



Conflict turns contemporary art

From top: Exhibits from Baptist Coelho's London show *Traces of War*, (left) the artist (Kate Anderson)

GARGI GUPTA | Sun, 6 Nov 2016-07:00am, Mumbai, DNA

*Baptist Coelho's works at the ongoing *Traces of War* exhibition in London present a chilling side of war. Gargi Gupta speaks to the Mumbai artist*

Names of contemporary art-works can be quite mystifying, but one called *Altitude Sickness*, *Frostbite*, *Chilblains*, *Arterial Hypertension*, *Deep Vein Thrombosis*, *Snow-blindness*, *Hypothermia*, *High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema*, *High Altitude Cerebral Oedema*...?

That's the name of a digital photograph and installation by Mumbai artist Baptist Coelho, currently on view at *Traces of War*, a new show that opened at King's College, London last week, and will run through mid-December.

War, as the name suggests, is the subject of this exhibition – more particularly, the "paradoxical dynamic of war and the everyday" in contemporary war zones from Iraq to India, Bangladesh to Afghanistan. Coelho is one of three international new media artists in the show curated by Cécile Bourne-Farrell and Vivienne Jabri, two professors of international politics at King's College.

Coelho's *Altitude Sickness*...refers to the names of illnesses that befall soldiers during their posting on the Siachen Glacier. The photograph, a staged image of white bandage rolls, discarded and strewn in the white snow, poignantly evokes the reality of the soldiers' presence in that harsh climate, their human frailty re-emphasising the pointlessness of the battle they are engaged in.

One, called *Nowhere but Here* is made of Siachen soldiers' thermal wear stitched together to form a parachute-like canopy; *Beneath it all... I am human*... has a more obvious reference to Siachen: the 11-minute video enacts again and again the removing of the many layers of a Siachen soldier's clothing to reveal the flesh.

Siachen, clearly, is an *idée fixe* with the 39-year-old artist, which is curious given that he's never been to Siachen. "I've only been as far as Panamic (a remote village in Ladakh's Nubra Valley)," he says over telephone from Dubai. "That's as far as non-Ladakhi civilians are allowed to go." But what Coelho has not been able to gain from direct experience he makes up with research. "I have been researching for eight-nine years now. I have spoken to mountaineers, porters, soldiers who have served on Siachen, etc."

In London for the past year as artist in-residence at the Department of War Studies in King's College, Coelho has visited museums and archives to look for material. At the Royal Geographic Society, he found photographs of the Glacier taken by British explorers before it became a conflict zone and a 1906 book called *Mountain Sickness and its Probable Causes* on how to deal with altitude sickness. There's also what looks like a sketch of a flower but is actually the outline of a mould of a Siachen officer's prosthetic finger, that Coelho traces drawn again and again in a circle to look like a rose. "Siachen means 'rose' in Ladakhi. But there's also a reference to the chakra – the 'flower' has 24 petals like the 24 spokes in the chakra. The officer who lost his finger got a medal, called the "wound medal" on one side of which there's a chakra. I was trying to look at the cost at which such medals are earned," Coelho explains.