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Culture

'Soldiers are human beings first'

Baptist Coelho on his show that has the world's highest battleground as its subject

Himanshu Bhagat

The Promising Artist Award Show at the Visual Arts Gallery in New Delhi has works by Chinmoy Pramanick and Baptist Coelho on display. Titled "You can't afford to have emotions out there...", a set of installations, video, video installation, digital prints and photographs by Coelho attempt to capture the life of the soldier stationed at the inhospitable Siachen glacier, the highest battlefield on earth, where the temperature dips to -60 Celsius.



I was not born for the Three-Point Contact

Being a civilian, he wasn't allowed access to Siachen, but he travelled as close as he could and spoke with "sources" (he refuses to elaborate; members of the Indian Army are not permitted to speak about their stint there). As part of the year long project, Coelho collected information and material such as uniforms of soldiers stationed there which he has used in the show. He talks to Lounge about the show and his experience of putting it together. Edited excerpts:

Do you feel you were able to capture some of the reality of the conflict in the Siachen region without being there?

There were too many constraints in trying to reach Siachen. As an artist it is very important to experience your subject. So I try and travel the space via someone else. I went as far as I could go—to Panamik, the last point for civilians. I experienced altitude sickness, a common affliction at Siachen. I 'experienced' things that had been physically present in Siachen—these were objects and articles from there that I acquired. For me, research has to be experienced and it has to be validated (i.e. verified by people on the ground).

Installations, videos, digital prints, photographs—you have chosen a range of mediums to express yourself.



I am not sure if I will return

The range allows me to explore. I don't want to be restricted to one medium; I don't want to box myself. The ideas come from the research and then the medium follows. It gives me the flexibility to experiment, to explore, and to create new mediums out of existing mediums.

What would you like the viewer to take away from the show? Do you have any expectations or a message for them?

I would like them to experience the show. There are clues and layers in my works; and I am not here to spoon-feed viewers. The soldiers are human beings first; they are not machines of war. They are flesh and blood, crying, laughing, longing for their family. Yes, they are superheroes in a sense, but they are not tools of war.

Your sources knew that you are an artist. What was their reaction?

They were helpful. For photos they said no, because of security reasons. Some thought my bottle project (where I ask people to seal air of a place in a bottle and put leaves or other objects from there in it) was "foolish", but no one refused.



If it would only end

Is it necessary to feel a soldier's struggles or his pain to create art out of it? Or do you have to remain detached?

Everyone has their own way. For me it is necessary to experience things; someone else would stay at home and do the research; someone else might not even research. I need to be connected; to breathe and experience. At Khardungla, the world's highest motorable road, I made it a point to use the toilet there—to get some idea of the human conditions.

The Promising Artist Award Show will show at the Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi till 13 June.

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