

The (Un)Making of a Man: The Work of Baptist Coelho

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IN PLACES TAINTED BY DEATH, LIFE IS OFTEN CELEBRATED WITH GREATEST FER-
vour. A cluster of soldiers, for example, huddled around a cake, attempting to
re-enact the rituals of normalcy. This commemoration of birth in an icy battle-
ground, captured as a photograph, found its way into the hands of an artist,
far away, in a city by the Arabian Sea. What struck Baptist Coelho most was its frail-
ty. Contrary to footage on screen and in print, laden by the narrative of patriotism,
this was pared down to the simplicity of a very human gesture—the remembrance
of someone’s birthday. For someone who’d almost always been bound by urbanity,
“born and brought up in Mumbai, into a family that had little or nothing to do with
the [Indian] army”, the image served as a source of intrigue, awe and inspiration.
And triggered a long-lasting interest in the human condition within the realm of war
and conflict. Of daily life carried on within this unusual, unnatural environment. Pro-

“I was a soldier. It is like a dream. When even the bones is gone in the desert the dreams is talk to you, you don’t wake up forever.”

≈ CORMAC MCCARTHY, *Blood Meridian*



pelled to uncover unspoken stories or stories like these that go unnoticed, Coelho embarked on research and travel—to Ladakh and its surrounding regions—leading to a body of work that now spans ten years.

Coelho, who graduated with a degree from the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design’s photography course in 2006, found his imagination pulled by lives lived at the very edge of the country’s northern boundary. Within the broader context of his artistic values, he says he is informed by the work of Joseph Beuys, marked by humanism, social philosophy and anthroposophy. In an artist statement Coelho outlines how his projects “frequently merge personal research with collaboration from people of various cultures, geographies and histories. This interaction begins the process of investigation, questioning and interpretation which often creates new ideas and outcomes. As I begin the research of conjuring meaning out of raw experiences, I am able to

1a and b

“Stand at ease” (2012) deconstructs the soldier’s stance where protocol, discipline and the constant threat of violence might not leave much room for truly being at ease. The viewer’s gaze meets the tidily unrevealing palms of the soldier as they perform what is meant to be a ritual of rest and repose. Installation with one photograph on archival paper and pair of leather boots. Paper: Hahemühle Photo Rag, 188 gsm, acid-free. Print dimensions: 24.1 x 15.4 cm. Approximate installation dimensions: 50 x 95 x 35 cm.





describe social and personal contexts, which often inspire inquiry and become the foundation for long-term projects.” A space within which creative interdisciplinarity could develop into site-specific work or public art projects.

Coelho’s photography, mixed media installations and video art are dominated by an enquiry not into the bulwark vastness of the military forces, but the lone figure of the soldier—in particular, those stationed at the Siachen Glacier, an area heavily contested by India and Pakistan, and at a height of over 17,700 feet (5,400 m), the world’s highest field of war. In 2008, he travelled to Panamik, the closest a civilian can get to the glacier, and was halted there by his lack of military connections. He had to imagine the region beyond that, travelling via the narratives of truck drivers, mountaineers, soldiers.

To counter the violence—military and environmental—wreaked on the place, Coelho creates an image of healing. His installation “537” (2007), “an entreaty for peace”, comprises 537 rolls of white gauze bandages, arranged in a careful heap, bringing to mind the shape and colour of a glacier. The bandages, while evocative of past brutality, symbolize care, protection and healing, a holding out of hope. Which is seemingly abandoned in (the elaborately named) photograph “Altitude Sickness, Frostbite, Chilblains, Arterial Hypertension, Deep Vein Thrombosis, Snow-blindness, Hypothermia, High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, High Altitude Cerebral Oedema...”, alluding to the fatal diagnosis that many soldiers are confronted with during their posting in a region where weather conditions have claimed more lives than combat. The image shows bandages lying unraveled and forsaken in the snow, camouflaged like soldiers in their white high-altitude uniforms. Snow also plays the backdrop to

2 In “537” (2007) rolls of white gauze evoke images of past violence and future hope and healing. Medium: 537 white gauze bandages. Approximate dimensions: 85 x 110 x 21 cm.

3 “Altitude Sickness, Frostbite, Chilblains, Arterial Hypertension, Deep Vein Thrombosis, Snow-blindness, Hypothermia, High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, High Altitude Cerebral Oedema...” (2009) is a picture of disarrangement, unravelling and abandonment. Digital print on archival paper. Paper: Epson Premium Semi Matt, 260 gsm. Print dimensions: 82 x 109 cm.

4 “Sixty-five days more to go...” (2009): marks on the ground denote borders, prison cells and endless waiting. Digital print on archival paper. Paper: Epson Premium Semi Matt, 260 gsm. Print dimensions: 82 x 109 cm.







“Sixty-five days more to go...” (2009), a print of repeated slashes on the ground (reminiscent of prisoners marking their days on the walls of their cells). The “manmade” lines also remind us of the arbitrary articulation of borders as random marks on a map; the danger lies in how, in their construction and maintenance, they come to inhabit a naturalized space, creating the assumption of a landscape that has always been (and always will be) divided in that manner. This belief, the artist seems to say, rather than the “enemy”, is what kills soldiers.

