



Mithu Sen in different avatars in mixed media works. 2006-07.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS Visiting Mithu Sen at her home, surrounded by cabinets stuffed with dolls (“my daughters and sons”) and seeing her walk around her fiery red kitchen, one gains an insight into the private narratives she creates in her art. Sen has shot into the limelight making work that is an extension of her life, sometimes quite literally – physically (by using material like hair to create sculptures) and emotionally (as an expression of her intense personality). She has, over the last two years, come up with innovative installations in shows like *I Dig, I Look Down* (Albion Gallery, London, 2008), *Half Full, Part 1* (Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, 2007) and *Half Full, Part 2* (Nature Morte, New Delhi, 2007).

In this free-wheeling chat with **Latika Gupta**, Sen admits, “I don’t make art for art’s sake, I make art for life.”

LATIKA GUPTA: WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY working on and what is this intriguing *Free Art Project*?

Mithu Sen: I do many things simultaneously – I make drawings, sculptures, video works, photographs and I write. This approach probably stems from my restless nature; I can’t concentrate on only one particular piece for a long time. My new work is the *Free Art Project*, which I am in the process of completing. I started it in April 2007 when the market for art (including my own) was getting over-hyped. It was a wonderful time for artists and contemporary art in India, but I also had an uncomfortable feeling. I was not very sure about the repercussions and the

imbalances this would create in our lives. I am not an activist but there was an internal revolt. I was feeling demoralized also with the hypocrisy of the art market, knowing that I couldn’t work outside this system.

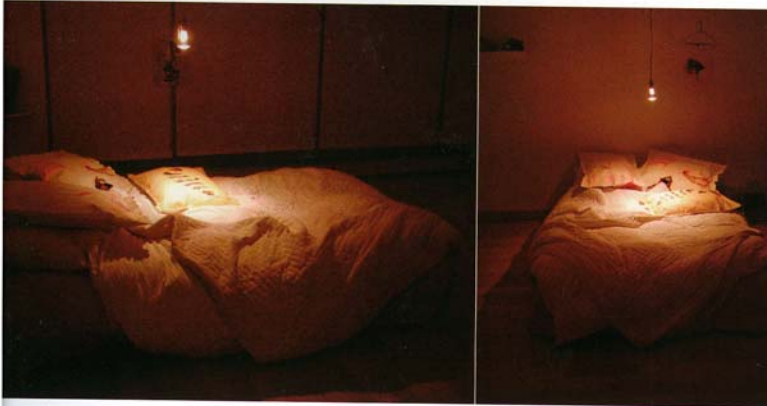
I sent a direct invitation to around 100 people and then asked them to send another 100 or so names from their contact lists. They had to send me a letter of love by post; e-mails would not do. It could be a note written for me or a webpage/site designed for me or something precious, even personal diary-entries. The project went beyond a barter system of exchange. It was about relationships and their journeys, whether they had developed over years or over chance

meetings. There was also a blog where people were asked to respond, especially, to the possibility of a free gift. I plan to give away an artwork with an authenticity certificate. The person who gets the artwork has the choice of framing and hanging the work, selling it, destroying it or gifting it to someone else. The project is very simple; it hopes to critique the commoditization of art. I will be presenting the project as an event at Khoj.

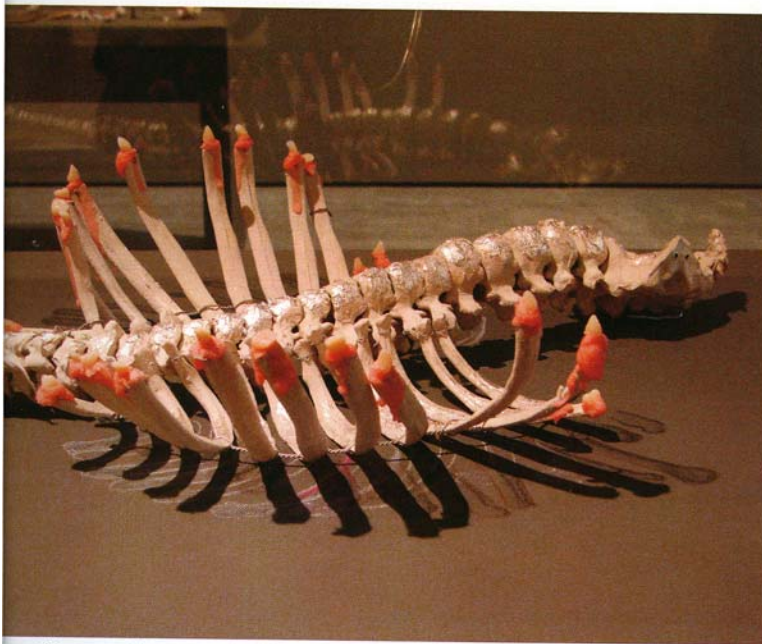
L. G.: Considering you think of your artworks as relayers of your self, how do you choose whom to work with?

M. S.: In India, we don’t have the luxury of

[Interview]



Mithu Sen. *It's Good to be Queen*. Installation/Performance. 2006.



Mithu Sen. *Work from I Dig, I Look Down*. 2008.

choosing galleries; they choose us. Having said that, I feel fortunate to be working with people who can appreciate something unconventional. Some individuals have followed my journey since I began working professionally. They share my life with me, not just my art. Building a relationship is very important.

L. G.: How do you edit your body of work for a show?

M. S.: I'll give you an example. When I was in Chelsea, NY, for a residency that resulted in *It's Good to be Queen* (at the Bose Pacia Artist Space, New York, in 2006), the gallerists were preparing a price chart. I told them then that not just the paintings, but everything in the flat where I was living for three months – my dolls, my garments, everything that was there had to be put up for sale as it was all part of my body and my life!

I don't like galleries to dictate terms to me. However, I have the confidence in my work to trust that my gallerists will not be upset with what I choose to do. When I am offered a show, I ask whether they trust me. If they say 'yes', then I ask them to leave everything to me, as I won't let them down. We also have to compromise. I use 'compromise' as a positive word, where one chooses a certain aesthetic over another. I practically bring my whole studio to the gallery to put up a show.

L. G.: Do you feel that the response to your work is different in India and abroad?

M. S.: Definitely, but it is not only about India and other countries. With every city, space or day, responses change. But because I am so keen to gain people's reactions, I sometimes choose to overlook the differences in perception. Some places have elicited spontaneous and warm reactions; whereas, in others, the reactions have been sophisticated and rooted in conceptual knowledge. This is useful but can also become an obstacle.