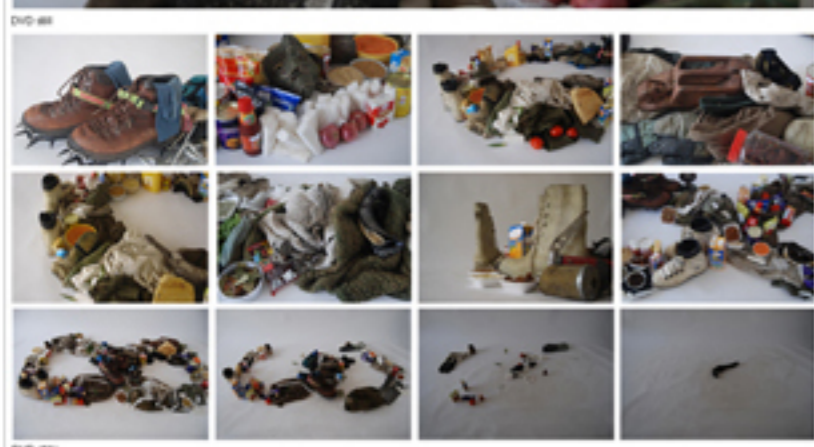
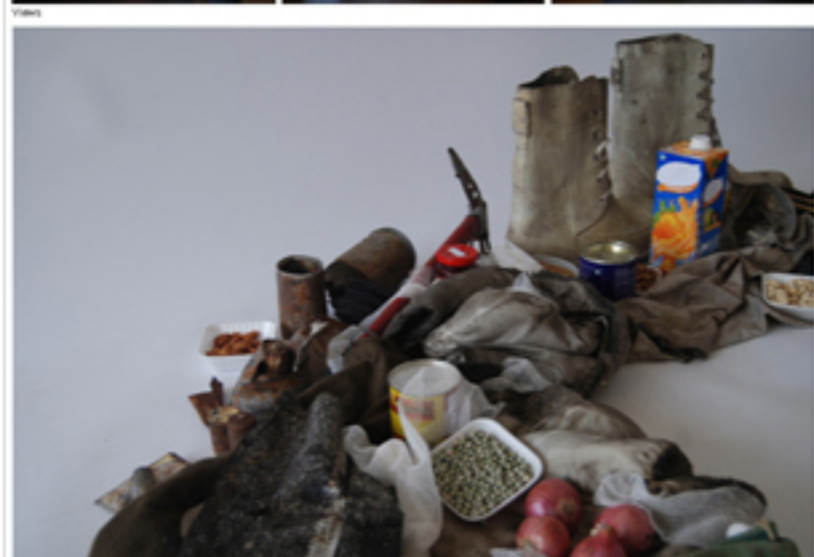


Soldiering on

2009 AUGUST 8

by anonandon

tags: Art, Baptist Coelho



While seeing Baptist Coelho's "You Can't Have Emotions Out There...", it might strike you that the only layers in the show are the ones that Coelho wears, and peels off, in one of the video works where he dresses up like a soldier in Siachen. It's true. The show isn't particularly complex. Coelho went to Ladakh, travelled as far as civilians are allowed, took a lot of pictures, met with a bunch of officers from the Indian army, nicked some of their stuff, was enormously impressed by their bravery and ability to withstand the climate, and so once he was back in the parts of country where you need airconditioning, he put together this show titled "You Can't Have Emotions Out There...". The works are all about Coelho's amazement that these men do what they do and his wide-eyed admiration for not hotfooting it out of there like he did. From the enormous "puppet" that greets you the moment you enter Project 88 to the last video piece that has supplies arranged to form the eternity symbol, all the show says is "sympathise with our troops". It's simple, verging on naïve, but it's still an interesting show to see.

Enter the gallery and you're faced with the "puppet": the uniform of a Siachen soldier, which dangles courtesy a set of ropes that are both its strings and references to the rope to keep all the

members of a trekking party connected to one another. Most of the works in the show bring you back to this piece. It relates to the video where Coelho takes off the layers. The striptease that he shows us is predictable when underneath the woollies is a scrawny artist but it becomes much more melancholy when you see it as the survival routine of the faceless soldier who is a puppet, hanging in a certain limbo. And then, of course, there are times when there's no life in there. The uniform just hangs there, like a skinned yeti.

Chances are you'll remember the puppet when you listen to the interviews that accompany an installation that shows the things soldiers and officers use in the kind of cold display unit that you see in cafés and delicatessens. They show smoothies, sandwiches and pastries; Coelho shows you snowshoes, bandages, rope, a couple of Malayalam newspapers and such things. Accompanying the display is a set of headphones that let you hear snippets from the interviews Coelho did during his time in Ladakh. The officers talk about experiences like moustaches turning to icicle and the physical pain of them breaking off or the time when one of them was exposed to some unearthly temperatures for 12 hours. Frostbite tends to set in within about 2 hours apparently. Calmly the nameless officer lists for Coelho how one by one his extremities became painfully immobile and you imagine him swaddled in that uniform that hangs mid-air in the gallery, inching closer to being frozen to death and maintaining the phantom expressionlessness of the white suit while surrounded by the still silence of snow. That's the limbo the army lives in and what Coelho depicts neatly in the short video piece showing a hand drawing near-invisible lines in the snow to try and keep count of how long they've been there. By the time you leave the show, the puppet is like a scarecrow and you wonder how it ever comes to life when even the air men breathe up there can kill them (the moisture in the thin air can settle in one's lungs and make them collapse).

The weakest link in the show is Coelho's video with the black paper planes. It's far too heavy handed and syrupy, even for my taste. I can quite imagine the less forgiving wanting to unscrew the jar and start flinging the stones in it at the projection. Plus, Coelho's been flogging this paper plane idea for more about three years now. Enough already. Find a new origami toy.

Coelho's show is earnest and sentimental but it does offer an intimate look into the life of a soldier that is more credible and nuanced than J.P. Dutta's "Border" or "LOC". Turn on the cynic mode; it's still a show made up of mostly well-executed pieces that respond to each other. It isn't anti-establishment and that will piss off all those who are (justifiably) outraged by atrocities committed by the armed forces. We have violence-ridden borders in alarmingly large stretches of India but few feel it. It's a much-repeated point but that doesn't make it any less true. Despite people being **shot in broad daylight** and **mini civil wars**, we're supposedly a peaceful, stable country. The armed forces and police are what make us feel secure and, occasionally like in Imphal, they turn security into a frightening conceit. It's also worth remembering that Coelho is representative of a very large demographic – the young 'uns who haven't grown up with the daily dose of patriotism that the media of socialist India once fed its citizens dilligently. To many of them the Indian soldier is a indistinct, vaguely unreal creature, perhaps one that looks like **Suniel Shetty** and if that's true, then we need to thank Coelho mightily for helping fight the good fight of reimagining the Indian army.

Of course this would have been a far better show if Coelho had less ellipsis and had he shown more of the complexities. If he had actually made it to Siachen, where civilians are not allowed, it may have been significantly better but are we going to judge his art for its reportage quality or its artistry? And why expect reportage from him? He isn't a documentarian and he isn't claiming to be one. He is an artist who wanted to understand a certain experience and fashion it into an engaging show. In that, he's successful.

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