Self-Portrait as a Lens for Identity, Intimacy and Gender in Contemporary Indian Art by Mithu Sen and Pushpamala N.

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Abstract— This study explores the ways in which contemporary Indian artists Mithu Sen and Pushpamala N. have expanded the concept of self-portraiture beyond mere physical likeness to include themes of intimacy, gender politics, and identity. Their work challenges societal assumptions of gender, sexuality, and power while upending fixed notions of selfhood through the use of performance, photography, and mixed-media interventions. Using case studies of a few chosen works, this paper makes the point that their self-representational techniques serve as platforms for play, resistance, and critical interaction with the politics of identity in Indian contemporary art.

Index Terms—Self-portrait, Mithu Sen, Pushpamala N., contemporary, art, identity, gender, politics, feminist.

I. INTRODUCTION

A self-portrait in visual art depicts both the artist's inner self/thoughts in addition to their outward self. It is the final element that adds even more attractiveness to the work. Throughout history, portraits have served as records of people's personalities, qualities, and social standing. In western art, the self-portrait is a fascinating and complex genre that has developed throughout ages, reflecting shifts in artistic mediums, cultural norms, and self-perception. Its critical history is a story about the artist's relationship with their own image, identity research, and self-representation. Unfortunately, it appears that Indian artists were less willing than their western counterparts to preserve their works for future generations. In the past, painting was mostly used to convey devotional topics; portrait painting and modeling were given very little consideration. In contrast to the west, where self-portraiture became increasingly popular in the modern era and artists like Vincent van Gogh and Frida Kahlo used the genre to examine themes of identity, loneliness, and mental health, Amrita Shergil in India would once again place a strong emphasis on the artist's view of their own body, which would go against the patriarchal norms of the time. Their self-images would incorporate unique cultural symbols and motifs from mythology and anti-colonial stories. Their personal estrangement from the normative existence that was promised to those who fit their social ideal would be a recurring topic. In the west, the development of photography significantly broadened the scope of self-representation, enabling artists such a Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman to explore gender roles and identity.

As Indian painters struggled issues of identity and cultural legacy under colonial control, self-portraiture became increasingly popular in the early 20th century. In order to challenge European creative norms and express their artistic individuality, artists such as Raja Ravi Varma, who is frequently seen as the founder of modern Indian art, experimented with self-portraiture.

Self-portraiture emerged as a potent medium for expressing feelings and claiming cultural pride as India's fight for independence gathered stream. Artists like Jamini Roy and Nandalal Bose portrayed themselves in a way that emphasized the value of local artistic traditions while also celebrating India's rich cultural legacy. These artists aimed to reclaim and reassert the importance of Indian art in a global context through their self-portraits. Self-portraits were increasingly popular in the years following independence as Indian artists struggled with the challenges of modernity and globalization. It was adopted by artists like M. F. Hussain and F. N. Souza as a way to explore their own identities in the quickly shifting socio-political context of post-colonial India.

During the second half of 20th century, self-portraiture saw a dramatic change as artists started to delve more and more deeply into issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. It became a tool utilized by artists like Bhupen Khakhar, Anupam Sud, Shobha Broota, and Gogi Saroj Pal to communicate their own experiences and address concerns of cultural hybridity and social marginalization. Their self-portraits present a broader and more inclusive view of Indian modernity while also challenging conventional ideas of identity. The self-portraits provided a record of the women artists' evolving connections with their own bodies. Some emphasized their right to examine their own bodies and depict them as they see fit, while others discovered methods to reflect on the harmful focus society places on the idealized female figures.

The varied and dynamic character of Indian identity and artistic expression is reflected in the history of the self-portrait in Indian modern art. From its origins in colonial resistance to its modern iterations in the international art scene, self-portrait continues to be a potent tool for examining the intricacies of identity and belonging in a world that is changing quickly. Additionally, it enables artists to keep challenging the characteristics that go into creating a self, whose historical foundations differ not only globally but also among areas of a nation as diverse as India. These artistic studies act as a range of guides in our continuous quest to improve our image, from the sincere and constructive to the playful and disruptive, each aiming to imprint its own idea of an amorphous self in the creation. To examine themes of gender, power, and identity, contemporary Indian artists have elevated the self-portrait to a critical instrument that goes beyond appearances and introduces new mediums like photography, performance, mixed media, etc. This paper centers on the works of two contemporary Indian artists, Mithu Sen and Pushpamala N., who use their bodies as locations for performative investigation. Their work explores the complex politics of intimacy and representation, going beyond simple physical resemblance in self-portraiture. Sen and Pushpamala reinterpret the self-portrait as a performative act of resistance against rigid ideas of identity and gender norms by using performance, satire, and body as a medium.

