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'Attempts to Contain': India's Baptist Coelho, winner of 2016 Sovereign Asian Art Prize – artist profile

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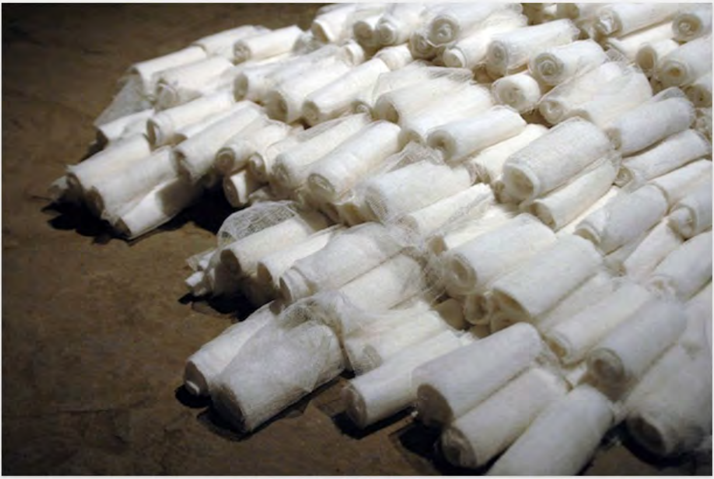
Baptist Coelho's artistic meditations on the Siachen Glacier won him the 2016 Sovereign Asian Art Prize.

Sovereign Asian Art Prize winner Baptist Coelho's "Siachen Glacier Project" is an ongoing decade-long exploration of nation-states, boundaries, the military and what unfolds in sites of conflict. *Art Radar* profiles the artist and his work.



Baptist Coelho, '537', 2007, 537 white gauze bandages. Approximate dimensions: 110 x 21 x 85 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

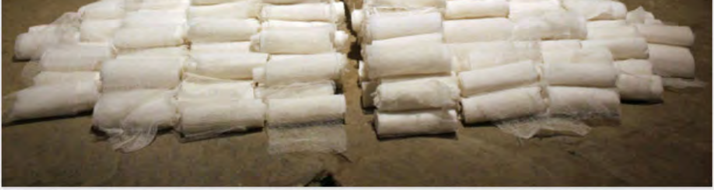
Indian artist **Baptist Coelho** may have only recently won the 2016 **Sovereign Asian Art Prize**, Asia's most prestigious contemporary art prize, but he has been studiously thinking about ideas of 'nation-state' and boundaries, its traditional arm of influence, i.e., the military, and sites of conflict since as early as 2006, when he began his research for "Siachen Glacier Project". A year later, in 2007, he produced his first work for the project entitled *537*.

It is an installation made with the titular 537 white gauze bandages, stacked on top of each other roughly in the shape of two white mountains. *537* perhaps still has the most pertinent thing to say about the situation at Siachen: an appeal for peace given the futility of the conflicting nationalisms.

Baptist Coelho, '537', 2007, 537 white gauze bandages. Approximate dimensions: 110 x 21 x 85 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

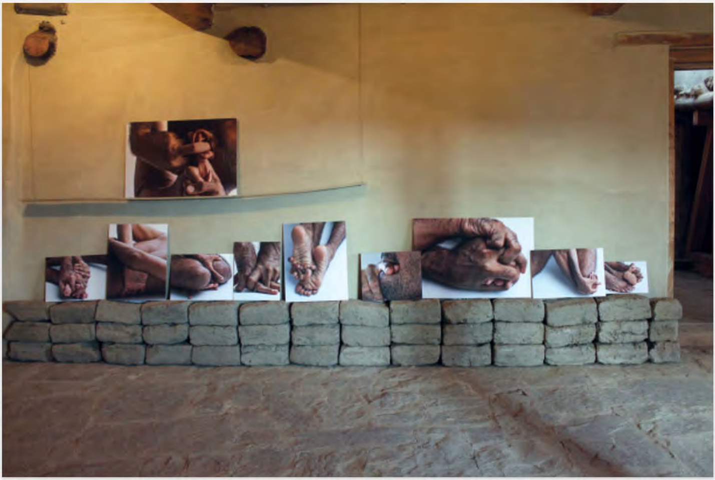
At over 5700 metres above the sea level, Siachen is the highest battleground in the world, and over the years, it has become a symbol for the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan. The two countries have shared a strained relationship since the seperation of India into two parts in 1947, and have subsequently fought three official wars post-partition. In the 1984 war, Siachen became the battleground where the rivalry between the countries unfolded, creating the conflict that lasts to date.

