

ART

Baptist Coelho: Strokes of Conflict

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Indian artist Baptist Coelho's art is not a simple critique of war, but a compassionate understanding of the mechanics behind it

The voice on the phone is scratchy and intermittent, giving one the satisfaction of a long-distance call, in a digital age. Baptist Coelho is in the UK, and he tells us what drove him to create installations around war—especially the Siachen glacier at the internationally acclaimed exhibition *Traces of War*, at King's College London. “I had always planned to do an exhibition when I received the Leverhulme scholarship as Artist-in-Residence at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. No doubt I had to push for it to happen, but I am so glad and privileged that it did,” says the 39-year-old artist, who is the winner of the ‘Façade Video Award’ (2011). The exhibition is showcasing artwork by Coelho alongside Shaun Gladwell and Jananne Al-Ani. All the three artists have direct experience of conflict and war zones and they work primarily with photography, film and multimedia installations.

Coelho's ongoing love affair with the Siachen glacier is not a new one. During his travels over the last three years, Coelho travelled to Panamik, close to the Siachen glacier in Ladakh. “It was so humbling being there...I think it was the journey that shaped my practice,” says Coelho who became friends with the soldiers and visited their bunkers, despite their wariness towards outsiders. He approaches the issue of war indirectly, through the uniforms of the soldiers and bandages, indicating the injury and death that the soldiers must deal with. “The soldiers more often die at the hands of extreme cold than the soldier's bullet,” says the artist whose works illuminate the mindset of people in a war, which is slow and consists mostly of waiting and guarding borders that are manmade. The bandages are a symbol of care and healing, hope and optimism in a bleak situation.

While his travels inspired the exhibition, the research continued even while in England. Coelho explains, “I had spoken to Harish Kapdia a gold medalist and a Himalayan Explorer, and he had asked me to check him out in the Royal Society's records. I was so surprised to find in the archives of King's College, that in 1910 there were several British explorers who had visited Siachen. Serendipitously my research had come full circle,” says Coelho who has literally joined the dots between India and Britain in real time.

The intersection of histories manifests in the letters of a British soldier written to his wife from Afghanistan, an old photograph of the explorers, a parachute fabricated out of Siachen thermal uniforms. The ‘fabrics’ of war are brought into the gallery and within the grasp of viewers. The installations foreground issues of conflict, the environment within which they occur, the histories that document these conflicts and its impact on culture and gender. It also reveals the adversities faced at such heights, such as deep vein thrombosis, altitude sickness and snow blindness to name a few.

Coelho has always been a hoarder, as a child he collected stamps and coins. With a Master's degree from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, his collection of objects became more political. He began with paper planes, and moved on to talking about borders, geographies and histories. Instead of settling for the usual painting and sculpture, Coelho decided to use objects to convey his message.

But isn't the Indian market and public sceptical towards conceptual work, I ask? “I think everyone has the capacity to appreciate unconventional and experimental artwork,” he says vehemently, providing an example, “I had made a video work depicting several issues faced by the soldiers by just using my hands. I decided to have a screening of the video in Ladakh and about 10 people turned up. Among those ten people a little girl reacted to my work. She was able to connect the slow movement of the hands with the kind of survival tactics the soldiers and locals adopt in the severe winters,” says Coelho highlighting that there is an audience for his ‘kind’ of art across classes and nationalities. The exhibition does however exist outside the realm of the art market, since the works are not for sale. “My research gave me a deeper understanding of the primal reason why we have these conflicts based on national pride,” says Coelho.

Coelho's work cuts across history and geography, for a soldier's struggle in the face of a slow war, is universal. However, the reference to the glacier, the highest battle ground in the world, is specific. This is what makes Coelho's works global and local at the same time. He has also done a series of photographs, stripping the soldier of all his gear, shoes, gloves, socks till he is down to his thermals and then his skin. This reveals the human being under the garb of the soldier.

Artists throughout history have sought to capture the trauma of war, its impact on combatants and civilians, on landscapes, and on the most hidden spaces: our memories, identities, and lived experiences. However, Coelho's is not a simple critique of war, but a compassionate and in-depth understanding of the mechanics behind it. Underlining the fragility of the soldier, the slow ravages of a war fought in complete isolation for months, he mounts a different kind of comment on war. One that is personal and yet universal.

The exhibition re-imagines war beyond its exceptionality, locating it in spaces where it would be least expected, in the everyday...in food supplies and clothes, birthdays and anniversaries all spent away from the warmth of familial life.

“Right now it's hard to see beyond this show, but I surely intend to continue my research and it is always in experiencing the everyday that new works emerges,” says Coelho.

(Baptist Coelho's *Traces of War* will run till 18 December at King's College, London)