II. THE SELF AS PROVOCATION: IDENTITY AND INTIMACY IN MITHU SEN'S ART

Mithu Sen is a contemporary Indian artist who works in a variety of media and fields. Her oeuvre is renowned for questioning established linguistic, artistic, and social discourse frameworks. She uses drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, photography, film, and writing as her mediums of expression. A large portion of her work is distinguished by her preference for performance and other types of intervention. Some of her recurring concerns as an artist have been shaped by the concepts of language and convention, home and hospitality, and her personal identity as a female South Asian artist. Sen consistently challenges the conventions of classifications and genres in her work, seeking to challenge and contradict the tenets of even her own writing, even though it may be situated at the nexus of second wave and postcolonial feminism. Because of this, she frequently refrains from announcing the completion of her projects, many of which continue for years. Sen attempts to undermine scholarly and capitalist notion of art by examining language, gender, sexuality, tradition, and censorship through humor and irreverence.

In contemporary Indian art, Mithu Sen's work is a prime example of a radical redefining of the self. Sen uses her own body, persona, and voice as changeable places of meaning, in contrast to traditional self-portrait, which emphasizes physical likeness or personal connection. In her art, the self is performative, fragmented, and frequently unnerving rather than stable or singular. It can take many different forms, such as provocateur, host, goddess, poet, or anonymous interlocutor, all of which undermine established ideas about identity, gender, and authorship.

Sen frequently presents herself as a controversial figure who subverts societal ritual conventions. She entered a high-society art luncheon in London with a placard declaring its cancellation and then proceeded to eat her meal while wearing veterinary cones around her neck as part of her 2019 performance 'Lunch is Cancelled.' The supper, an occasion marked by affluence and sophistication, became a theatre of discomfort due to the ridiculousness of this performance. Here, her own self-image which is simultaneously funny, foreign, and defiant, becomes an embodiment of critique. This usage of self involves conducting critique through one's presence in social settings rather than visual portraiture.

Figure 1 Mithu Sen, "I have only one language; it is not mine," video installation, Thomas Erben Gallery. Courtesy- https://ocula.com/art-galleries/thomas-erben-gallery/artworks/mithu-sen/i-have-only-one-language-it-is-not-mine/

Exploring languages and its shortcomings is a major theme in Sen's work. Sen consciously avoided using any common language while living with girls in an orphanage in Kerala in 'I Have Only One Language; It Is Not Mine (2014)'. Rather, she established a confidential, nonverbal mode of communication. Here, the self –a person who suspends linguistic power to establish a relational form of being –becomes the negotiating site. Similar to this, she created made-up scripts and unintelligible symbols in 'I Am From There. I Am From Here' (2023), positioning herself as the creator of language as well as the barrier to understanding. Her gestures and body in these pieces represent a rejection of hegemonic communication structures, particularly those imposed by patriarchal and colonial history. The self-image is reframed as a linguistic trickster who is simultaneously an author, performer, and disruptor.

Sen resists being limited to readings of her art as purely sexual, although she regularly employs the erotic as a destabilizing technique. Eroticism, in her opinion, is a way to probe the psyche and challenge gendered embodiment. She reclaims fragility as a common human condition by crafting narratives around weak masculinities in Black Candy (iforgotmypenisathome). Within this space, her own androgynous self-image emerges, neither completely embracing masculinity nor restricted to feminine norms. Sen's body serves as a platform for reinventing intimacy, gender, and power by mocking sexual desire while also highlighting its frailty. In this way, the self in her work defies the easy dichotomies of repression and desire by being at once sensual, grotesque, humorous, and compassionate. Her use of herself as a feminist instrument is exemplified by her performance (Un)Mansplaining (2019) at the Venice Biennale. She inserted herself through absurd nonsense into video recordings of male art critics while dressed as a goddess. This deliberate and ludicrous behavior challenged the legitimacy of patriarchal discourse. Sen introduced a new feminist grammar into the field of art criticism by substituting unintelligible utterance for logical speech, mocking the concept of "mansplaining." Her physical self-served as a disruptive annotation in which the feminine body writes itself against patriarchal language.

