

IN FOCUS

"YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO HAVE EMOTIONS OUT THERE..."

Baptist Coelho is a practicing visual artist, currently living in Mumbai, who is exhibiting his work throughout India and internationally. His first international solo-exhibition was in BIANJ, entitled Air(Edge)Air, 2006. Baptist received his Master of Arts Degree in 2006 from BIAAD in the UK and in 2007 he was awarded the **Promising Artist Award** given by Art India magazine and the Visual Arts Gallery, (India Habitat Centre), in Delhi which he shared with Chinmoy Pramanick. The Promising Artist Award Show was held in the Visual Arts Gallery from June 6-13, 2009.

The artist explains the thoughts behind the works exhibited in this show. During the past 25 years, the endless conflict between India and Pakistan, over the ownership of the Siachen Glacier, has been fought on the coldest battlefield on earth. Bitter cold temperatures, reaching to -60 °Celsius, make living conditions unbearable for the soldiers. Even though this formidable landscape is virtually impossible to access for a civilian, I set out to experience this world for myself. Through researching, collecting artifacts and recording stories, I was able to identify and define this space of conflict.

Throughout this project, I have focused on the life of the soldier; not as a machine of war but as a man coping with the day to day complexities of conflict; a soldier with emotions and vulnerabilities like any other human being. The soldiers' stories and the intimate objects, which were abandoned by war and rediscovered on this terrain, are what remain from a conflict and imbue the experience with memory. War is no longer about victory but about the personal loss and triumph of the soldiers. One of the casualties of war is the sacrifice and loss of personal identity for the greater national one. These narratives of hardship and perseverance were collected from various sources and draw the viewer closer toward these encounters between the soldiers themselves and their environment.

I utilize a variety of media such as: video, installation, photography, acquired and found objects to explore the fabric of war. Here, the viewer experiences this journey of raw human interaction and realizes that what appears to be concealed is often revealed. As the narratives of these fearless soldiers unfold, what comes to light is the irony from such statements such as: "You can't afford to have emotions out there..."



Artwork 01
 "We waited for days, but no sign of hope..."
 Installation with sand filled nylon bags, supply parachute and audio
 Approximate installation dimensions: L 20 X B 20 X H 7 feet
 Audio running time: 3 minutes 8 seconds

Note:
 "We waited for days but no sign of hope..." is a mixed-media installation with sound and creates an emotional response from its viewers, who are confronted with the presence of a large, army-supply, parachute which has been juxtaposed between an intimidating barricade of sand-filled nylon bags. When entering the space, the sound of wind contrasts disturbingly with the austere, immobile, wall which is often used as a barrier to protect the soldiers from the enemy. This wind, which would otherwise navigate a parachute to great distances, no longer serves this purpose. The white parachute used to carry supplies to sustain the soldiers and symbolized hope, but now it has been left abandoned and motionless.



Artwork 02
 Air (Travel)
 (Gurgaon to Panamik, 2008-09)
 12 glass & plastic bottles with plastic & metal lids, containing leaves, stones and air along with notes on paper
 Display dimensions: B 80 X H 40 X D 16 inches

Note:
 Air (Travel), (Gurgaon to Panamik, 2008-09), includes a set of glass bottles which have been gathered from a particular place and sealed; containing leaves, stones and air. These artifacts were collected from a wide range of locations along the artist's research trail. These areas included: the ever-growing city of Gurgaon, the world's highest accessible road of Khardung La and the serene village of Panamik, which is the furthest point a civilian can travel along the road to the Siachen Glacier. These time capsules, along with handwritten thoughts, were documented by locals from various walks of life; some of whom were: soldiers, a student, a monk, a Ladakhi shopkeeper and other indigenous people. This project becomes a testament to life and draws together a strong, ethereal, connection between the air, the natural space, and the thoughts of common people. The project also speaks of how people's lives have been directly or indirectly affected by the Siachen conflict.



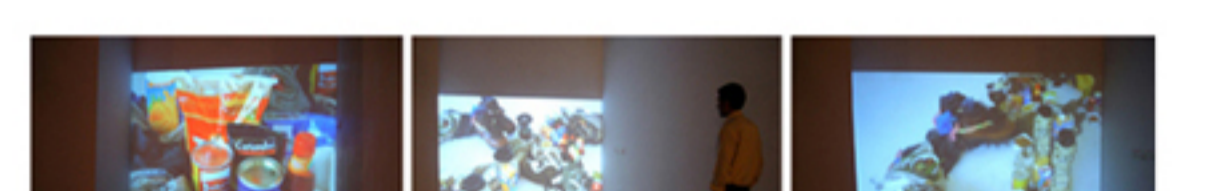
Artwork 03
 "I long to see some colour"
 Installation with nylon rucksack and 90 photo frames
 Approximate installation dimensions: 24"x24"x24"

Note:
 The unforgiving terrain of the Siachen Glacier distorts a Soldier's sense of being; a place where he often hallucinates due to the extreme weather conditions. The blinding white of the snow and the lack of oxygen, provoked by the high altitudes, takes a toll on the soldiers' psyche. The colour white, which is also a symbol for death, surrounds the soldiers at every moment and those, who seek a reprieve from it, yearn for the true colours of everyday life. In the installation, "I long to see some colour...", the viewer witnesses a soldier's time-worn rucksack; stacked with empty, white, picture-frames which symbolize the colour-scape of the soldiers' memories on the glacier.



