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ART

Air bender

Baptist Coelho's latest show is an attempt to capture air and emotion from around the globe

BY KARANJEET KAUR

Baptist Coelho has his head in the air again. In 2009, the Mumbai artist had created *Finally Found My Room Full Of Toys*, a site-specific installation of thousands of folded white paper planes displayed to the automated tune of a music box. Glossed over by a wistful patina, the artwork was a nod to childhood aspirations and dreams arrested in flight. At *Between Here And There*, an exhibition of his latest works that began at Project 88 gallery on 13 August, Coelho goes back

to the elements with *Air (Travel)*—an installation comprising bottled air from different parts of the world.

The exhibition has six other components, including a five-channel audio installation, a set of photographs and a wall-mounted installation made of gauze, which harks back to Coelho's 2009 exhibition on Siachen, *You Can't Afford To Have Emotions Out There*.

"*Air (Travel)* was the starting point of the exhibition for me," Coelho says—he is busy installing the works for the show. "I used to collect stamps as a child because I was fascinated by the idea of holding an object that someone in another part of the world had touched." As he grew up, Coelho started looking at air as a medium to express the themes of "randomness and chance (that) inform a lot of my practice".

Chance has also helped aid the evolution of *Air (Travel)*. He recalls meeting an American sedimentologist during a charity dinner in Switzerland, who later

sent him a bottle. And a student of his, who brought back a bottle from Antarctica. "In a lot of places, customs and immigration officers would open the bottles, suspecting drugs and contraband were being smuggled out," Coelho says. "Earlier, I wouldn't accept a broken or opened bottle. But, I think, why not? At least there is a story."

The plastic, glass and tin jars in *Air (Travel)*—the artist crowd-sourced 448 of these over 10 years through friends and acquaintances—come from 96 countries, "from the Antarctic to the Arctic". Half of these are on display at the gallery. These time capsules contain something organic from the landscape, such as a leaf or a handful of soil; they are marked with the date, time and approximate temperature of the place at the time of collection; and have a note handwritten by the collector.

Some of the notes are prosaic, congratulating the artist on his endeavour; others give a glimpse into the life of the note-writer:

One pesto sauce bottle, for instance, contains a leaf in the mid-stage of decay. The note stuck above it has been written by a certain Randall Roach from Bangkok, Thailand, on 2 January 2010 at 1.44pm. The temperature at the time, Roach records assiduously, was 27 degrees Celsius. The note reads: "The older I get, the more I realize that I just want to make stuff—paint, build, fix, transform. It's all I really need."

The individual journeys of the bottles fuel the overarching themes of the exhibition—geography, terrain, and the conflicts that come with these.

Other exhibits, for instance, grew out of Coelho's engagement with Siachen. In 2009 too, the artist had started with the idea of collecting bottles of air from Siachen, but ended up researching the lives of soldiers, officers and mountaineers at Panamik in Ladakh, the farthest point where non-military personnel are allowed.

"The soldiers thought I was

crazy," says Coelho, "but they also opened up because of it. In the random thoughts that they wrote (were some) amazing things."

These thoughts dovetail in *Dream Speech*, the five-channel audio track that supplements an installation of sleeping bags representing four soldiers and an officer. The audio accompaniment unfolds as a dramatized, if dispersed, conversation between the five in a bunker—the listener is called upon to imagine the flow of the exchange, because you can only hear one person's account at a time, from each of five headphones. It's a little odd, chiefly because the men speak in clipped English, clearly reading aloud from a script. But once you're able to get past that, you hear them cover a fair bit of conversational ground: family, sexual desire, intimacy and, finally, the ennui that is as enduring a part of their lives as the wind you hear in the background.

In one of the most dispiriting moments from the track, one of the men says, "In Siachen, we

From Antarctic to Arctic

Baptist Coelho has collected 448 bottles for his installation *Air (Travel)*.

just sit." Another man reads from Rainer Maria Rilke's 1912 prose poem, *The Love And Death Of Cornet Christopher Rilke*. The poem's context is important: It was a popular handbook for German soldiers during World War I. But even for viewers unaware of its history, the testimony is a poignant comment on the endless loop of war. Death is everywhere, most visible in the empty sleeping bags that resemble shrouds.

The awareness of mortality and the body's perimeter resonate in another element of this exhibition. *Attempts To Contain*, a series of 10 close-up photographs of human limbs, evolved from an earlier video in which a soldier takes off his uniform. "I started thinking about what comes next," says Coelho. "How does the body protect itself, not just physically but also mentally? What if your body wanted to create its own fabric?" At first glance, the images appear to be of someone trying to protect himself from the cold. On closer inspection, the hands and feet begin to look like the warp and weft of a fabric.

Some of these threads come undone in the installation *The Rose I*, a gauzy homage to Cy Twombly. The wall-mounted installation replicates the American artist's large dripping rose paintings. But in a departure from the flamboyant brushstrokes and vivid colours in Twombly's paintings, Coelho's rose is made with white gauze bandages, some of which unroll and fall to the ground. "I was really interested in transforming a flat surface into a three-dimensional one," says Coelho. More importantly, it ties in with his explorations in Siachen.

In the region's Balti language, *sia* means rose. Coelho discovered this when he encountered wild rose bushes at the base of the camp. "And when I came across the paintings of Cy Twombly, I had goosebumps."

Between Here And There is on till 19 September, 11am-7pm (Sundays closed), at Project 88 Gallery, BMP Building, NA Sawant Marg, Colaba, Mumbai. The price of works ranges from ₹1-4 lakh.

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