The two hill-like mounds of white bandages in *537* tell of the wounds, and the healing, care and protection afterwards; but the work also tells of the readiness in anticipation of the wounds to come. In Siachen, though, these wounds do not come from the prospective enemy.



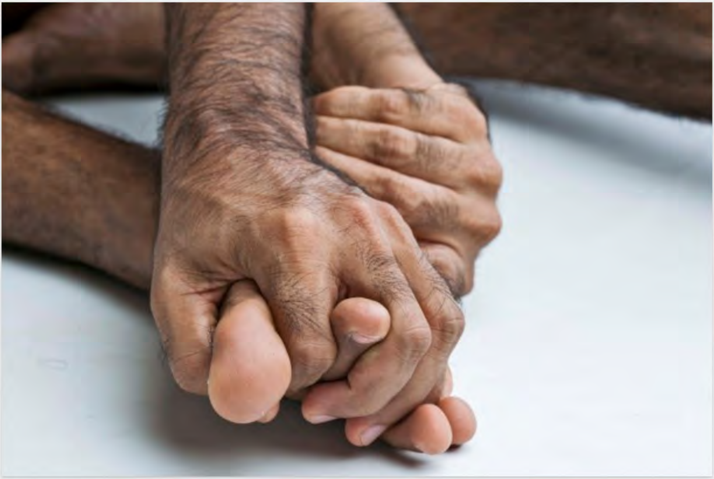
Baptist Coelho, '537', 2007, 537 white gauze bandages. Approximate dimensions: 110 x 21 x 85 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

Both countries have about 150 manned outposts in the glacier located in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region, where the clamour for self-determination by the people of Jammu and Kashmir is now reaching a crescendo. It is estimated that more lives are lost due to the extreme weather conditions in Siachen – temperatures drop as low as -60 degree Celsius – than actual armed conflicts, despite which each soldier spends at least three months at a stretch there. For two lower-middle income countries, it is also extremely expensive to run the military outposts in the glacier – perhaps this could be interpreted as a masculine display of power, or an obstinate devotion to fantasies of nationhood.



Baptist Coelho, 'Attempts to contain', 2015, 8 photographs on archival paper. Print dimensions: 2 Nos. (W 76 x H 50.5 cm), 2 Nos. (40.5 x 50.8 cm), 1 No. (38 x 30.5 cm), 2 Nos. (45.5 x 30.5 cm), 1 No. (30.5 x 38 cm). Archival Paper: PhotoRag, 308 gsm, acid-free. Approximate installation dimensions: W 391 x H 157 X D 15 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

"Attempts to Contain" (2015), the collection for which Coelho was **awarded the 2016 Sovereign Asian Art Prize**, is a series of eight photographs of varied dimensions on archival paper. In the photoseries, orifices are safely shut and fingers and limbs urgently clasp each other; Coelho suggests that the idea of the photoseries is to "[…] explore how the body responds to the physical and psychological need to protect itself by forming a mesh of interlocking body parts". The desperately clinging, dismantled parts of the human body form twisted and tense shapes that seem to juxtapose the pressure of a soldier's duty and the innate instinct to protect and adapt to different situations.



