



'They agreed to eat biscuits and European bread, but our regiment refused' (performance, 2019). (Courtesy Artist; Maurine Tric (photographer); Cité Internationale Des Arts, Paris and Project 88)

Art with a critical point of view

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- In a new show, Baptist Coelho demystifies the romanticized figures of the Armed Forces through artworks, images and performances
- It juxtaposes early works with photographs, sculptures, mixed-media work and videos of his later performances



At the Jindal School of Liberal Arts & Humanities (JSLH), located within the O P Jindal Global University in Sonapat, Haryana, one can see a cluster of 537 white gauze bandages lying in a pile. Created in 2007 by Mumbai-based artist Baptist Coelho, this assemblage was, and continues to be, an entreaty for peace—a call to end the conflict, on since 1984, between India and Pakistan for control of the Siachen glacier.

This is one of the first works that the artist created while marking his shift from being a graphic designer to the realm of visual arts. “As an artist, things around you start speaking to you in a different manner. You start having a critical point of view. It was while making this shift that I came across a call for a Peace Project by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Colorado, USA. I chose to respond to that by interpreting an online satellite view of the Siachen glacier through bandages,” says the Mumbai-based artist, who has won several awards including the prestigious Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2016. He has also performed and exhibited his works worldwide such as at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, Pump House Gallery, London, and so on.

The ongoing show, *Body-Automaton*, curated by Premjish Achari, showcases Coelho’s evolution as an artist, juxtaposing early works such as *537* with photographs, sculptures, mixed-media work and videos of his later performances, such as *What have we done for you?* (2018). The latter was inspired by a photograph from World War I, in which an Indian prisoner-of-war is seen washing his feet in Wünsdorf, Germany. In the exhibition, he has combined archival research, interviews and field notes to demystify the romanticized figures of the Armed Forces.

He has approached the subject through a variety of work, some of which can be seen at this exhibition: For instance, there is a work from the 2009 series, *“I long to see some colour...”* (collection of the Devi Art Foundation), featuring a Siachen soldier’s nylon rucksack and 70 photo frames to explore the effects of hallucinations caused by extreme weather conditions and illustrate the colour-scape of the soldiers’ memories of the glacier. “Then, I did work on how fabric and army clothing plays an important role on the glacier. The third series looked at the history of the glacier before it became a conflict zone and how the British explorers and the military were mapping the area. The fourth explores the stories of Ladakhi porters in Siachen,” says Coelho.

There is a particularly poignant photograph, *Tsering Puntsog & Stanzin Padma #1* (2019), which examines the camaraderie between a father and son, both Siachen porters. “Technically, they are not part of the military. But they are part of this conflict because they hail from the region. I look at how their stories intertwine with those of the Siachen conflict,” he says.

Stories from Siachen share space with those of Indian soldiers fighting for the colonial force during the two world wars. For instance, one can see a video of a 2019 performance, *They agreed to eat biscuits and European bread, but our regiment refused*, which focuses on the eating habits of Indian soldiers during WWI. “Through performances and mixed-media works, I want to explore their experiences of fighting a war that was not of their own making,” says Coelho.

One wonders how he chooses a medium for a particular story. Coelho maintains that the medium comes at the end. Eighty per cent of his time goes into gathering materials and stories, accessing archives and conducting interviews. Once that is done, it is an organic decision to use a medium that will best tell the story.

Body-Automaton is on view till 30 September at the JSLH Art Gallery by prior appointment with faculty coordinator Achia Anzi.

