



'He's Not Here To Give A Speech', 2019; water-based medium on paper. (Aicon Contemporary)

Can art foretell the future of humanity?

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Delhi-based artist Avishek Sen's solo at New York's Aicon Contemporary feels prescient and urgent in a covid-19 world.

In artist Avishek Sen's work, humans, animals and vegetation are often fused by a unique alchemy. A figure with a lion's head and ripped male torso poses in front of a bathtub, out of which an oversized dissected fruit and a tiger-riding deity peek out. A panel of images depicts a cheetah clutching a larger-than-life banana in various postures. The peeled fruit seems to be attached to the animal's body, like a stand-in for a giant phallus. When Sen paints the cross-section of a pumpkin, melon or jackfruit, he opens up a brave new world, a landscape of unseen possibilities.

"I find his work incredibly prescient, especially for these strange times," says Projjal Dutta of Aicon Contemporary, the New York-based gallery where Sen's latest solo is on display. "This juxtaposition of people, plants and animals feels uncannily like a metaphor of what's going on today, when viruses are jumping species and causing havoc."

Sen, who was supposed to be in New York for his big solo show, is stuck at home in Delhi. He admits that this isn't perhaps the best time to open a show but he has been working on this set of paintings for a long time. His gallery is going out on a limb to put the work out in the world too. A short film on Sen's practice was created specifically for this show and is up on the website, with comments by journalist Annie Gowen and art-writer Rosalyn D'mello.

"My work takes a long time to finish," Sen adds. "The paintings of the fruits, for instance, can take up to a month or two." The intricately detailed imagery, along with the use of the water-based medium (notoriously difficult to control compared to oil, which can be easily manipulated), are proof of his sheer dexterity. But even more fascinating is the cerebral energy that goes into the making of each work.

Take, for example, the elaborate titles Sen often picks for his paintings. The current show is titled *Whoever Brought Me Here Will Have To Take Me Home*. Part-playful, part-mysterious, there is a hint of an unspoken story, a sly intimation of drama, in his paintings. It was also there in the work featured in *Bedtime Stories*, Sen's earlier solo at Delhi's Gallery Espace in 2015, though the narrative energy of the current work feels more archly symbolic.

The banana-wielding cheetah, for instance, is titled *He's Not Here To Give A Speech*; the cross-section of the jackfruit, naughtily erotic, is called *Offering*. "If I were a poet, I would have liked to write like Lalon and Rumi," Sen says. Instead, he aims to create poetry through paint. For him, the long-winded titles are often a way to leave clues for the viewer to decode the layers of meaning in the work.

While the metaphorical potential of Sen's imagery can be endlessly debated and analysed, his bond with the natural world is direct and unmistakable. "I grew up in a

village near Kharagpur (in West Bengal)," he says. "As a boy, I would traipse around the countryside, catch birds, watch the farmers till the land." Sen's father was a teacher of biology and the family wanted him to be a doctor. But in spite of being a diligent student of the sciences, he opted for art school. He attended Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata as an undergraduate student, moving thereafter to Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, in Santiniketan, for his master's degree.

While the former gave Sen a solid base in the technicalities of form, the latter exposed him to an innately cosmopolitan milieu. Suddenly, he was among students from all over the world, working together in the open or in their personal studios.

"Santiniketan gave me the freedom to find my voice," he says. "It filled me with a positive energy."

In 2002, Sen moved to Delhi, to strike out as a freelance artist. His big break came in 2006, when he was awarded a residency in Paris, where he spent several months working and looking at some of the greatest works in the history of art. "That was a turning point in my career," he says. "For the first time, I not only had my independent living quarters and studio but also access to the masterpieces I had only seen in books."

That frisson of discovery, the primal joy of creating a new piece of art, is still resonant in Sen's work. It's palpable in his voice as we speak. "My work is like chanting," he says. "It's intuitive, not premeditated, and doesn't directly anchor itself on social, political and religious messages." For the viewer, the visual is the irresistible hook. Whatever else comes along is a bonus.

Whoever Brought Me Here Will Have To Take Me Home is on till 18 July. For more information, visit <https://www.aiconcontemporary.com/>