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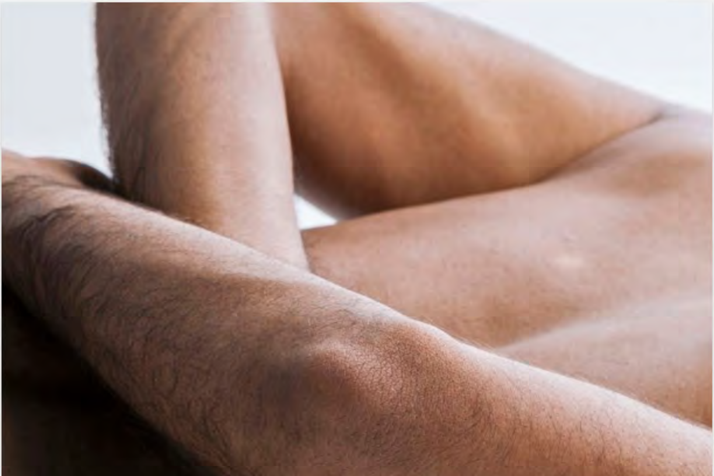

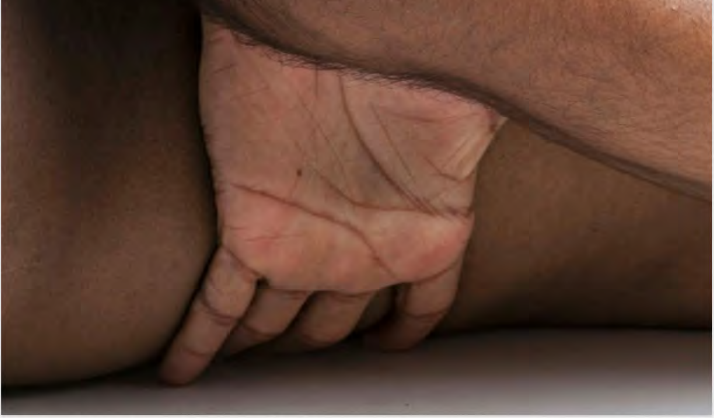

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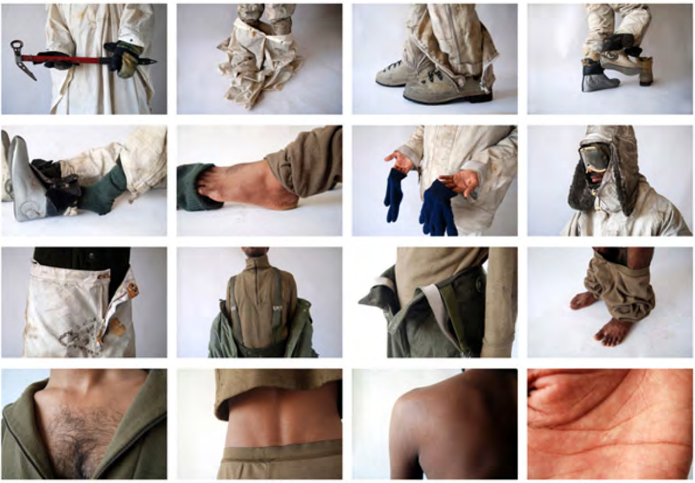
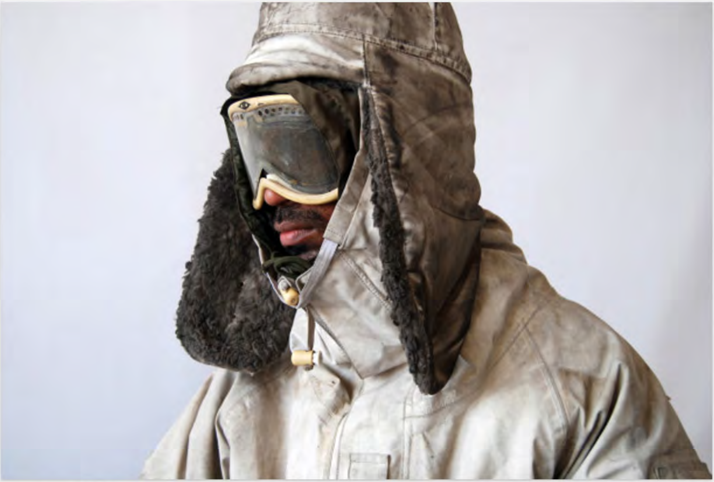


