

art

# MISSION SIACHEN

**The Glacier area is closed for civilians,** but artist Baptist Coelho convinced soldiers from the conflict zone to contribute to his project

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An installation of five army sleeping bags, military decorations recreated using trousers and blankets used by soldiers, photographs showing the intertwining of the human body to indicate frostbite — these are some of the exhibits at Project 88 in Colaba. They form a part of city-based artist Baptist Coelho's latest exhibition, *Between Here and There*, featuring a total of seven exhibits.

Coelho is fascinated by the frozen terrain of the Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield, where thousands of soldiers battle inhospitable conditions. His obsession goes back to 2006, when Coelho came

across an online peace project calling for entries. "I grew up in Mumbai and had never confronted war. Nor did I know anyone who was part of the army. But I found myself responding to the call as an artist," he reminisces.

During his travels, Coelho has been to Panamik, close to the Siachen Glacier in Ladakh (the extreme end open to the public), where he struck a rapport with the soldiers and visited their bunkers. "It is a fascinating, lonely, and terrifying terrain. Being a strategic zone, they are wary of outsiders (non-Ladakhis) and consider them spies," he explains.

Despite the hurdles, Coelho convinced some army men to participate in his project by contributing

found objects like jackets, blankets and sleeping bags. For the exhibit *Air(Travel)*, where air from different places is contained in a bottle with notes and photos, Coelho persuaded an army officer to pen his thoughts: "He wrote about missing his family and of feeling brave. This random text became material to understand what's really happening there, apart from what gets reported."

Through the exhibition, Coelho also questions the restrictions in the army. For instance, the exhibit, *Stand at Ease*, which features a pair of boots and an image of the "at ease" gesture questions the 'ease' that a soldier experiences when working in the army.

Conversations with people he meets during his journeys are significant to the artist and provide him research material. "I am fascinated by how human conditions confront, negotiate, how we forget and remember. Also, it gives a sense of people making up stories, mixing up information and faking it," he says. For every story Coelho heard, he admits there was

Between Here and There is on till September 19, 11am to 7pm

Project 88, BMP Building, Colaba

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■ (Clockwise from top) *Dream Speech*, *Ribbons*, *Stand at Ease*, (left) Baptist Coelho, (far left) Attempts to Contain  
PHOTO: ARIJIT SEN/HT

a counterpoint from someone else. Coelho has been a collector for a long time, even before 'found objects' became a buzzword in the art space. It started with collecting stamps as a child ("not for the design, but for the feel of the paper from that part of the world") and went on to objects like coins and clothes.

Things also came full circle when Coelho's artworks were exhibited at the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) in May. "It was a vision from 2009 but due to natural calamities, it finally happened this year. The people who visited included monks, policemen and army men," he shares.

