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ART INTERPRETS WAR

Indian artist Baptist Coelho is part of a new show that explores how the imprint of war can enter the gallery space

BY AVANTIKA BHUYAN

It was a chance meeting, three years ago, between Vivienne Jabri and Cécile Bourne-Farrell which triggered the idea for the exhibition *Traces Of War*. The conversation prompted them to think about how to bring the subject of war, and the traces it leaves behind, into the gallery space. "It led us to think about how the academic study of the subject of war can converse with contemporary artists' interpretations of it," explain Bourne-Farrell, an independent curator, and Jabri, a professor of international relations at the department of war studies, King's College London, in an email interview.

To seek answers to these questions, the duo began to look at the work of various contemporary artists, finally narrowing down on three: London-based Jananne

Al-Ani, who has her roots in Kirkuk, Iraq; Indian artist Baptist Coelho, who works in Mumbai; and Shaun Gladwell, who served as Australia's official war artist in the first Gulf War and then, later, in Afghanistan.

Working primarily with photographs, film and multimedia installations, the three artists have tried to address the paradox of the war and the everyday—its enduring imprint upon geographies, histories and cultures. This reimagining of war has resulted in 16 works, five of which are being shown for the first time at the exhibition at King's College London. "We are very proud that each artist has produced new pieces for the exhibition, which is not always the case for regular contemporary art spaces nowadays," say Jabri and Bourne-Farrell.

The artists have drawn on direct experience of conflict and war zones, from Iraq to India, Bangladesh to Afghanistan. Personal stories meet larger narratives in each work, with the artist's own journey becoming a part of it. Al-Ani left Kirkuk with her family in the early 1990s and her work speaks of the trace that the Gulf war left on the global landscape, well beyond Iraq. The imprint of the colonial wars on family relationships becomes obvious in Gladwell's artwork.

Coelho's exploration of war in everyday

life began nearly 10 years ago, when he returned to India after a master's in arts from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, UK. He was asked to respond to the idea of *The Peace Project* by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, US, in 2007. The exhibition, through installations and performance art, explored issues of overpopulation, pollution, war and more, which threatened the idea of peace. There he created *537*, a set of white bandages rolled and assembled together. Using bandages as a metaphor, Coelho is trying to heal the pain and wounds of the soldiers posted in Siachen. "Not understanding the conflict became an engagement point and I kept going back to Ladakh to speak with officers, mountaineers and locals to understand the mindscape," says Coelho on the phone from London.

Oral histories—thoughts of locals in Ladakh on the many base camps that line their beautiful landscape, the palpable tension that is evident to mountaineers and visitors while travelling through the camps, and more—form an important part of his artistic process. He keeps collecting histories wherever he goes. "I met a gentleman in London who as a young boy had seen bombs falling in the parks in the UK during World War II. Such testimonies become an integral part of my fact-finding



(above) *Double Field/Viewfinder* by Shaun Gladwell (2009-10); and a production still from the film *Shadow Sities II* (2011) by Jananne Al-Ani. COURTESY DEPARTMENT OF WAR STUDIES, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON



process," says Coelho.

In *Blueys*, a mixed-media installation, he uses handwritten and printed letters exchanged by a British soldier with his wife and children during his posting in Iraq in 2003. These are juxtaposed against the language cards issued by a limited set of Arabic words that would assist in communicating with the local Iraqis. "The words in these language cards are stilted and lack emotion. There are mere SOS words to be used in emergency. Now compare that to the free-flowing language that we use while communicating with our loved ones, as can be seen in the letters. The letters between the couple speak of loneliness, love, fear," says Coelho.

He also depends on archival material, the testimony of Sachin Bali, an ex-army officer who lost two fingers and the toes of his right foot to frostbite in Siachen in 2003, and a chapter on surviving extremes from *How To Avoid Being Killed In A War Zone: The Essential Survival Guide For Dangerous Places* (2011) by Rosie Garthwaite. Coelho explores an individual's way of surviving and questions guidebooks, presenting the gaps between the personal and the institutional.

Traces Of War, a collaboration between the department of war studies and King's College London, is on till 18 December, at Inigo Rooms, King's College London, UK.

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