Artwork 04
 "I was not born for the Three-point Contact..."
 Site-specific Installation with 3 wooden pedestals, plastic paint and video
 Installation dimensions: variable
 Audio/Video running time: 5 minutes 53 seconds

Note:
 This site-specific, performance-style video, "I was not born for the Three-point Contact...", is projected onto three vertical columns and illustrates a man methodically dressing himself in soldier's survival gear in preparation for his duties on the Siachen Glacier, one of the coldest battlefields. While the performance makes references to the stages in time of the Evolution of Man, it documents a soldier caught up in the task of laboriously and repetitively protecting himself with layers of camouflage. We are reminded that beyond the complexities of armor and war there remains the inner, vulnerable, layer of a human being.



Artwork 05
 "If it would only end..." 2009
 Audio/Video running time: 3 minutes 50 seconds

Note:
 The struggle over the ownership of the Siachen Glacier, between India and Pakistan, continues to this day. This video, "If it would only end...", reveals the past 25 years of this war through the goods that the soldiers have consumed and how these commodities have consumed them. These personal possessions and supplies, which reflect the true character of life experienced on the glacier, mysteriously move in a controlled formation. The saga persists and the accumulation appears without an end. Nevertheless, the work raises hope that perhaps there could be an end to this warfare; simply, if we so choose.

Artwork 06
 "I'm not sure if I will return..."
 Digital print on archival paper
 32.25" x 43"

Note:
 In the life of every fearless soldier comes a time when he faces his own uncertainties regarding death. "I'm not sure if I will return...", reflects on a soldier's thoughts concerning his possible return to his family. These doubts about survival can weaken a soldier's resolve to continue fighting and yet at times the thought of family gives him hope and strength to survive; to move past fear itself and accomplish heroic acts.



Artwork 07
 "If only I could see my children..."
 Digital print on archival paper
 17.6" X 23.5"

Note:
 Our basic instinct to bond with our loved ones is one of the most powerful motivations in life. Soldiers, who are left isolated on the battlefield, are consumed by this loss of personal contact. "If only I could see my children..." highlights this fundamental connection with family and how it becomes an enduring symbol of life and hope.



Artwork 08
 "Sixty-five days more to go..."
 Digital print on archival paper
 17.6" x 23.5"

Note:
 The notion of time for a soldier becomes distorted during his 90 days of service with his battalion on the Siachen Glacier. The brutal temperatures of -60 degrees Celsius, along with inhabitable living conditions, take their toll on a soldier's state of mind. Even though he counts each passing day of his survival, he also awaits his return to home and normality. "Sixty-five days more to go..." reflects on the soldier's will to survive and his detachment from this cold, unsympathetic, place.



Artwork 09
 (Un)Identified #1
 Digital print on archival paper
 17.6" x B 23.5"

Note:
 This multi-disciplinary series, (un)identified, focuses on the personal objects which have been abandoned during war and have often mysteriously resurfaced on this hostile terrain. The stories relating directly to these objects have been lost, but what remains is a ghostly reminder of the warfare that so many soldiers have endured.



General Artist Statement
 "Many of us live out our defining stories without ever being able to express them. As a visual artist, it has been a driving force in my practice to provide an articulate voice to these unspoken stories and able to permeate them with intellectual thought and conscience.

My projects frequently merge personal research with the collaboration from people of various cultures, geographies and histories. This interaction begins the process of investigation, questioning and interpretation which often creates new ideas and surprising outcomes. As I begin my practice of conjuring meaning out of this raw experience, I am able to describe and question strong social and personal contexts; which often become the foundation of a long-term project or series.

During this process of research collection and documentation, I am always aware of the physical and emotional responses of my audience. Throughout my practice, I employ the use of atmospheric stimuli and residual work, such as found objects, to engage the participant into the story and allow them an interactive space to reflect on their own surroundings and predicaments.

These works begin to take on the form of human-shaped media-landscapes and often contend with identity, space, history, culture and gender. Each project may incorporate various media such as: video, sound and architectural installation, photography, Public-Art, performance, found objects and Site-Specific work. While exploring these stories and ideas from places of such diversity, I have discovered that the values expressed can be applied to a global perspective and can have a universal merit."