Sen's writings have a strong autobiographical foundation, even when they appear to be social or political on the surface. Her early drawings were extensions of her own mind, where fantasy and selfhood blended together, and were frequently replete with eerie and sensual images. She later used her self-image as a reigning figure –both majestic and humorous –to examine representation and power in art in her long-term project 'It's Good to be Queen' (2006-ongoing). Sen's inability to commit to a single identity is demonstrated by the 'queenly' self's oscillation between empowerment and satire.

Sen's aversion to closure is a key component of her self-reflection. Many of her projects, such as 'It's Good to be Queen', are purposefully left unfinished for years. According to Sen, the self is never fully formed and is constantly changing. Her broader tactic of rejecting institutional, linguistic, and gendered classifications is reflected in her refusal of finality. Her character, voice, and body become flexible instruments for humor, intimacy, experimentation, and conflict.

Sen frequently leaves her projects open-ended or continue for years since she avoids finality. Her broader rejection of rigid labels and classifications is reflected in her hesitation to declare completion. According to Sen, the self is constantly changing and is characterized by humor, provocation, contradiction, and constant reinvention. Her body moves between registers of the sensual, the ridiculous, the vulnerable, and the political, serving as both an autobiographical marking and a conceptual instrument. In this sense, the self0image in her work is a malleable medium that demands relationality and plurality rather than a mirror of likeness.

The self-image in Mithu Sen's work is a complicated combination of provocation, language, and performance rather than a portrait or confession. Sen uses linguistic subversion, eroticism, and parody to turn her own body and identity into a subject of critical investigation. She defies cultural norms and upends patriarchal, linguistic, and commercial systems by rejecting fixed identities and embracing an androgynous, performative self. Her wok reinterprets self-portraiture in modern India as an area of radical hospitality, intimacy, and resistance.

Figure 2 Mithu Sen, detail, Black Candy, Chemould Prescott Road, 2010. Image Courtesy: https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/art-and-culture/unmyth-new-monograph-mithu-sen-collapsing-hierarchies-11745560422178.html

sculpture, creating what she refers to as 'photo-performances.' Her early training in sculpture continues to shape the meticulously produced, iconic, and static aspect of her photographs, which straddle the line between the illusionism of the movie and the stillness of the sculpture, even though this approach represented a major break from conventional ideas of self-portraiture.

The artist herself becomes the topic in Pushpamala's work, transforming her body into a variety of personas, identities, and archetypes. She turns the self-portrait from a representation of the artist's likeness into a performative and critical tactic by disguising herself as legendary characters, ethnographic types, movie heroines, and regular women. Instead of serving as simple autobiographical documents, these self-stagings create a dynamic, satirical, and frequently comical conversation about history, popular culture, gender roles, and the representational processes itself. This makes her 'self' less about self-discovery and more about

III. THE SELF-PERFORMED: PUSHPAMALA N.

By expanding the possibilities of the self-portrait, Pushpamala N (born in Bangalore in 1956) has become one of the most critical voices in contemporary Indian art. Pushpamala, who had her sculpture training at M.S. University in Baroda, started out wanting to create an indigenous sculpture language that would represent concepts of 'Indianness'. But in the middle of the 1990s, she started concentrating on conceptual photography and video instead of

self-referentiality, which is an examination of the ways in which identities are socially consumed, historically constructed and visually coded.

A significant piece of Indian art, 'Phantom Lady of Kismet' (1996-98), was created in partnership with photographer Meenal Agarwal. Pushpamala plays a masked female vigilante, a role inspired by the cinematic persona of Fearless Nadia, the first white stunt actor in Indian cinema. By doing this, she honors Nadia's legacy while also challenging the patriarchal conventions of film narrative, which typically confine women to submissive parts. Pushpamala dramatizes the potential of female autonomy while also highlighting its limitations by integrating herself into this tradition of action heroines. In addition to invisibility and disguise, the work's phantom quality conveys a somber recognition that women's agency has frequently been falsified or destroyed throughout history. Her self-portrayal here thereby stages empowerment's ambivalences, inconsistencies, and losses rather than merely celebrating it.