Baptist Coelho, 'Beneath it all… I am human…', 2009, (set of DVD stills) audio/video running time: 11m:05s loop. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

"Attempts to Contain" is a continuation of Coelho's 2009 audio-visual work entitled *Beneath it all… I am human…*, wherein a Siachen soldier's uniform is removed layer by layer to finally reveal the soldier's body underneath, replete with flesh, bones and skin.

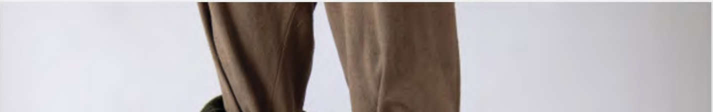
Undressed of the uniform that literally protects the soldier from the life-threatening cold outside, the body becomes vulnerable but liberated from meaning, from nationalisms; it becomes free from belonging to any of the sides. But how long can the same body sustain itself that way in the severe cold? "Attempts to Contain", then, becomes the answer to the question of how to protect oneself beyond the uniform, within the boundaries of the witnessing body.



Baptist Coelho, 'Beneath it all... I am human...', 2009, (DVD still) audio/video running time: 11m:05s loop. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

For someone born far away from Siachen in Mumbai, and based there, it is perhaps an odd choice of subject to dedicate so much of one's life to. When asked about this, Coelho says:

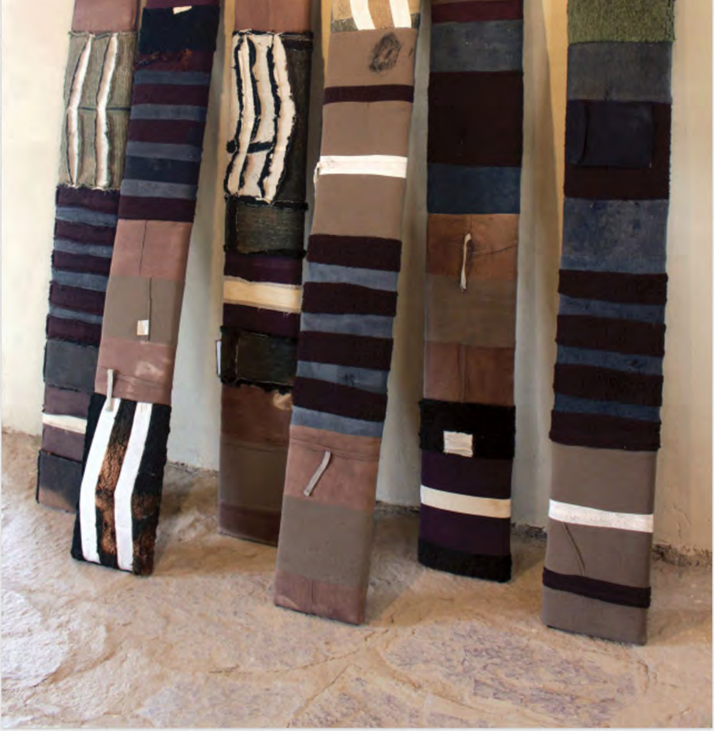
> *To date and even in the past, I have never understood the army (their purpose, their ways, etc.) and this not-able-to-understand was one of the starting points for to me beginning the research.*



Baptist Coelho, 'Beneath it all… I am human…', 2009, (DVD still) audio/video running time: 11m:05s loop. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

