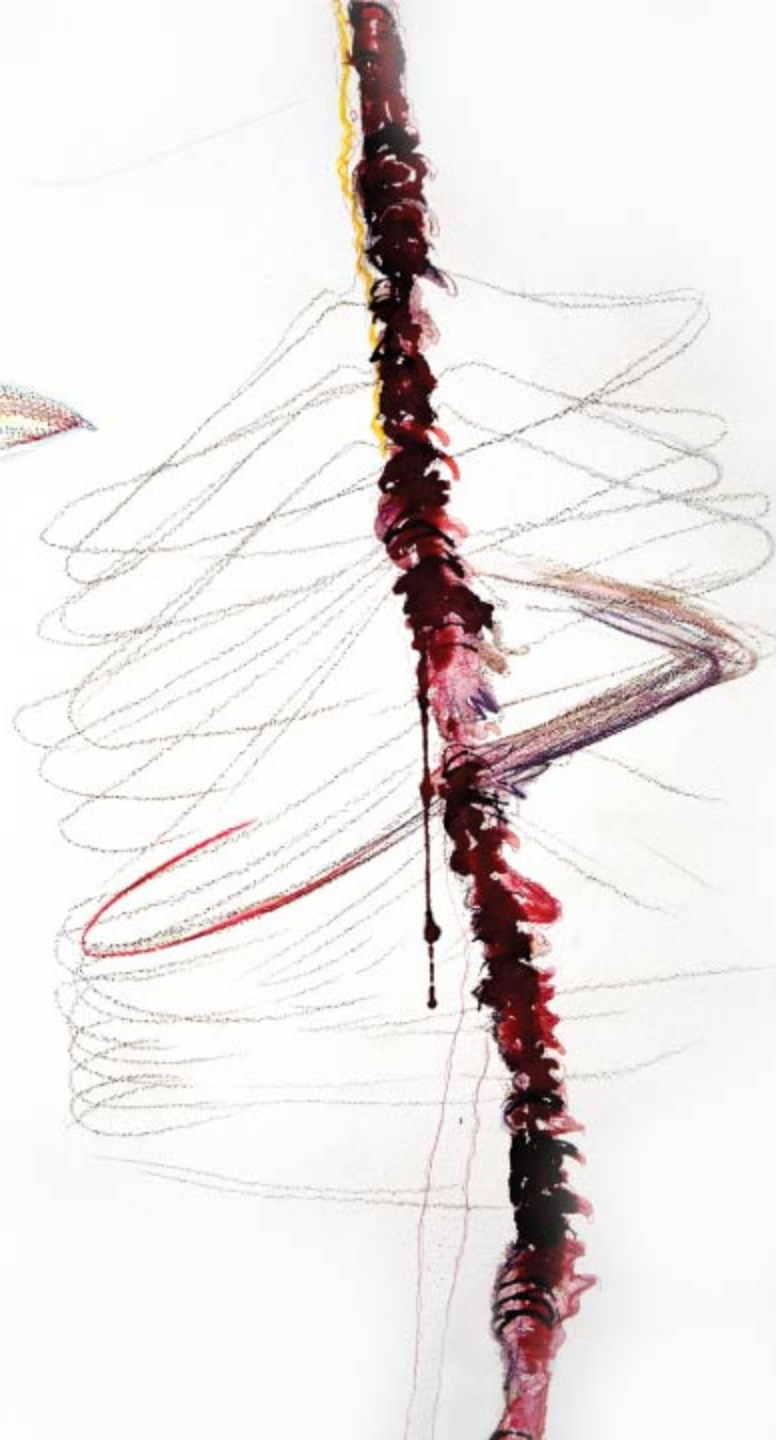




Untitled, 2006. Handmade paper leaves in drawing book.



CENTER: *Untitled*, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



Queen bee ...
drama queen



Throne →



|| Mitadi telling naem, @
Gross, 1830, was from there.
12 12 12 12

I Lost the night of 16th April
I flew against the sun

(16) 17 18 19 20 21 22 23

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 +

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29

30 31 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12 13 14 15

60 days

LEFT: Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 39 3/4 x 27 3/4 in.