Another important series that expands on Pushpamala's work with the self as performance is 'Native Women of South India' (2000-04) which was created in partnership with photographer Clare Arni. Pushpamala challenges the process of representation

Figure 3 Mithu Sen, Performance with Alexa during the exhibition UnMythu, 2018. Courtesy : https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-mithu-sen-s-concept-laden-practice-unearths-the-unseen-meanings-of-body-and-home

itself by assuming the roles of many kinds of South Indian women derived from popular culture, calendar art, and colonial ethnography. She both embodies and subverts the cliches that have traditionally defined the 'Indian woman' by posing as temple deities, housewives, tribals, and movie characters. She poses like a Toda woman in one especially tense picture, her body positioned against a colonial anthropometric grid and her skin darkened. In this instance, the artist challenges colonial ethnography's assertions of impartiality in addition to re-performing it. She enters a double consciousness by being both the object and the spectator, the subject of colonial gaze and the one who initiates its parody. This masquerade tactic has continued to be essential to Pushpamala's work. Through the staging of both fictional and real, individual and collective history, her works serve as critical allegories. She

Figure 4 Pushpamala N., Phantom Lady of Kismet (1996-98), a photo romance shot in Mumbai. Courtesy: http://www.pushpamala.com/projects/phantom-lady-or-kismet-1996-1998/

illustrates the performative character of cultural stereotypes by assuming archetypal positions, especially those associated with femininity, nationalism, and tradition. Thus, her 'self' becomes a place of inquiry into how identities are malleable constructions influenced by history, power, and representation rather than unchangeable essences.

The dual nature of photography as both fictive and documentary is exactly what draws Pushpamala to it. She uses photography to create uncertainty and fantasy, despite the fact that it is frequently believed to possess the authority of truth. She uses both modern and antiquated technology to undermine the photographer's reality claim by working with specialists who are proficient in lithography, photomontage, and hand-tinting. Her 'Somberikatte' studio project, for example, subverts early Indian studio photography and portraiture with irony and anachronism while still purposefully referencing them.

Both artistically and politically, she insists on the still picture over live performance. Pushpamala employs photography to freeze the performance into a permanent tableau, in contrast to performance art that captures the fleeting moment. Her total control over mise-en-scene, including to create staged fictions that challenge the validity of cultural conventions. Her use of stills demonstrates a postcolonial tactic, as critics have pointed out: by halting history in the frame of the photograph, she exposes the brittleness of representation and challenges the viewer to face the prejudices ingrained in it.

Finally, it is possible to see Pushpamala's self-portraits as a type of critical masquerade, a feminist tactic that both appropriates and subverts the prevailing representations of women in Indian visual culture. Her use of self is never limited to autobiography, whether she is shown as the fearless Phantom Lady, the anthropological 'Naïve Woman', or innumerable other personas. Rather, it turns into a tool for challenging prejudices, collective histories, and dreams. She claims that her art has always deconstructed the stereotype of women while telling their tales. Pushpamala turns the individual into a performative space where identity, gender, history, and politics are continuously reenacted and reimagined by assuming stereotypes and then destabilizing them.

Figure 5 Pushpamala N, Toda; H-26. 2004. Courtesy: https://mapacademy.io/article/pushpamala-n/

IV. CONCLUSION

The works of Pushpamala N and Mithu Sen show how the self-portrait in contemporary Indian art serves as a key space for examining identity, representation, and power, going well beyond issues of likeness or autobiography. Both artists use their own bodies as the main tool for their research, but they take different approaches to the 'self' that highlight different facets of modern subjectivity. According to Mithu Sen, the self becomes into a psychological and visceral landscape. Confessional closeness, physical excess, and an unreserved engagement with vulnerability, taboo, and desire are characteristics of her work. In her work, the 'I' is not a fixed thing but rather a fluid and permeable state that traverse's language, sexuality, and visibility politics. Her self-portraits, which are frequently presented through texts, performances, and drawings, challenge conventional boundaries and create room for comedy, affect, and transgression.

In contrast, Pushpamala N views the self as a mask. Her photo-performances critically analyze the ways in which women's identities have been shaped by cultural and historical frameworks by taking on archetypal guises from mythology, ethnography, and film. In her work, the artist's is used as a vehicle for parody and sarcasm, both occupying and revealing stereotypes. Therefore, rather than being revealed, the self is created, staged, and played as a means of analyzing societal conceptions of gender and nationalism.

In Indian contemporary art, the self-portrait is shown to be a flexible and creative category by the two artists working together. Whereas Pushpamala redefines it through theatrical performance, emphasizing the instability of culture archetypes, Sen redefines it through the register of the intimate and the psychic, emphasizing the fragility of human identity. By placing selfhood within networks of desire, memory, history, and representation, both approaches challenge the idea that selfhood is unique. By doing this, they broaden the definition of self-portraiture itself, turning it from a type of self-depiction into a performative and conceptual approach to challenging the subjective conditions in modern-day India.

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