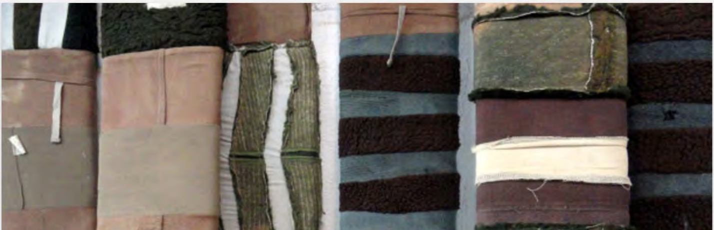
Much like his eagerness to be open to subjects that evade understanding, Coelho is open to various media, and often works with installation, video, sound, photography, found object, and site-specific and public art projects. In terms of subject matter, he has worked with ideas of urbanism and migration, aside from the Siachen Project.

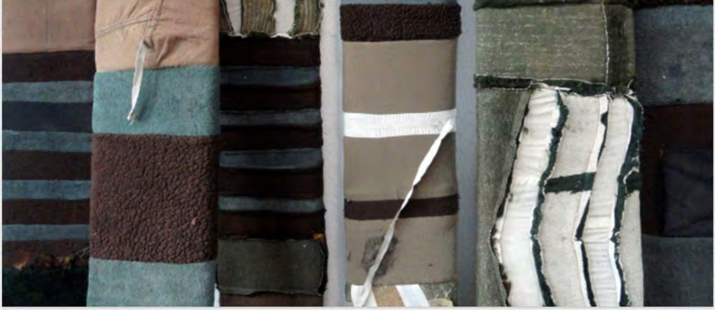
His intention, it seems, as evident in many of his works, is to unfurl the details of the fabric that are woven into life-stories – sometimes quite literally. For instance, he is particularly interested in the material things that give meaning to a solider: his uniform, his ribbons, the locations of his duty, the basic amenities that will allow his survival.



Baptist Coelho, 'Ribbons I', 2015, 6 bars made of various Siachen soldier's clothing, sponge and wood. Single bar dimensions: W 9.5 x H 72 x D 1 in. Approximate display dimensions: W 68 x H 70 x D 22 in. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

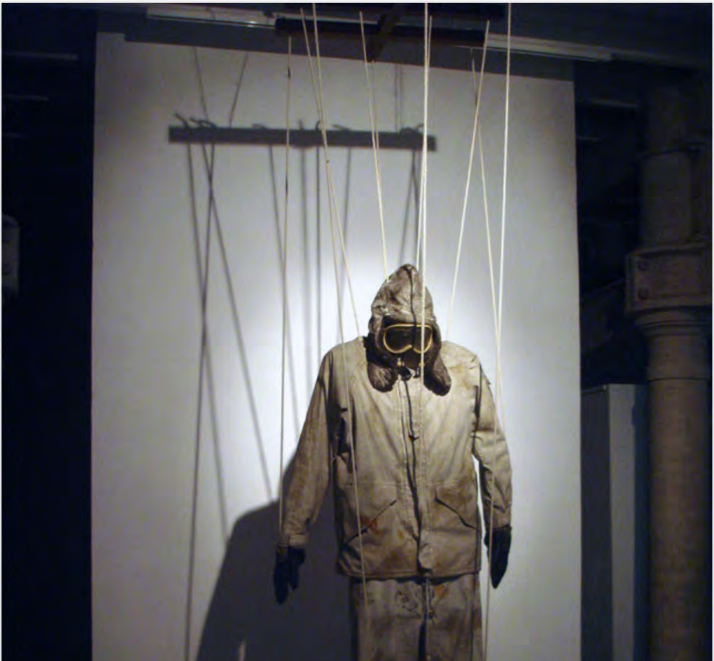
Ribbons I (2015) is an installation of six vertical bars clothed in ribbons made of various items of clothing and artefacts of daily use by the soldiers posted at Siachen, such as pants, jackets, socks, blankets and so on. It is reminiscent of the service ribbons worn by officers in their military services. Each bar consists of four different types of ribbons, much like the grades of awards given for bravery and heroism within the national military economy of gallantry.