RIGHT: Page from notebook.

I have to leave - sorry!!

[illegible]

Back
Forth
Back
forth
back
forth
back
forth
back
forth
back
forth
back
forth
back
forth
back
forth

n clip and safety pins.
notebook.
p band.
notebook.

back
forth
back

LEFT: Doll coat with clip and safety pins.
CENTER: List from notebook.
CENTER: Friendship band.
RIGHT: List from notebook.

Dear Guest

- Please use one set of bed covers / pillows etc. What's on the bed for your use.
- Make sure the bed room does not have hair on the floor.

We will keep everything tidy for your use.

Thanking



Hair sculpture.



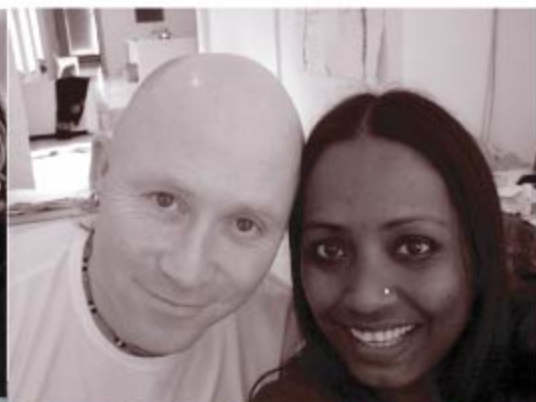
Guest-host-hospitality-tolerance

Mithu Sen

...sepia photos encased in an album or delicately monogrammed teabags represent fond memories of moments spent with her many visitors.

The photographs in particular are an exploration of intimacy, as characterized by the tension between proximity and distance among us. One must choose, make an immediate decision when confronted with another person. How close? To hug or not? To touch or not?

When this camera takes pictures at my hand's length, facing two of us, and you are confronted with such minimal distance between us, there is a moment of revelation. This person: what does she mean to me, and what do I mean to her? It is the same moment when one enters: room, house, gallery space, etc. Should I stop? Smile? A smile might render me too vulnerable to the host, to her hospitality. In diverse contexts, we enter and greet differently, we are received differently. This negotiation of distance and proximity is the key to our everyday lives. We might want to touch and kiss more, much more than the other wants, or is 'accepted'. Or we might choose to be cold and distant, as if it is an easy choice! Welcome, negotiate, become aware, and lose yourself if you are still able....





One of the sleeper highlights of the 2006 New York art season was Mithu Sen's studio residency in Chelsea. Most everyone was allowed to enter this enchanting atmosphere, aptly titled *Its Good to be Queen* for its ending exhibition, upon prior notification to the artist...whether one was an art connoisseur, legendary collector, idiot savant or amateur, an adult or a child, an artist, critic, gallery-goer, writer, photographer or art world groupie, Mithu Sen received you with unusual kindness and unpretentious hospitality in a city known for its art world snobbism. The energy of the space created by Mithu Sen made you feel privileged to be there and for most, a feeling of an unforgettable experience and time passed too soon. The endless flow of visitors, their demands to explain the work, show the videos, their various comments, questions, compliments and arguments were handled in a direct and bold way by the immensely patient, talented and charismatic Mithu Sen. She defined the term artist by her every action with each interaction as queen. We shall await the queen's next durbar.

The NY stay was a pivotal point for Mithu Sen's artistic growth. The vocabulary of skeletons and bones, hands, claws and birds, roses and glamorous women, hair or lips with bloody trails opens up magically to a tender but terrifying private arena that is notably encapsulated in the large, diptych masterpiece of her stay in New York, titled "Untitled (bed)". This is a sublime painting of crisis and joy, ornamented with desire, love and loss on a par with the psychological constructions of Bhupen Khakhar or Louise Bourgeois. This painting I loved and bought for my collection.

