

# Exhibitions/ Workshop Reviews/ Interviews



*Baptist Coelho,, Beneath It All Iam Human*

You can't afford  
to have emotions out there...

Works of Baptist Coelho

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Baptist Coelho's solo exhibition *You Can't Afford to have Emotions Out There...* comprised a series of photographs, videos and installations to reveal the severity of the sensitive Siachen glacier issue between India and Pakistan. The works on display stirred deep emotions within the viewer for whom the stark reality of the Siachen glacier issue was realised in Coelho's humane photographs. Voicing suppressed emotions through 'unspoken stories', the artist's photographs connected the viewer's emotions with that of a soldier serving his severe tenure at Siachen.

Photography was a part of Coelho's profession when he worked at an advertising agency. However, not wanting to be confined by clients' demands, Coelho employed his skills through artistic renderings in the form of photography, video installations and public art with detailed attention to subject matter, composition, pattern, mood and contrast.

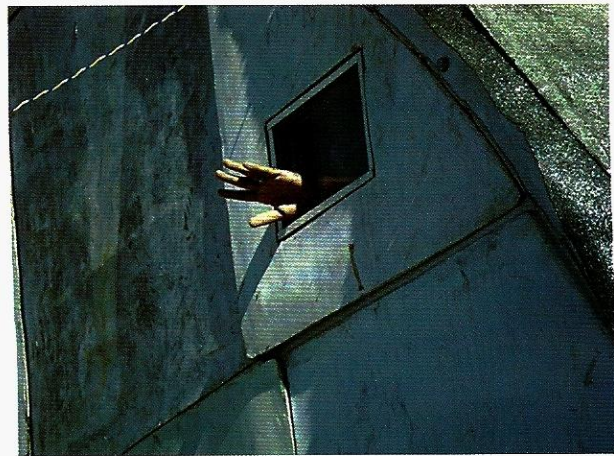
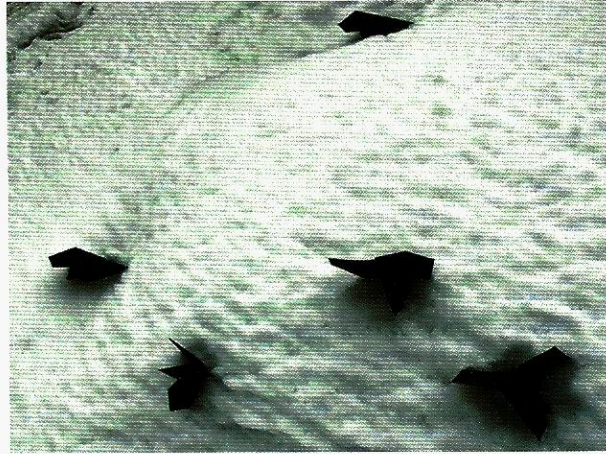
The artist's works reflect his detailed research and documentation, which he interlinks brilliantly with the various mediums he uses. Coelho weaves his ongoing project and concerns on Siachen, with *Air* into his recent photographs. This current preoccupation is symbolised through a prior series associated with airplanes, which make an appearance in his photographs and works related to that of the Siachen issue. These in turn are a take-off from the video installations of the *Air* series.

*Air* in its non-intimate form becomes an essential and integral part of existence and composition. What we see in Coelho's photographs are black airplanes, which are reflective of his paper airplane installations with a strong presence of *Air* – such as in his installation – *Finally found my room full of toys*. While some of these photographs reflect a strong influence from Coelho's older series, they create a connection between the videos and installation pieces. Fragile airplanes become metaphors for a very sensitive issue, with the colour black signifying the mood of the situation.

Coelho's photograph *If only I could see my children...* conveys the most powerful bond of a soldier's willingness to survive their term in Siachen. Family relationships are emphasised through the series of photographs. The black airplanes in this work connect directly to Coelho's double channel video installation *I think of my brother's only one child named, Deepthi*, where the black airplanes are the only coded communication between the soldier and his family. Black, the colour of grief appears bright on the snow-white landscape, signifying dashed hopes in the grounded paper airplanes.

Communication through codes is reflected in the suggestive messages and actions in Coelho's photographs. Imparting a hint through titles and a fleeting gesture of a hand (*I'm not sure if I will return*, 2009), the viewer is gripped by the severity of the Siachen glacier issue. Survival doubts are battled with the only motive of hope and survival – family.

Without the hint of a soldier's character and uniqueness, the viewer encounters a pair of feet and snow boots that are atypical of any other soldier, but for some, he is the only hope – and all that remains



(Top)  
Baptist Coelho, *If only I could see my children*,  
Digital Print on Archival paper, 17.6 x 23.5 inches, 2009

(Centre)  
*I'm not sure if I will return...*, Digital print on archival paper  
32.25 x 43 inches, 2009

(Bottom)  
*(un)identified #2*, Digital print on archival paper  
32.25 x 43 inches, 2009

is an objective reminder in a barren landscape of war – where incidents are abandoned, danger becomes frivolous and reminiscent items are the only leftovers of unknown encounters. The *(un)identified* series of photographs are personal objects that are typified as a soldier's belongings. There is a loss of personal identity to achieve a national one. The stark snow's whiteness of the arid Siachen landscape is a backdrop that contrasts anything that might appear on it.

