

“TRACES OF WAR” –
INDIA'S BAPTIST COELHO
ON SIACHEN AND THE
BRITISH ARMY IN IRAQ

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A new exhibition looks at war and conflict as seen by three different artists in surprising and revealing ways...

FREEZING temperatures (as much as -50C), mountainous terrain, and an invisible enemy are just some of the issues faced by troops stationed at the Siachen Glacier high up in the Himalayas.

More Indian troops die there from the inhospitable conditions, than they do from enemy fire and this forms the backdrop for Indian artist Baptist Coelho's contribution to "Traces of War" display at King's College, London.

Two other artists also have work on display as part of the exhibition, which runs until December 18. Iraqi-born but British-based Jerome Al-Asi, a winner of the 2011 Arabica Capital Art Prize (one of the major art awards in the Middle East), and Shaun Gladwell, the Australian War Memorial's official war artist in Afghanistan (2009), also have work that can be viewed. Both specialise in photographic and video displays.

Coelho, who has used video but the majority of his work on display at this exhibition consists of textiles, pictures and displays of letters and other written material – all with a bearing on conflict either in Siachen or Iraq.

Mumbai born and raised, Coelho enjoyed a year-long King's College residency, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, and the exhibition is mounted and supported by the university college's department of war studies.

"I am not a war artist," the affable, one-time graphic designer, told www.asianculturevulture.com in a face-to-face interview last month.

"A lot of people are tempted to say that and put me into a category or slots but when I started out what I was doing I had no idea the direction of my art would take.

"I was looking at other things that bothered me about urbanisation," he continued.

A Master's degree from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in 2003-6, helped to crystallise his artistic leanings: he was fascinated by using air as an artistic medium, but it was not until he returned to India and contributed a piece to an art peace project in Denver that his interest in war and conflict really grew.

"I had grown up with India-Pakistan conflict and knew about Siachen," he narrated.

Siachen is a Himalayan glacier and lies across a notional border separating India and Pakistan to the east of Kashmir. An official Siachen ceasefire was signed in 2003 and both countries have indicated a willingness to demilitarise, but with present relations at their lowest ebb for years, it is highly unlikely anything will change soon.

The region contains the world's highest helipad at 21,00ft and is used by the Indian army routinely to drop off supplies.

"I knew it was a very striking terrain and I began to think about it...why was someone there? What was the reason for soldiers to be there? The subject chose me rather than me choosing it," said Coelho.

The conditions are extreme, there is only 10 per cent oxygen and surviving there is not really a battle against an enemy – but the weather. The area also snowstorms and avalanches and despite the human toll both India and Pakistan regard the region as strategically important.

As he researched the subject, he became aware of the clothing and other items that were necessary to simply live in such an environment and the human toll it inflicts.

"I saw a picture of a pile of gauze bandages together – and I thought can it do anything? I felt like I needed to go further and deeper."

It isn't possible for anyone to go to Siachen – though the Indian Army does organise an annual trek – the closest you can get to the area is Ladakh, a largely ancient Buddhist enclave to the northeast of Jammu & Kashmir.

"I went there every year from 2007 onwards – it's not a place you can just get to like that, the roads can be closed."

In 2009, his work around Siachen went on display in Mumbai.

There were photographs and textile work (see images) – and there was no issue, but when the exhibition moved to Ladakh itself, he was made aware the Indian Army knew about it.

"I felt the need to bring this work to the area it came from. The gallery owner had seen my work in Mumbai and had created an art space in Ladakh which had already been there for 15 years.

"She was well-known in the area and had worked with people from the textile industry in the region. That all helped the project (move to Ladakh). It would have been dangerous otherwise."

The area around Siachen is highly restricted and the Army are said to monitor media around the subject.

"I was quite nervous and we told everybody it's an exhibition of textiles, and how fabric is used in the army, which is all true."

He said someone who didn't reveal his identity made him aware that the Army knew about his work.

Coelho told www.asianculturevulture.com: "The man said: I want you to know that this work of yours is critical to us and he said 'you might not think we are aware of your work because you are not well-known, but we are'."

The exhibition in Ladakh passed off without any incident. It should also be stated that Coelho's work in this area is subtle and questioning and not overly critical or aggressively positioned.

He is, as he told www.asianculturevulture.com, looking at issues of masculinity, bravery and discipline.

A region like Siachen tests soldiers in every way, and as well as the human suffering, the cost of maintaining the posts runs into millions – but some would argue, what price is defence of the realm?

Researching the Himalayan region in London, he had also come across old notebooks and other records housed by the Royal Geographic Society, from the 20th century when the area was under British control.

Much of it alludes to the inhospitable terrain and the precautions required to survive.

"It was interesting to see what were the political conditions and what was the agenda (at the time)?"

His other work which is showing for the first time is that around the Iraq conflict and British involvement.

For the project, he was in extensive contact with a British Army soldier and his family. On display are some of the 'bluays' (a free Army letter service which looks a bit like an old style aerogramme) the ex-soldier now, dispatched to his wife and children, when he was on duty in Iraq.

What Coelho has done is juxtapose those with official Arab language handbooks issued to soldiers.

The soldier's handbook is full of functional phrases and instructions in Arabic designed to assist co-operation and obedience.

"It was very interesting to see the type and selection of words – you had to be brief and to the point – just enough words to get you out of trouble or save the day," Coelho explained.

Some of the words from the soldier's letters have back home have certain words now concealed by Coelho.

"The restriction is easy to see, you have the feeling that of somebody who is writing to their loved ones and then you see these words permitted by the language card. It's like reading a letter using the words only the Army would use.

"You can see how certain words used continuously in the letters – such as darling, kiss, love, are not listed by the Army."

Coelho has now left the UK and after a short stint in Dubai participating in workshops there, he will be in Mumbai for a while.

It is now 10 years since he became a professional artist – he has contributed to many exhibitions in India and abroad. His old tutor from Birmingham came to see his part in "Traces of War" and other UK contacts visited the exhibition when it first opened on October 26.

His year-long residency and attachment to King's College and his department of war studies came after his work was seen by Cecile Bourne-Farnell and a conversation and visit by Coelho to London in 2013.

The "Traces of War" exhibition has been curated by her and Professor Vivienne Jabri, based at King's College department of war studies.

Listing

Traces of War" until December 18 2016, free entry – Inigo Rooms, Somerset House East Wing, Strand Campus of King's College, London. WC2R 2LS.

Information
<http://www.lact.ac.uk/apps/departments/warstudies/traces/index.aspx>

<http://www.baptistcoelho.com/>

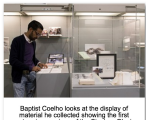
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Baptist Coelho's 'Nowhere, but here' is right at the front of the 'Traces of War' display



The white gauze bandages abandoned in the snow got him thinking...



Baptist Coelho looks at the display of material he collected during the last western impressions of the Siachen Glacier



Attempts to contain



The 'bluays' written by a soldier and his family



The Arabic phrase handbook used by both British and American troops in Iraq