In an attempt to humanize the “supermen” (no women are posted at Siachen) confined within a space of hyper-masculinity, Coelho strips the soldier, quite literally, down to the skin in (perhaps a tad blatantly titled) “Beneath it all...I am human...”. This video depicts a Siachen soldier’s uniform being systematically removed to reveal the physical body and nature of a soldier. There’s something deeply confessional in tone about the piece, echoing the intimacy of Louise Bourgeois, an artist Coelho often cites as an inspiration. Using this as a starting point, his most recent work, “Attempts to contain”, forces viewers to confront the soldier’s nude skin in remarkable close up. Fingers interweave with toes, arms interlock across the back, fingers plug earholes and the mouth. This 10-image installation broadens the artist’s exploration; sophisticated clothing may protect against extreme temperatures and illness, but how does one shield the body from a distressed and afflicted mental state? Even more affecting is “If it would only end...”, a video that sets up, in an infinity-shaped loop, the past 25 years of India-Pakistan conflict at the glacier through the goods that the soldiers have consumed. The items are touchingly evocative of a household grocery list—juice cartons, jam jars, peas, almonds, onions, ketchup.

While Coelho’s earlier work comprised explorations of the military self, from ill health to homesickness, severance from family to facing mortality, from 2011 he

5a-p (previous pages)

“Beneath it all... I am human...” (2009), the slow undressing of the official accoutrements of a soldier reveal humanity and skin. Audio/video running time: 11 minutes 5 seconds loop.

6a and b

“Eight Pauses” (2011–12) springs from a dramatic performance piece where the artist embodies the physicality of a soldier and moves through public urban spaces dressed in camouflage, noting people’s reactions toward him. Installation with eight photographs on archival paper and video. Paper: Hahemühle Photo Rag, 188 gsm, acid-free. Single print dimensions: 25.4 x 33.8 cm. Approximate installation dimensions: 60 x 378.3 x 28.5 cm. Video running time: 5 minutes 21 seconds loop.

7

“If it would only end...” (2009): the endless cycle of India-Pakistan violence set up as a touching infinity video loop of food consumed by the soldiers at Siachen. Audio/video running time: 3 minutes 50 seconds loop.





8a and b

“Attempts to contain” (2015) highlights the fragility of the human body as it wrestles to shield itself from the distress within. Installation at the LAMO Centre, Leh, with 10 photographs on archival paper. Paper: Hahemühle Photo Rag, 188 gsm, acid-free. Print dimensions:
 2 Nos. (50 x 76 cm),
 2 Nos. (50 x 40.5 cm),
 3 Nos. (30.5 x 45.5 cm),
 1 No. (30.5 x 38 cm),
 1 No. (38 x 30.5 cm),
 1 No. (20 x 30.5 cm).
 Approximate installation dimensions: 157 x 391 cm.

pushes his enquiry further. “Eight Pauses”, a series of eight photographic works and a video, emerged from “Why is he here? ”, a psychogeographic performance piece in which he wore a soldier’s uniform and moved through an autumnal Battersea Park in south London, walking and stopping, capturing and observing people’s reactions to his attire. Dressed for camouflage (in jungle green and brown), a soldier appropriates a phenomenon natural to many living creatures in order not to be spotted and destroyed—yet in a city space, albeit a leafy park, this generates a range of reactions, from fear and disdain to surprise and aggression. People moved aside and made space for him in a markedly different way, acutely aware of his presence. The eight prints capture Coelho in an autumnal landscape, standing in open spaces, by the side of a road, close to a fence, while the video documents his journey, highlighting, in the ordinary everydayness of his surroundings, the apparent randomness of military events and their historical representation. The artist “performed” the soldier, through body language—stiff, formal—and behaviour, noting that the army uniform allowed him not only to merge with the background, but also to become anonymous.

It is this very anonymity that Coelho seeks to tackle. His installation “Stand at ease” (2012), developed from “Eight Pauses”, consists of a pair of black leather army boots and a black-and-white photograph, hung on the wall, of his palms placed one above the other, as if in response to the “stand at ease” drill command. The work ques-



tions what “ease” means within the context of the army, and how much one can really savour it while confined to its strict regimented routine. How does this affect relationships between the men? Is there room for companionship? In an environment of hyper-masculinity, especially at places like Siachen, what part does touch and intimacy, even on a physical level, play? Coelho has moved beyond accoutrements, the sometimes simplistic sentimentality of his early work, and has wedged his attention on explorations beneath the surface. If, as he says, the work of Anselm Kiefer also informs his artistic practice, it is in this searing honesty, an unflinching willingness to confront the terrible and terrifying—coupled, though, with a gentle unsharpened pacifism, wrested free of the dominant narrative of constructed nationalism of the belligerents, and drifting instead to the fallibly, achingly human.