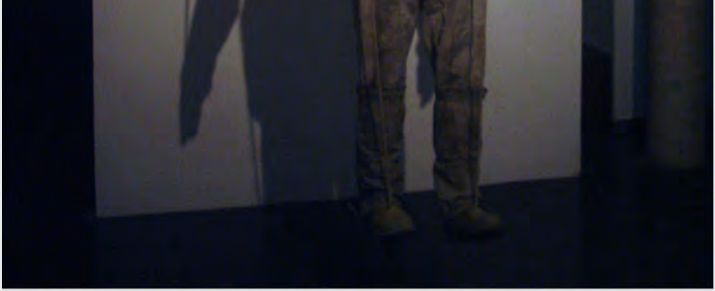




Baptist Coelho, 'Ribbons I', 2015, 6 bars made of various Siachen soldier's clothing, sponge and wood. Single bar dimensions: W 9.5 x H 72 x D 1 in. Approximate display dimensions: W 68 x H 70 x D 22 in. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

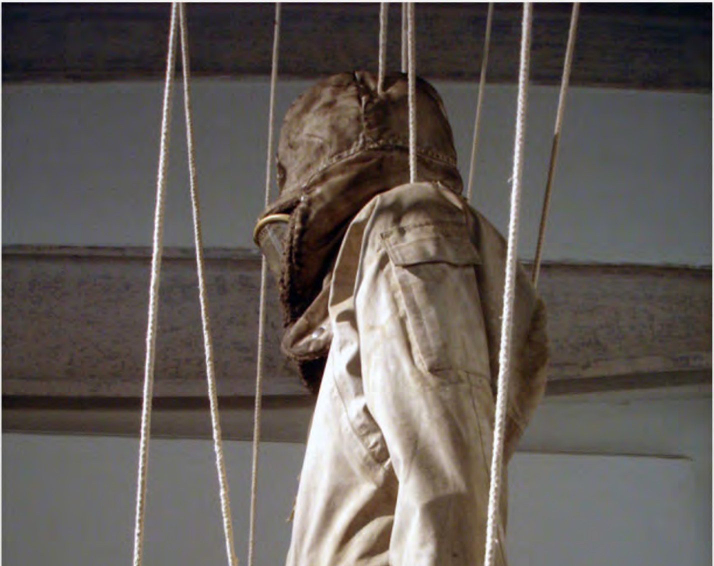
"Do we have a choice?" #1 (2009) is a human-sized puppet, made with a suspended phantom-like Siachen soldier's uniform hanging from a wooden cross-bar, replete with strings tied to the limbs. In this work, Coelho attempts again to see beyond the common perceptions of the military as a locus of power, but rather as another arm in the design that sustains nation-states.

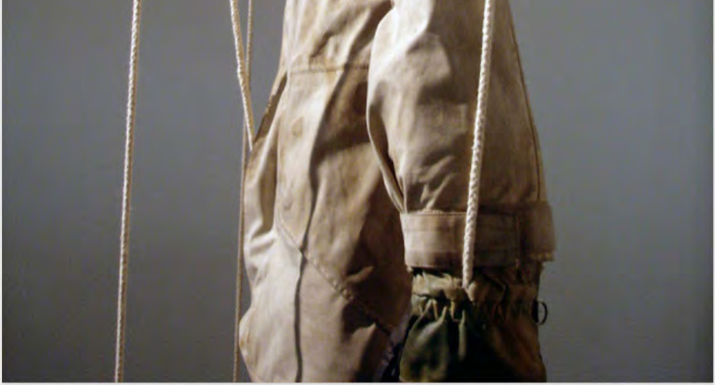




Baptist Coelho, 'Do we have a choice?" #1', 2009, installation with soldier's clothing, sponge, string and wood. Installation dimensions: variable. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

The word 'Siachen' comes from the Balti – the Tibetan language spoken in the Baltistan Division in Gilgit-Baltistan, the northernmost administrative territory of Pakistan – terms *Sia,* referring to the genera of roses that grow widely in the region, and *chen*, meaning an object found in abundance. Siachen, therefore, as post-colonial irony would have it, means 'the land of many roses'.





