

CULTURE

# State of Art: Moments in Time

## Installation artist Baptist Coelho shares his secrets in this week's State of Art.



Oh, the places you will go! © Baptist Coelho and Project 88, Mumbai

DATE  
16 September 2015  
AUTHOR  
Shannon Tellis

Conflict and discord have long been a source of inspiration for artists; a place for them to paint the next chapter in a global story. By adding their own take to socio-cultural incidents, artists give people a ready platform to react to these issues.

Installation artist **Baptist Coelho** could be described as one of these artists. From the Siachen War to today's cultural environment, he boasts of a body of installation work that is designed to inspire human emotion and reflection. Focusing on observations and conversations, his work showcases the often-forgotten human element of conflict.

In this week's **#StateOfArt**, we spoke to the man during his latest exhibition at **Project 88, Mumbai** to hear the stories behind his work.

### Q. Tell us about your work. How did you get started?

I used to be a graphic designer back in 2006. As part of the Peace Project, I was one amongst many artists who were asked to respond to conflict and I chose the Siachen War. I had heard about the war as a child and I felt that I needed to respond to it. My initial project was 'Rose I' which essentially comprised of a pile of bandages.



Let me tell you a story... © Baptist Coelho and Project 88, Mumbai

The project was very well received but I still felt like I had something more to say. So I went to Ladakh to see what I could find. During my research, there was this photograph that struck a chord with me. It showed soldiers cutting a birthday cake and celebrating life in the midst of a conflict-driven land. That human element in the Siachen War is what I wanted to showcase. That's the story I wanted to tell.

If you notice, all of my projects focus on that human element. I'm constantly looking for the stories behind conflict and discord and in the aftermath of war. Be it 'Stand At Ease' (the pair of soldier boots and framed photograph seen above) or 'Rose I', each project I create needs to tell a story. It needs to draw the viewer in to hear more.

### Q. We've heard about your project called "Air Travel". How did it start?

That's another interesting story. Air Travel was born during my Masters in the UK when I was trying to study how to use air as a medium. Being an artist, I tried looking at air from different angles: anything from air pollution, aircrafts to even phrases that used the word 'air' like building castles in the air.

Then inspiration struck! As a child, I used to collect stamps and I thought why not collect air or moments of time from different places. So during my travels, I collected different bottles and filled them with air or keepsakes from that specific moment and I asked friends to do the same. It could be anything from sand to a small rock to a button to anything. While collecting air is not a unique concept, I was more interested in capturing that moment. What were people thinking as they sealed their bottles?

**“ Each of these random thoughts sealed inside a bottle, became a conversation with someone from across the world. ”**

It took me over ten years to collect enough bottles to fill an exhibit. Each bottle had its own trajectory and added a unique story to add to the mix. Some people sent me bottles only, some sent me notes or photographs along with the bottle and some bottles got lost along the way. Some bottles were even opened/confiscated at airports. For example, Costa Rica doesn't allow you to take samples out of the country. So I took a picture of the bottle and added it to the exhibit instead. But I realised that the variety of objects only added to the whole project. It gave me insights into what people were thinking. Each of these random thoughts, sealed inside a bottle, became a conversation I was having with a wide spectrum of people across the world.