In another photograph titled *Altitude Sickness, Frostbite, Chilblains, Arterial Hypertension, Deep Vein Thrombosis, Snow-blindness, Hypothermia, High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, High Altitude Cerebral Oedema...*, 2009, deserted white gauze bandages contrast themselves on snow to symbolise the harsh reality, illnesses and concerns faced by a soldier besides just war in severe climatic conditions.

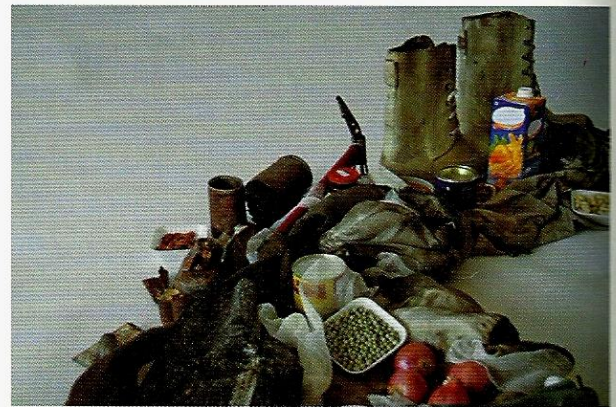
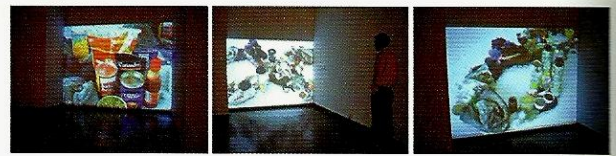
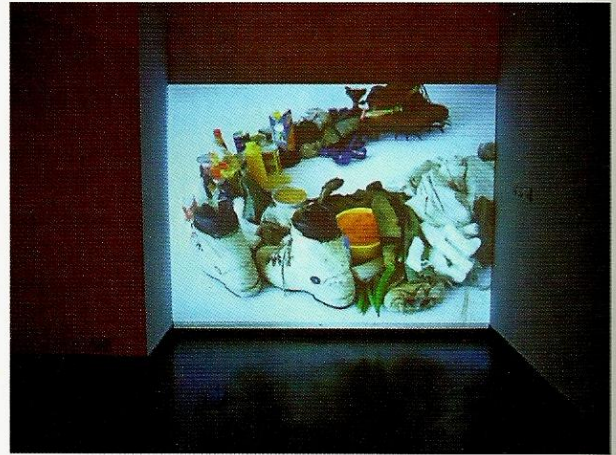
The desire to survive each day in the brutal cold is all a matter of a countdown of days left to go home, but the invisibility of these lines on snow, is almost symbolic of the futile hope of speeding time. The slow passage of time in *Sixty five days more to go...* of a soldier's ninety day tenure, is distorted in the faint temporary markings in the snow.

Each of Coelho's photographs stand as individual works of art, while contributing to the theme of the Siachen glacier. Taking this form of art forward, the artist included two stop-animation videos in this exhibition to create a transition from one artistic medium to another.

Coelho's stop-motion animation video – *If it would only end*, 2009 is a series of one thousand photographs stitched together. What one sees here is the ration of material and food carried by a soldier to Siachen. The controlled pattern of infinity is made of products consumed by soldiers in a manner of disappearance which reflects their hope for the end of the twenty-five year long struggle between Indian and Pakistan over the Siachen glacier to leave the landscape barren and white, just like the end of the video. The soldiers have two desires while in Siachen – to see colour, but there is none; or to see nothing, but chaste snow without a soul there, for a *peace park* to exist. This video is a comment on the above desire, where it begins with essential requirements, which gradually begin to disappear till there is nothing but a white screen confronting the viewer.

Coelho's second stop-motion animation video – *Beneath it all...I am human...*, uncovers a soldier's human body under all the layers of artificiality over him. The systematic revelation of humanity separates the soldier from his stereotyped identity. Coelho who is in awe of and respects these soldiers studied their daily rituals and characters in great depth – till the extent of the order in which a soldier wears his clothing. The order in which he disrobes is a reverse process of putting on the identity masking outfit.

Through his photographs, installations and thorough documentation and research, Coelho de-contextualises the Siachen issue from its political framework and makes it more real



Baptist Coelho, *If it would only end...*

and identifiable to the viewer. A war between India and Pakistan on the highest battlefield in the world is translated through Coelho's photographs to symbolise family bonds, patriotic soldiers pining for peace, daily objects, struggle for life, issues of identity and motives for survival.

**Baptist Coelho's solo exhibition – "You Can't Afford to Have Emotions Out There..." was held at Project 88, Mumbai from 5<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> August 2009.**