

Fighting chance



Cold war From the video work "If it would only end"

Baptist Coelho tries to tap into the mind of the Indian soldier in the country's frozen north, reports **Deepanjana Pal.**

Baptist Coelho is a slight man in his early thirties. He isn't very tall and there is an air of fragility about him. This is not the kind of person you imagine bunking with soldiers in Ladakh but Coelho did precisely that last year and of his own accord. His show, *You Can't Afford to Have Emotions Out There*, is the result of that experience. The exhibition was shown in Delhi earlier this year and will be Coelho's first solo show in the city. It includes videos, photographs and installations that attempt to explore what it means to be a soldier.

Coelho graduated from the LS Raheja School of Art in 1997 and,

after a short stint in advertising, went to study for a Master's in Visual Communication from Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in 2005. It was here that Coelho developed his distinctive style of using simple materials like paper to create sophisticated installations that are packed with symbolism. His interest in Siachen and the armed forces began in 2007, when he made a sculpture called "SIACHENGLACIER - Satellite View". He followed it up with the 2008 trip to Ladakh, which was the basis for *You Can't Afford*. "I think it's my fear of the cold," said Coelho. "I just can't take cold weather. I guess that's why I have this morbid fascination for it."

Coelho spent almost a month travelling in Ladakh and was able to go up to the base camp at the foot of the Siachen glacier, which is as far as civilians are allowed. "The original idea was to create

works that tried to be a dialogue between India and Pakistan," he said. "But then I realised that you'd need years to get permits to get to Siachen glacier and even if you do have the permits, you'll be questioned and probably not be allowed to document anything." By the time Coelho returned to warmer climes and managed to defrost adequately, the relations between Pakistan and India had chilled considerably, after the November terrorist attacks in Mumbai. "I thought if I did do what I'd planned in Pakistan, I'd be in something. Like a jail."

The time Coelho spent in Ladakh also made him shift the focus of his project to the soldiers. He was curious about the lives of the men stationed in the unforgiving terrain and had asked the soldiers about every nitty gritty detail of their

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lives. The answers left him with a wealth of information. Coelho learnt that most camps received newspapers two or three days late and the men would read them over and over again until they had memorised every word. "It was proof to them that there is a world beyond theirs," he explained. "Reading the newspaper was the only way they could touch it." Getting a glass of water in snowbound Ladakh required two hours of planning since the temperature of the water had to be much higher than that of their surroundings. After their first three days, many soldiers would begin hallucinating and the most common hallucination was of being followed. "The stillness and the loneliness starts eating you up," said Coelho. "Your mind desperately wants to see something, feel the presence of another person, some colour."

The soldiers and officers Coelho

met were at first puzzled and amused by the young artist, but they were generous with their information so long as he didn't disclose names, identities and locations. "I was able to gain their confidence and they told me so many things," he said. "They showed me maps as proof of the boundaries they were protecting. Some even opened up a little bit about their feelings."

However, there was a lingering sense of anxiety. Coelho got into the habit of emailing the photographs he had taken each day to himself and then deleting them from his hard drive because he didn't want to get into trouble if someone checked his laptop. "There was one place where I was sure one of the guys I was talking to would report me for all the questions I was asking," he recalled. "When dawn broke the next day, I packed my bags as fast as I could and I left the place. They don't trust anyone and you can't blame them for that."

Coelho hopes that his exhibition will give the viewer some idea of the emotional experience of being a soldier. "Art for me is about trying to confront something and understand it," he said. Rather than burden the exhibition with references to news reports about the soldiers posted in the difficult region and controversies about defence deals, Coelho hopes that his viewers will make the connections themselves and empathise with the soldiers. In Delhi, the reactions to the show were diverse. Many people from military backgrounds and families came up to Coelho to tell him how moved they were. But there were also those who were less enamoured. One viewer accused him of being an apologist for the army. "She kept saying that being in the army is like any other job so there was no difference between her and a soldier," said Coelho. "I was so shocked by her naive attitude that I couldn't say anything to her at first. People like that are important. They remind you why you believe what you believe."

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