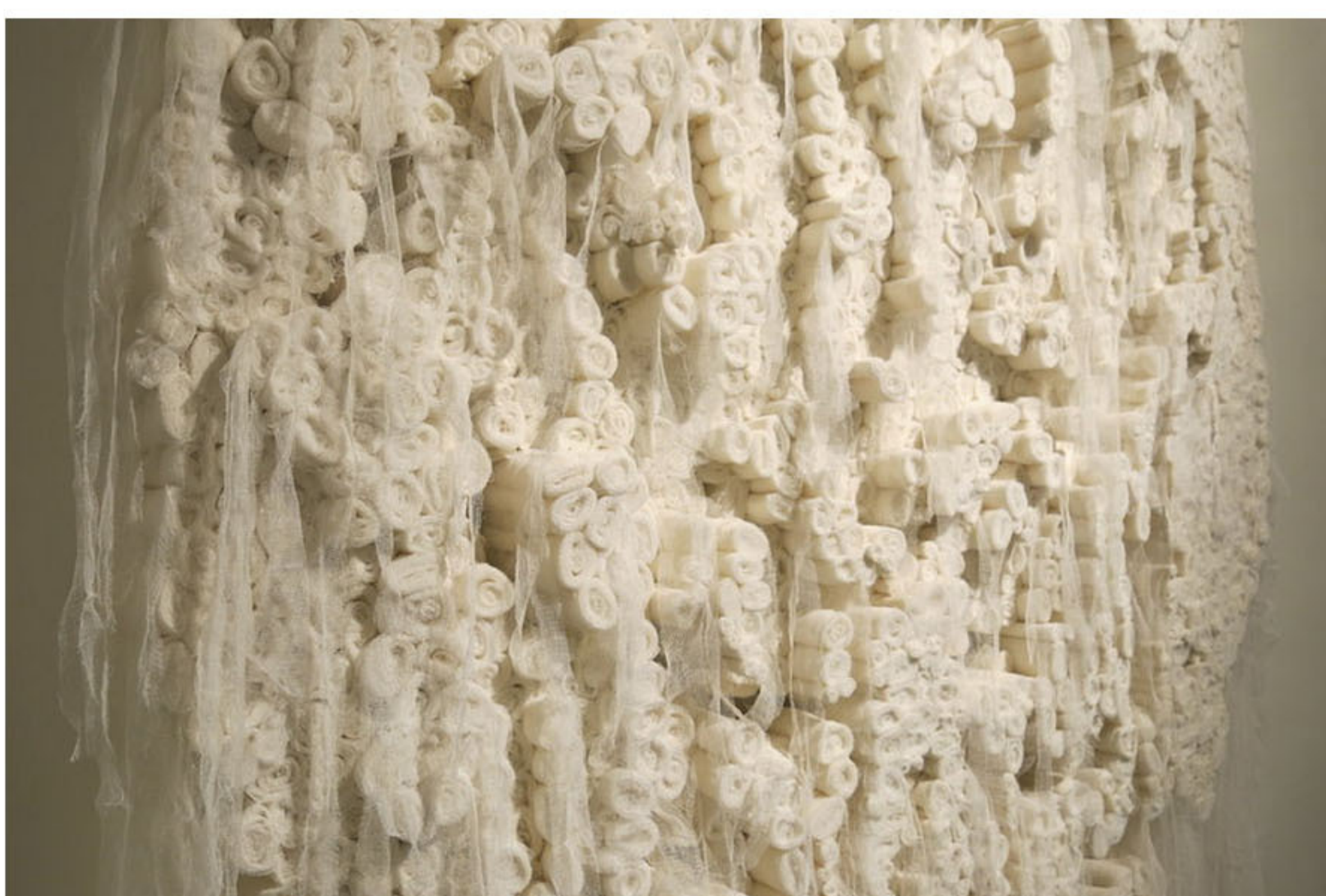
It also became the starting point for future conversations. For example, when I was in Ladakh, I took along a few empty bottles with me. While I was collecting mud outside the base camp, the guard upon hearing my story invited me inside (civilians are generally not allowed). So there I was sitting on the soldiers bunk beds while they filled the bottles with handwritten notes. It's funny how such a small thing gave me access to the base camp and allowed me to hear their stories..

### Q. You mentioned that the audience often adds another layer to your work. Could you elaborate on that?

Every artist wants the audience to engage with their artwork. Since my pieces are often derived from stories and conversations, the final exhibit that most people see is only a part of the full picture. When my audience looks at my exhibits, I'd like to think that they are compelled to want to know more about they see.

For example: How is a rose connected to the Siachen War? Or why is this bottle broken but the others sealed?

When a viewer engages with the piece, they add another layer to it. They bring their own stories, their own conjectures to the exhibit and the final experience that they take home is magnified



The project that started it all... © Baptist Coelho and Project 88, Mumbai

### Q. What's next for you?

I don't know yet. I prefer to keep my plans open-ended so I have a few in the air, some ideas that still need incubating, a couple more research trips planned and some conversations that could be potential starting points for my next project.

### Q. Last question, out of all of your projects, which one is the closest to your heart?

That's a very difficult question. All of my projects are very special to me, each with their own story. It would be really hard to select just one. Sometimes, I think the projects that are unfinished, the ones that are in still in the development phase are more important to me.

Want to see more from this artist? Check his work out [here](#).

**Want to discover the world of Art? Sign up for our newsletter and stay updated with the latest from the scene.**