Ranbir Singh lives in New York and collects contemporary art ranging from Andy Warhol to John Currin. Works from his collection have been exhibited in major institutions across the US, Europe and Asia.



Arriving early to the artist space on the evening of its opening, it was exciting to have the full space to see, touch, and explore Mithu's work and her living space. As more people arrived, it was fascinating to see the hospitality extended by the artist and by the space itself as we rifled through Mithu's drawings, books on Shahrugh Khan, and everyday paraphernalia – with white gloves on, of course. Slowly becoming comfortable with the unusual protocol, as if we too were at home, the rooms revealed the layered dimensionality of Mithu's drawings, in which each line extends beyond the paper into the artist's real and psychic space.

Sushi dinner on the roof was equally special: an unusually cool summer evening with a heavy spell of rain and

the anticipation of the artist's late arrival led to an intimacy of conversation unusual at gallery openings. Enjoying a cigarette with Tejal Shah and two visiting German artists while getting soaked by runoff from the plastic tarp and taking in the full grey cityscape was a highlight.

Beth Citron is a writer and a PhD candidate in art history at the University of Pennsylvania. Based in Mumbai and New York, she researches and writes about contemporary art in India.



Last summer before going to New York – I got a mail from Mithu inviting me to visit her while she was there. I called on her at her studio cum residence in the gallery district, and was a bit lost – when I saw her shouting and waving excitedly from her balcony. She was midway through her project of being queen – and I guess I had the privilege of having a sneak preview and watching it in progress – her excitement at being offered such a project, where the entire space becomes an installation – and Mithu is good at that - her work as well as her mind lend themselves well to such a thought, as that's the person she is. From what I could understand, she was feeling both like a queen as well as a prisoner of sorts – being put in a new place – with full freedom to do whatever, wherever, and in any manner possible – yet bearing in mind that she was a guest, yet being lost, knowing few people there.

I was greeted with several Shahrukh Khans in different shapes and sizes, roses and books, drawings of lips, teeth and blood and sketches on the walls, on little sketchbooks, and scraps taped together, objects made using hair and fabric, and some large and small drawings that she had carried with her from Delhi – which I had an earlier occasion to view. What I think moved me the most – was the email I got from her after the open house – when she herself was missing, apologising for her absence – I guess not wanting to be obligated to play hostess when she was a queen, in a place where in a way she herself was a guest and at the same time not obstructing the viewer/voyeur in their enjoyment of soaking in her intimate details – whether they be in the ice compartment of her refrigerator, her clothes rack, her bed or her toilet. It didn't seem to be just a case of Mithu playing a queen – only for the duration of this project in New York. Mithu IS a queen.

Abhishek Poddar is a collector of contemporary art based in Bangalore, India. He runs a gallery for contemporary photography.



Smothered, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 27 x 39 1/4 in.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.



IRINA ARISTARKHOVA works on cyberfeminism, new media art, and comparative feminist theory/aesthetics. She is Assistant Professor of Women's Studies and Visual Art at Pennsylvania State University.

ELAINE W. NG is the editor and publisher of *Art AsiaPacific*, a magazine dedicated to contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region and the Asian diasporas. She is also a program advisor to the MA program for Exhibition Studies and Art Curatorship at the Hong Kong Art School. She is currently based in New York City. This piece previously appeared in *Art AsiaPacific* magazine (no. 50, Fall 2006).

OLU OGUIBE is an artist whose work has been exhibited widely including, most recently, in the 52nd Venice Biennale. Oguibe is also a curator and critic, and Associate Professor of Art and African American Studies at the University of Connecticut.

DAVID A. ROSS is curator and museum professional since 1971. He was director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston), the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Ross is currently an independent critic and curator and the Chairman of the Curatorial Committees of the Artist Pension Trust.

MITHU SEN lives and works in New Delhi. Trained at Shantiniketan and Glasgow, she has participated in many group shows and several residencies, producing works in multiple media. This is her tenth solo project.