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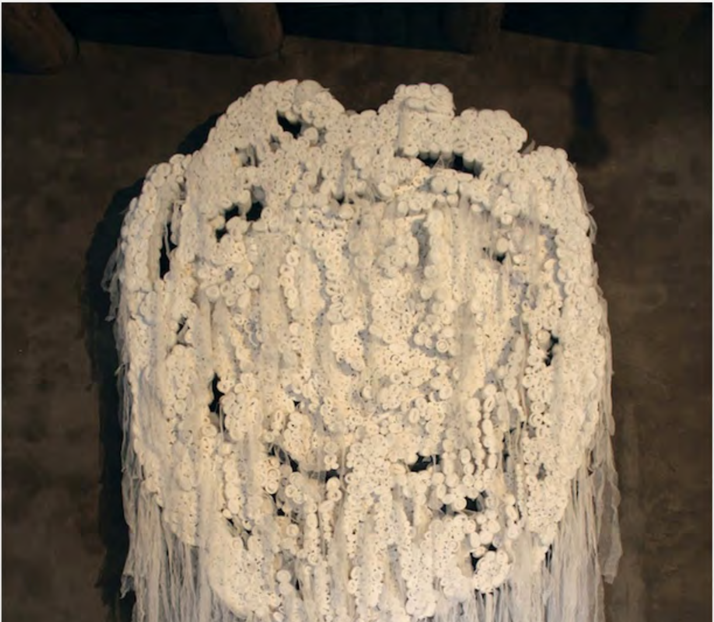
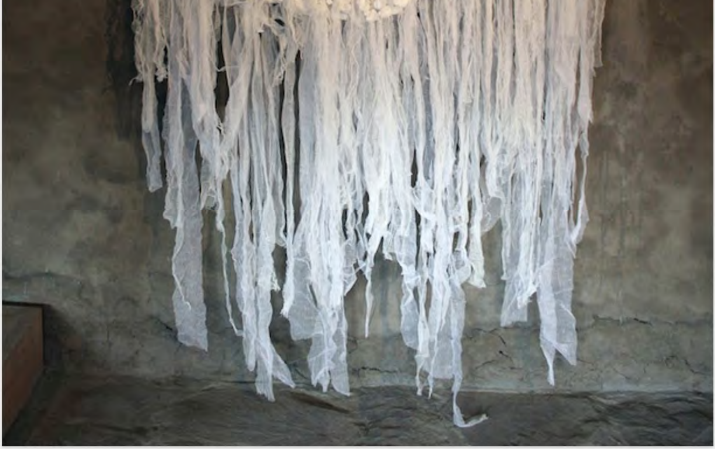
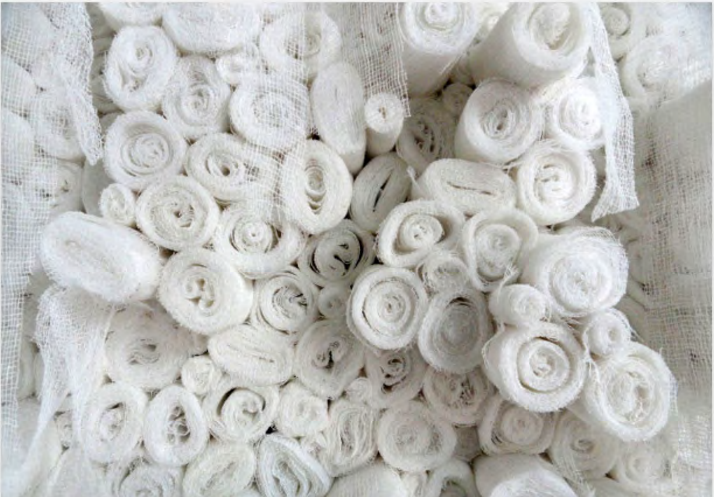




