

November 8, 2007

Different Strokes

Surya Singh visits **Mithu Sen** 's exhibition of recent works at Nature Morte, New Delhi and writes why no one with serious interest in art can afford to ignore her work.



One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.
-Simon De Beauvoir.

Beauvoir explains that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men. Somehow Mithu sen also confirms the dictum with her mysterious glances, quirky sense of humour and playful kitsch. Using her images as great Indian beauty queen/princess in highly sensuous background she happens to be a mysterious girl with sudden intrusion who enigmatically returns the glance, reverses the gaze and challenges the place and authority of audience position and exposes masculine authority as flimsy mocking with playful experimentation with her body (skin and face).

It was a very pleasant evening of October 26, 2007 when her solo exhibition “Half Full; Part II” was inaugurated at Nature Morte, New Delhi . In the air-kissing, wine-in-the-cups opening atmosphere followed by dinner was making a brimful of youthful festival among majority of 20s and early 30s people and Peter Nagy, the gallerist and curator, was so happy to serve wine on tables showing warm hospitality. Only later on I came to know that it was birthday celebration also of the poetess-Mithu Sen-compelling one to be more poetic than critical or investigative. After making my mind I interrupted her to give a complement “your works are so individualistic and autobiographical that you-self seem to be a Fultush (complete) art piece.” With a kind smile she welcomed my complement “sweet heart of Indian art” very casually as if I was saying very monotonous and repetitive words from the last of the queue. Of course, her fascination about quotidian interaction with delicate balance makes her appropriate for this award. Mithu Sen, known for investigating her known and unknown selves, creates her own beauty of being a woman that invites her audience to come with her-

*“Mujhe bhi jalwa gaahe naaz tak lete chalo musa,
Tujhe gash aa gaya to husn-e-jaana kaun dekhega.”*
(*Make your company oh! Musa (dear) to that exotic sight of divine charm,
Who will cherish and treasure if you couldn't stand that marvel...*)

Born in 1971, West Bengal (Burdwan) Mithu Sen completed her academic training at Santiniketan and Glasgow school of art and has attended some international residencies in India, China, Kenya, USA, and Brazil. All ready very influential on international scene, this young artist has done some important shows also like “Drawing Room” at British Council, New Delhi, “I hate pink” in Mumbai, and “Its good to be a queen” at Bose Pacia, New York. Each time she makes stronger argument on gender inequality, sexuality and our sense beauty and femininity. “Half full; part II” is also arranged as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered representation which could be read directly off from its surface. She seems shouting to counter the ideas that presumes to limit and confine gender into masculinity and femininity. Obviously she creates “Gender Trouble” in the way Judith Butler analyses against the ‘regimes of truth that stipulates that certain kind of gendered expressions are false and derivative, and others, true and original.’

Mithu Sen has become more decorative and performative than ever. She has devoted more to clarifying and revising the tactics of performativity to achieve its effect through its naturalization in the context of body. “Life is more critical now” she answers about her experimentation with and splendours of her work. So many disparate and sensuous motifs join together as if they form some kind of unity that subvert the constructed idea of market beauty catering libidinal drives. The recent appetite for apparent fair-centric, slim and trim beauty is also of our concerns here. With expanding cosmetics industry, body building centers it became a sudden call to be fairer and slimmer, to reshape your body, to not remain ‘Other’. Just a couple of years ago, a leading Hindi columnist and critic satires on this recent phenomenon “looking ugly is a kind of terrorism”; when girls' suicidal notes become recurrent in news due to their ugly looking-pimpled face and unshaped body. There are unending examples of cosmetic manufacturers dividing gender line and creating irritating rivalry between masculine and feminine beauty. Recently a leading cosmetic manufacturer aired an advertisement in which a guy makes fun of his friend who is using a fairness cream meant for girls saying- *Ladka hoke ladkiyon wali cream lagata hai* . Is not it a sentence dividing gender on skin basis?

Mithu Sen prouds on and enjoys her own beauty. Black skin, shining teeth, wicked eyes and

mischievous body language - all recur here again and again to make her a woman of desire without consecrating femininity or signaling phallogocentric world. Mix media photocollage on archival paper and photomontage drawing have been staked out in different pink-reds, black grays etc. with sudden bursts and falls. The subtle flowing lines are embellished and given dimensions and textures with floral and sensuous motifs from printed fabric and coverlets. These velvety fabric cut-outs give embossed and relief effect. Among these sinuous lines and drawings the additions of her own photo cut-outs make her work pretty autobiographical that draw our attention to the difficulty of the "I" to express itself through the language available to her. In a black and white single channel video projection, with her thrilling and provocative facial expression she apparently combines ecstasy, fear and desire to enter in audience vein. Interfered by installation sculpture of simulated leather it took more time to reveal its actual duration. In a continuous projection she almost take our all attention and stops eyes - blinking. Indeed she does not speak in falsity rather creates an interior of *thousand monsoon bloom* on her face along with another single LCD monitor opening up like page-by-page of a diary to explore her high spirited fantasy and weaving her dreams during her residency in foreign country.

Hers is amazingly comprehensive art that provide excellent resumes of individual artist and position, clear exposition of approaches and practice, while at the same time making explicit her own self and preferences. Her reputation as "New Radicals" that Nancy Adjanian prompt to say has emerged as an artist that no one with serious interest in art can afford to ignore her work.

Half Full: Part II

Mithu Sen

October 26 – November 17, 2007

Nature Morte, New Delhi