

Mithu Sen

Artist

'Each of my works is my god'

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Artist Mithu Sen feels like a composer with her works, assembling them till she reaches the moment when it feels all done.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Usually, being from India, people expect you to be so-called spiritual. It becomes like a branding. And it bothers me. I have no idea what that kind of spirituality is.

Some magazine asked me to write a few lines about spirituality, here is the naughty text I sent:

"Spirituality is unbelonging, something that always provokes but never gets caught.

It is such a great erotic feeling but it is not.
No need to go to the Himalayas to discover it.
No need to meditate for ages behind a tree either.

I make my own dictionary with my own meanings. I keep it secretly in a corner and inflict others with it. Those dying to find that unreachable spirituality beyond the word, beyond life, they can come and find how easy the term is, how closely it is attached to our lives. Spirituality is love and loving everyone does, sharing when making love and not sharing when masturbating.

Spirituality is not unreachable, it is like a fly, sorry butterfly.”

The expectation is that I would associate something poetic, romantic, idealistic with the word spirituality. It is a common disease of human beings that we cannot accept the little and easy moments of life. We always look for some big thing and big event. So when you do something very little and very simple, people actually love it. Because deep down in their heart, everybody is looking for simplicity. When we try to make it meaningful, grand, bookish it becomes detached from life.

So actually I see spirituality as an extreme attachment to life, with the power to leave it within seconds. This simultaneous sense of strong attachment and detachment.

I am truly very materialistic. I love my family, I love people, I can't throw a single thing out of my life. Every day I am filling myself with so many things. But at the same time I have so much energy that I feel I could leave everything behind.

Reaching that point of both attachment and detachment, I think that could be called spirituality.

It is extremely difficult to reach it, isn't it?

But life is not about reaching some goal. Life is about thinking of reaching a goal. We make our fantasies and can't ever reach them except in our own imagination. Plus, they keep changing. And that is the fun of life!

You were the same as a little girl, always so much in the moment?

You think I have grown up? Sometimes we don't express it enough, but we all have that inner child, so strongly inside.

And part of my art is to remind people of it. I love to trigger those things in people, to give them that joy and connect them with those sides in them. You can call me a therapist or a story-teller...

What is God for you?

I don't know ! It is one of my mum's favorite toys ... I grew up in small towns of North Bengal and saw a lot of religious practices there. At home we always had a small corner for gods and goddesses and my mother would worship them. She believes in all this.

For me it could be the toilet basin just as much as those stones. The point is to have something to concentrate on, to visualize and project all of our complaints and demands on.

God, like a doll or a toy never answers back, never scolds you, never shouts at you no matter what you say. It is always there for you to cry and share all your emotions. It is like a catalyst, or a therapist. When you don't have a therapist, you make a stone or a god your therapist. And it definitely helps ! Sometimes I feel it would be better not to be too intellectual or too intelligent and know there is nothing special in that piece of stone. Because then you cannot do all of this.

But concentrating for a few minutes on something is good in any case. It is like a meditation. It keeps your mind calm and focused.

Did you believe in god as a child?

I always had a sense of unease because I felt there was much selfishness in our relation to gods and goddesses. It was always about asking for something - somebody's health, success at an exam and so on.

So instead, I used to ask for something extremely far-away in time, like "when I am 80 years' old, I would like some wonderful grand-children", or "when growing up, I would like to be the best person in the world". That way, I didn't feel I was treating god like a Santa Claus fulfilling some immediate wish.

Also, I felt sorry for god at times. I saw we were bringing him clothes, fruits and sweets. But I used to love non-veg food and noticed we would never bring him some succulent fish. So I wasn't sure he was happy with what we were bringing him.

With all this I somehow walked away from faith. Of course I still love watching people and their intense belief, how they can channel their entire suffering on a piece of stone, and use it as a therapy.

But the idea of some external force affecting your life – does it talk to you?

My life is fulfilled with the energy I get from everything around me - people, trees, the moon, a movie theater ... How do I absorb all of this? That is what life is about. I would be very insecure if there was only god to get energy. If there was only one source and by any chance I were to lose it, I would be totally lost! So I take energy from each moment, each person, each piece of food, each touch, each laugh, each insect. Everything is a source of wonder. I have to keep that feeling alive. That is my only job.

Did you always feel you would be in the world of arts?

Absolutely not. Going to art college was a complete accident. I didn't know anything about the art world. As in any regular middle class Bengali family, and as a good student, I was destined to study medicine or engineering. But somehow I began feeling very uneasy about the idea. I was looking for a way out and didn't know what it would be. I applied to Shantiniketan without knowing anything about arts. I happened to get accepted and convinced my parents to let me go there at least for a couple of weeks.

The moment I reached Shantiniketan though, I knew I had to stay. I loved the atmosphere, the people, the spirit of the place. Everything. I knew I had to be there and nowhere else. I knew that there, I would be happy.

I wrote a letter to my father asking him not to force me into any other school. And I am so grateful to my parents that they accepted it. Every single day there I was happy, I was smiling. Many people just think I am a lucky person.

Actually, is there such a thing as destiny or preordained events in life?

If there is, then why would I have to believe in it? If I am destined to something I will reach that place. Why should I waste my energy and time thinking about it? It will simply happen.

What about the feeling of being a conduit for something else, being possessed by the piece you are working on?

My art is a long process, very scientific, very technical. I work for a very long time on an idea and do a lot of research before actually sitting or standing next to my paper, or sculpture material, or video, or camera. I think a lot and write a lot, much more than making layouts or images.

But the moment I begin physically producing the piece, it is like being in a trance. Maybe you can call this a spiritual moment. I am addicted to those moments. It is for them that I live and don't want to die - ever.

When I start doing something on a paper or a canvass, I feel it is like my lover. We fight with our egos and then finally we reach a point where we give birth to the baby. That is the energy. Each of my works is my god. I give them all my energy. But I don't want to make statements or be too serious about those things. If someone were to say Mithu's work is serious, I would break it!

I actually feel like a composer. I am not so skilled in every part of the work - for instance, when it comes to drawing, I won't try and make myself as skilled as Leonardo da Vinci. But I can collage, I can compose. I assemble and compose until I reach a particular moment when it feels all done, when I know it is over. Then I stop and don't touch it at all. Sometimes it can take years till I reach that point of feeling the work is done. You could call it all a spiritual process. But I don't like to name things. It is like putting them in a box. It creates limitations.

At times of major challenges, where do you find your energy?

I go ahead and face them head-on. What is the worse that can happen? In any case I have to die one day. So if that is supposed to be the moment to go, it is fine! I am quite adventurous. I have only one life and don't want to miss anything.

What is your idea of happiness?

Living in each micro-moment. Fully. And more than that if possible!