Untitled, 2006. Mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.

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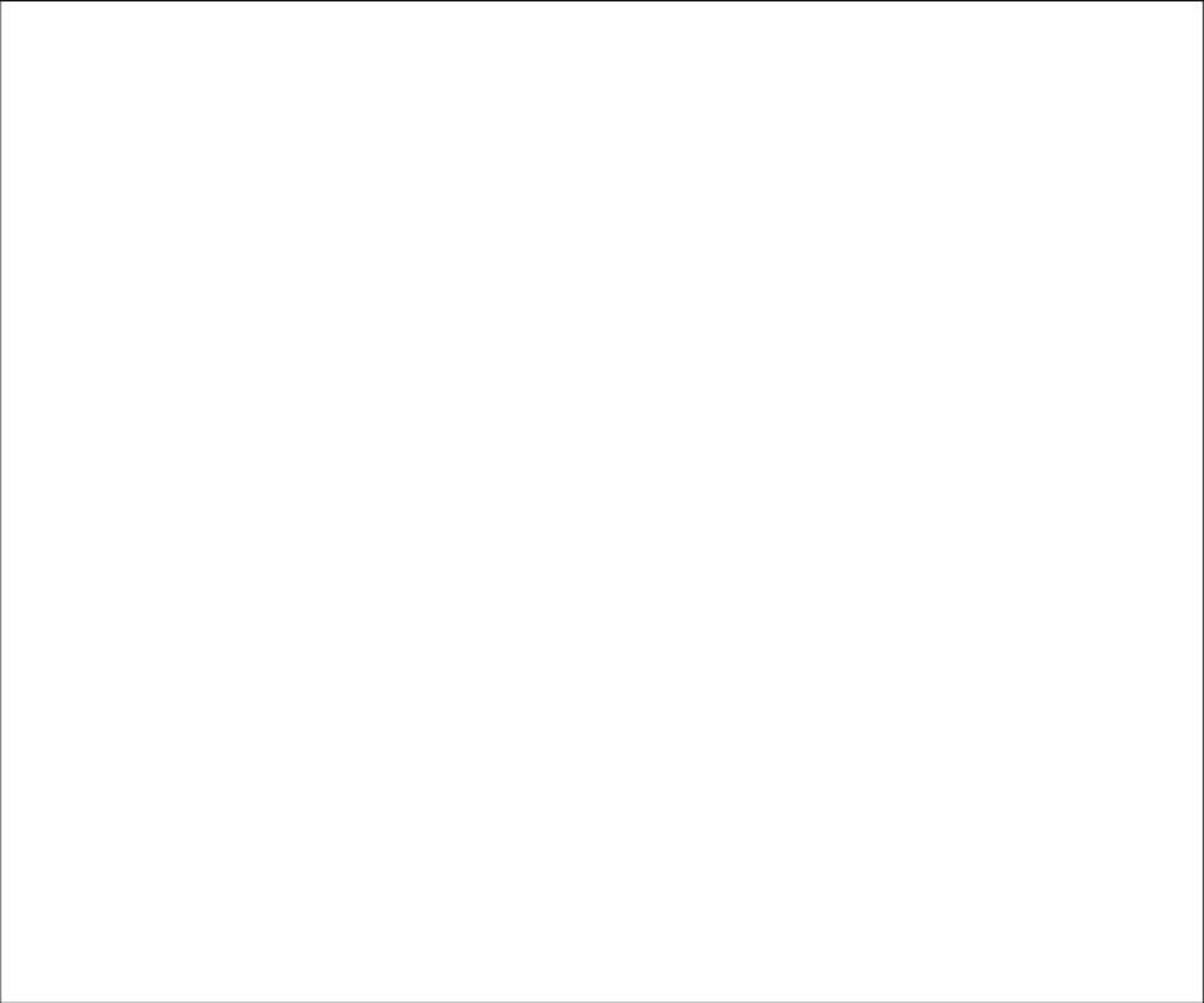
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