

CITY EXPRESS

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

Fabric of The Borders

ARTIST BAPTIST COELHO GETS TALKING ABOUT HIS ART INSTALLATION IN THE CITY THAT PONDERES OVER A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS THAT DEAL WITH CONFLICT, VULNERABILITIES AND FABRIC

by Rajitha S

What is hidden behind that uniform? Who is the person behind that brave persona? Are you vulnerable like anyone of us? What makes you stand up against the chill that cannot be described in a phrase?

These are questions Mumbai-based artist Baptist Coelho wanted to explore and has been trailing behind soldiers who are posted at the Siachen Glacier since 2007. In the city, in between setting up his art installation titled Thread by Thread at Goethe-Zentrum's auditorium, and giving instructions to his team he sits down to talk to us.

The combination of mediums is slightly unusual – horizontal arrangement of cloth patterns leaning on to a wall, a large parachute in one corner, a series of head phones connected to an audio device, a projector, photographs of hands, feet and body parts intertwined and some others, that are yet to be installed.

"It is a mixture of mediums that talk about the meaning of fabric in a conflict and a war zone. It is beyond aesthetics or the weft and the warp. In places such as these, fabric is an essential. It is about security and safety," begins the artist.



Artist Baptist Coelho

PICS: A SURESH KUMAR

Thread by Thread was first showcased in Mumbai and Delhi in the year 2009. Eventually, Coelho felt that it needs to go to the place where the whole idea emerged. "In May-June this year, we showcased it in Ladakh. It was a different experience altogether," he recalls.

With a couple more additions to this installation in Hyderabad, Coelho explains the idea behind each element. "The chords that bind the parachute

are original but the rest of it has been replaced with thermals that were worn by soldiers – the innermost layers of their body. They have all been collaged to form the canopy of the parachute," says Coelho.

It is also about abandoned parachutes you find along Siachen that somehow couldn't make it to the ground. "I have heard stories from the many conversations I have had with army officers



over the years. The parachute is also a depiction of soldiers' strength to fight any situation and conflict as a team," adds Coelho sharing that the fabric has been sourced from soldiers who served at the Siachen glacier. One can always dig further and find more layers to a piece of art, feels Coelho.

This particular piece is also intimate he tells us. "Thermals are the closest to the soldier's skin and this is an ex-



tension of the video that is also part of the installation. I wore the uniform that Siachen soldiers wear when I was in Mumbai and I couldn't see myself. There is no air, there is no space for anything to pass out. The video is where a ghost removes this uniform – layer by layer," explains Coelho while adding that there is an intention behind creating this video too. "By the end of the video, only the soldier's skin is visible.

It shows vulnerability. We have clothes to protect our body, but what about vulnerabilities of the mind? Do we have a fabric to guard our thoughts, our fears?" he questions.

And this question is partly answered by the next element in his installation – photographs. "How does one feel secure? Your body is trying to create a weapon and that's when this weft and warp happens. The body is trying to weave itself. It is again, only an attempt. Can it protect the mental state? I don't know," elaborates the 38-year-old.

How the soldiers guard their mental state is also part of the installation. That, we recommend you go and watch it unfold, rather, hear it unfold.

With no connection to the army or conflict in the family, for Coelho who started off as a web designer and went on to study design in the UK, the whole idea of borders seems absurd he tells us. "How can someone enrol in the army? How can someone enrol oneself to die? What makes people opt for a career like that? I always had these questions in my mind. This pushed me to delve deeper and that's when I started my research," he says, signing off.

Thread by Thread will be open to viewing from 6 30 pm today till October 24.