

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS



Mithu Sen, *I have only one language; it is not mine*, 2014, video, color, sound, 29 minutes.

NEW YORK

Mithu Sen

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY
526 West 26th Street, Floor 4 4th Floor
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“Language imposes a strange and alien logic that tells us not to smell poetry, hear shadows or taste lights,” Mithu Sen warns in the introductory text to her multimedia

installation *I have only one language; it is not mine*, commissioned for the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The artist tried to counteract this logic by becoming stranger and more alien herself, conducting an experiment in “radical hospitality” over three days in a state-operated home for female orphans and victims of abuse in Kerala, India. Posing as Mago, an itinerant being with a camera strung around her neck, Sen attempted to communicate with the children in a tongue all her own. While the setup could rightfully flag ethical concerns, the artist is careful not to fetishize the girls’ histories of violence, abuse, or abandonment, appealing to them on the level of an outsider to outsiders.

In lieu of speech, the girls communicate with hand gestures, facial expressions, charades, and props. By nudging the children outside the “parrot-like cage” of linguistic constructs, Sen reveals that language doesn’t have to be an instrument of claim and colonization; it can exist as something more fluid that doesn’t belong to anyone, thriving in the spaces between speakers.

Sen distills the events in her twenty-nine-minute video to scarlet outlines on a white backdrop, an aesthetic decision that protects the girls’ identities, while also underscoring the liminality of the world in which they live. Presented in collaboration with Sen’s Mumbai gallery, Chemould Prescott Road, here the film is projected in a dimly lit installation, festooned with relics from past performances, talismanic objects fashioned from feathers, sequins, and knotted threads. The thick carpet is the same crimson color as the cinematography. The resulting atmosphere is warm and womblike: not a site of violence but a place of new beginnings.

—Kate Sutton