

# When Saying is Protesting - "Unspoken Stories"

by Franck Barthelemy

There are conflicts we do not want to talk about. They are weird, baseless and cruel. For the last 28 years, India and Pakistan are fighting to control a 78 km long band of ice, the Siachen glacier, at about 6,000 m altitude, where no one can survive more than a few months. Wind, cold, isolation, hallucinations and nervous breakdowns are part of the everyday life of a bunch of soldiers, from both camps, facing each other. Though they sometimes fire a few bullets, the severe weather



Baptist Coelho, *You can't Afford to have Emotions Out There - Do we have a Choice*, Image Courtesy: the Artist

conditions is the main cause of death. The war is frozen in ice. And no one seems

to be willing to find a solution. 35.5° N 76.9° E have been the highest battle ground on Earth and the graveyard of more than 4,000 soldiers. A human made catastrophe.

Baptist Coelho, a Bombay based artist, explored the matter. He interviewed soldiers, he collected used items left over by soldiers, he recorded videos and he took photographs. He explored the soldiers' environment from different point of views, psychological, emotional, clinical, memories. He tried to visit the soldiers on the glacier but was not granted permission. The authorities' refusal did not stop him to put together the body of works dedicated to the Siachen war. Baptist started *You Can't Have Emotions Out There ...* in 2009 and keeps adding to it. He reminds us, the viewers. He does not want us to forget. He writes a 3-D book encapsulating stories nobody really cares about. He captures elements of personal history that will one day become History.

Talking about the forgotten or rather the unspoken conflict reveals the absurdity of its nature and perhaps its futility too. When the politicians see it as a red line on a map, the artist sees it as a human tragedy, a tragedy made of human beings who suffer and die silently. The works demonstrate the nonsense of the conflict. The artist's consideration for it is not only a memory exercise or a documentation attempt, but also a scream to say 'enough!'. *'You Can't Have Emotions Out There ...'* joins in its own original and unique way the long list of art works denouncing and opposing wars, from Goya to Picasso. In many different forms, artists have protested wars and injustice. They bring to the front stage a debate the politicians don't want to have. They dig out issues that should be public and discussed openly. They highlight the dysfunctions of our society where the right to kill becomes anonymous and impersonal and thus easy to exercise. Isn't it too easy to forget wars are made of soldiers who breathe, who are friends,





Baptist Coelho, *You can't Afford to have Emotions out There - I Long to See some Colour*, Image Courtesy: the Artist



Baptist Coelho, *You can't Afford to have Emotions Out There - I Long to See Some Colour*, Image Courtesy: the Artist



Baptist Coelho, *You can't Afford to have Emotions Out There, We waited for Days but no Sign of Hope ...*, Image Courtesy: the Artist

brothers and dads? Isn't it too easy to forget under a uniform, however modern and protective, there is a naked individual capable of feeling, loving and fearing?

So far, Baptist's exploration of the Siachen conflict is composed of 16 installations. The common point: collecting lost memories to protest. Most of the titles are quotes from conversation the artist had with soldiers. 1. *Out There Nothing Really Survives ...* The artist gathered objects that are or could be related to the conflict or a conflict. He shows them in a cold display where viewers are more used to see pastries or cheese than war items or cold memories. The items have perhaps been elements of lives. They have probably been used. They surely carry a history, the history of the one who used them. And to emphasize the past life behind the objects, the artist has recorded the voice of an officer who survived his Siachen stay and had obviously a lot to share, intimate moments and cruel souvenirs. Preserving the objects in a cold display puts the viewers in an uncomfortable situation where they have to connect the items with the reality and the memories they trigger. Death, abandon and defeat are round the corner. 2. *We Waited For Days but No Sign of Hope...* The artist explores the mystical expectations of the soldiers stuck in the ice of the glacier. The parachutes provide the supply from the sky, the connection with the spiritual and the human world. The wall made of sand bags protects and reassures. The wind soundtrack destabilise the viewers. They are

questioned audio-visually. They are trapped in contradictions, aggression and protection; stillness and movement; in the middle of nowhere, where severe temperatures immobilize the bodies and where the enemies are invisible, only the mind can wander around and make the soldiers expect a sign from the sky. The work witnesses the insanity of the conflict. 3. *Yes! It is Very Comfortable...* A tent, utilitarian, used and dirty shelter. A hotel, luxurious, clean and cosy. The artist explores the opposition between the two representations of a home. The exterior is rough. The interior is comfy. The exterior is reality. The interior is a dream. And in any case, the tent is the place where the soldier will find a bit of relief while on the glacier. It is a home for a while, protective and as comfortable as it could be, as intimate as it could be, as private as it could be. A home in a hostile and unknown environment but a home. 4. *Do We Have a Choice?* The artist chose to use the uniform of a Siachen soldier and hanged it from the ceiling as if it was a human size puppet. The impressive installation is probably the strongest political protest statement in this body of works. Soldiers are puppets, they are manipulated. They are not in control. They are controlled. They look down, march and kill on demand. In this occurrence, they wait and die. The artist is questioning the viewers: are soldiers anonymous robots? 5. *I Long to See Some Colour...* A rucksack on the floor filled with white photo frames. White is the colour of the soldier's everyday life on the glacier. The monochromatic environment along with the extreme weather conditions he faces open doors to hallucinations, depressions, sometimes death. White becomes the colour of his memories of the glacier. White becomes the colour he abhors. The installation becomes an appeal to life, joyful and colourful. The artist makes his statement a *contrario*, which is perhaps a defining feature of this body of work. 6. *Air (Travel)*. The artist applied here the principle of a broader eponym body of works he started in 2006. Here, he requested people he met during his research on the Siachen conflict to make a *time capsule*: a stone, a leaf and a note reflecting on the conflict. The installation is an interactive snap shot capturing at a particular moment of time the mood of 11 people about the Siachen. Not really a survey, not really interviews. An ephemeral opinion frozen in time. 7. *I Count Each Day...* A video projected on a poncho showing the hand of a soldier that draws bars on the snow to keep track of time; not to forget a day done there; not to forget to leave the white nightmare as soon as the three month stay is over. The video captures how easy it could be to lose track of time in an adverse environment. It shows the pressure the soldier has to undergo. The snow becomes the wall of a jail the soldier wants to escape. The installation opposes open and closed spaces, freedom and imprisonment. The viewers feel the state of mind of the soldier, clear and confused, rational and animal. *You Can't Afford to Have Emotions Out There...* include a few more installations revolving around time, memory and lack of freedom emphasising the damages countries can do to their soldiers, reduced to a nameless count in a table. Saying their stories and remembering their struggles is an act of protest against a meaningless war, against wars in general.