Baptist Coelho, 'The Rose I', 2015, white gauze bandages, MDF plywood and synthetic resin adhesive. Rose Dimensions: W 50 x H 60 x D 6 in. Display dimensions: W 50 x H 100 x D 6 in. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

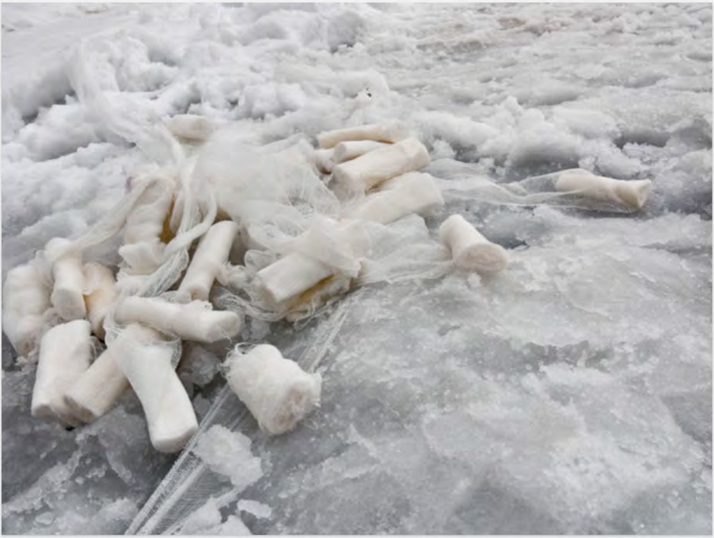
Coelho draws on this irony to construct *The Rose I* (2015), which is made from white gauze bandages of various sizes grouped next to each other to form a rose derived from the American artist **Cy Twombly**'s 2008 lush purple-hued painting *Untitled (Blue Roses)*. Coelho's rose, made of white cotton bandages, so far away from the vibrant blue and purple of Twombly's, tells the story of Siachen and its landscape as the ethereally beautiful witness to this human conflict made of bandages, blood, cold, heroism and animosity.



Baptist Coelho, 'The Rose I', 2015, (detail) white gauze bandages, MDF plywood and synthetic resin adhesive. Rose Dimensions: W 50 x H 60 x D 6 in. Display dimensions: W 50 x H 100 x D 6 in. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

Coelho uses bandages as a vehicle for revealing what is contained in the body of a soldier at Siachen again in another early work entitled *Altitude Sickness, Frostbite, Chilblains, Arterial Hypertension, Deep Vein Thromboses, Snow-blindness, Hypothermia, High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, High Altitude Cerebral Oedema…* (2009). It is a digital print photograph on archival paper that depicts a bunch of snow-white bandages strewn on the hardened snow, abandoned.

The title refers to the endless number of fatal illnesses that might befall soldiers during their three-month long compulsory posting on the Siachen glacier. More than that, though, it gives us glimpses of a time long after the soldiers are gone, when those who will look at the fossilised burial of the snow-bandages – symbols of wounds and bleeding first and foremost, before protection – and think of those who left the remnants with pity, as though that is all the apocalypse left behind.



Baptist Coehlo, 'Altitude Sickness, Frostbite, Chilblains, Arterial Hypertension, Deep Vein Thrombosis, Snow-blindness, Hypothermia, High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema, High Altitude Cerebral Oedema…', 2009, digital print on archival paper. Print dimension: H 82 x W 109 cm. Archival Paper: Epson Premium Semi Matt, 260 gsm. Printer: Epson Stylus Pro 11880. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai; LAMO, Leh.

Coelho is currently undertaking an artist-in-residency programme as the **Leverhume Artist-in-Residence** at the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, the outcome of which will be exhibited in the upcoming exhibition at Somerset House in London, titled **"Traces of War"**, running from 25 October to 18 December 2016.

Lily Tekseng