I caught up with Coelho via a Whatsapp call between Melbourne and Mumbai. We talked about how much the coronavirus has changed our lives, how LGBTQI identity affects our work no matter how much we want to avoid it, and how we yearn for a space for those who prefer to be outside of labels. Kiran Bhat: So, let's get the annoying questions out of the way. How are you? How are things over in Bombay? Baptist Coelho: I don't even want to talk about it! I frequently used to keep an eye on the numbers, and then gave up as things looked ok. However, the second wave has hit India very badly and I find myself again surfing through various news channels (local and international). Life

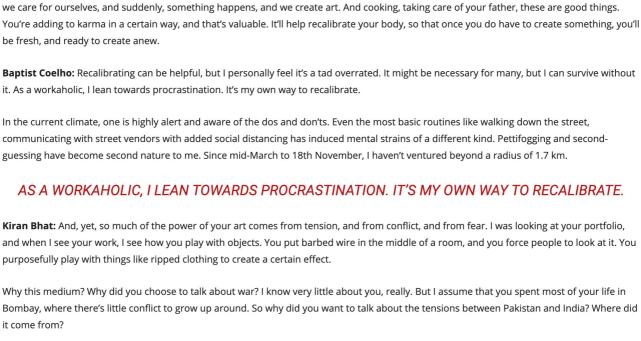
in my neighborhood has gone back to what it looked like in March 2020. The virus is here to stay for a long time and let's hope things get better

if not completely ok. Kiran Bhat: But, all this home time, it must be inspiring you. How has it been affecting your work? Have you been channeling it productively? Baptist Coelho: I don't know whether or not I am trying to address it, to be honest. I spend a lot of my time learning how to cook, taking care of

my father, sanitising hands and surfaces, washing everything from eggs to packaged food; it's like an endless circus of chores. In all this rigmarole, I also had to move to a different place of stay, which was difficult. However, I keep an eye on my projects from time to time and, as we speak, I am redesigning my website.

Tsering Puntsog & Stanzin Padma #1 (2019) Digital print on archival paper

Kiran Bhat: That's completely normal. Work isn't just about putting things out all of the time. We take time for ourselves; we work on ourselves;



The Jungfrau – 3D (2006) Installation with aluminum ducts, metal diffusers and audio. Installation view and detail. Add the words and detail. and a full stop Image courtesy, BIAD, UK

Baptist Coelho: It all started when I was doing the research for my Masters in Arts at BIAD – Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, UK from 2005 to 2006. I dived into it with a specific topic but kept an open mind with no concrete goal. That year, I was exploring how to use air as a medium. I started with nothing but towards the end, I think, I created a mountain of impressions and observations. The university initiated and

When I was in the UK, I was thoroughly immersed and didn't really miss home. When I returned to India towards the end of 2006, I continued my research work and was responding to my immediate surroundings. The chaos of the city and gender trepidations were some of the many questions I was trying to address. As these thoughts were hovering in my mind, there was an online call from the Museum of Contemporary

organised a solo exhibition titled, *air(edge)air*, which included artworks that I had developed during the year.



about?

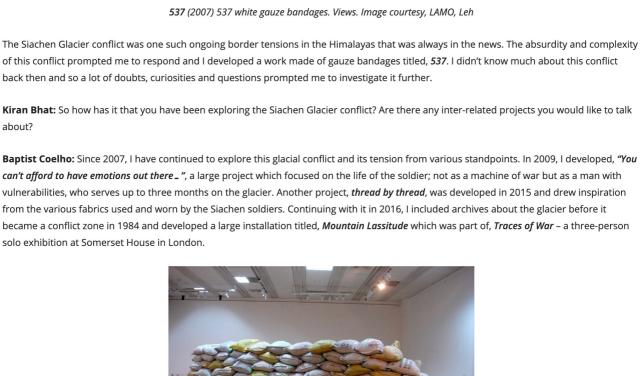
solo exhibition at Somerset House in London.

armies of an undivided India that fought during the two World Wars.

Grammatologie (1967) by Jacques Derrida.

on the forgotten armies and their experience with everyday life in foreign lands.

it come from?



"We waited for days, but no sign of hope..." (2009) Installation with 1 Siachen glacier's supply parachute, various sand filled nylon bags and audio. Installation view. Image courtesy, Visual Arts Gallery, Delhi

The Siachen project had a very strong impact on me on various levels. It also went on to give a very focused direction to my overall practice, which addresses the psychological and physical disruptions caused by war and conflict. In the last few years I've been engaging with the Ladakhi porters that assist Indian soldiers on the glacier. Since 2011, I have also been investigating and developing projects on the forgotten

SPIVAK'S ASSESSMENTS ON FORGETFULNESS, TRUTHS, INTERPRETATIONS AND HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE HAVE BEEN POIGNANT DEPARTURE POINTS FOR MY RESEARCH...

combatants and non-combatants to the First and Second World War across various countries. I quote, "Even in Friedrich Nietzsche's early writings 'forgetfulness' makes its appearance in two opposed forms: as a limitation that protects the human being from the blinding light of an absolute historical memory (that will, among other things, reveal that 'truths' spring from 'interpretations'), as well as an attribute boldly chosen by the philosopher in order to avoid falling into the trap of historical knowledge"

That is an extract from the translator's preface for Of Grammatology (1976). an English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of De la

Spival's assessments on forgetfulness, truths, interpretations and historical knowledge have been poignant departure points for my research

"I thought I had forgotten about it\_" (2011-12) Raster engraving on oak veneered medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and wooden table. View and detail. Image courtesy, Pump House Gallery, London

I quote, "The memory of those soldiers who had served in the now-discredited empire was all but lost in the post-colonial world. The lack of a political identity in 1915 thus served to rob Indian soldiers not just of an acknowledgement of their role or a commemoration of their sacrifice but also of their place in history." An extract by Rana Chhina in the book Indian Voices of the Great War - Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18, 2014 by David Omissi.

Time ago er by er

When I was about something

Between fifteen and twenty, I suppos

And ah ... I don't think so no well its

Possible I suppose yeah... yeah... yeah... yeah...

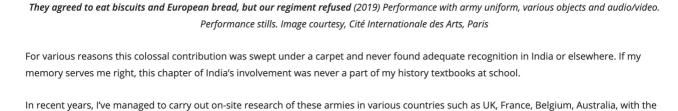
Through a series of dreams, where I was being

Treating them As though they were entertainme

Baptist Coelho: In 2011, during my artist residency at the Delfina Foundation in London, I came across material in army museums and the National Archives that spoke about the British colonial forces during the world wars. An undivided India contributed a large number of

The Rose I (2015) Rose made of white gauze bandages, MDF plywood and synthetic resin adhesive. View and detail. Image courtesy, LAMO, Leh

Kiran Bhat: Very interesting. Would you like to tell me a little bit more about that? Who are these forgotten soldiers exactly?



last one in Singapore and Malaysia in 2019. To date, I have developed various mixed-media artworks to critically address these memories and

THE BODY FOR ME REMAINS A TABULA RASA, A MEDIUM TO COMPLICATE, TO DISTURB AND TO AMBIGUOUSLY SEEP UNDER DELIBERATIONS...

in so many ways this entire exercise has helped me to understand an episode of India's past.

Kiran Bhat: And what about this focus on Ladakhi porters?

their bravery and service.

range of tasks such as transporting kerosene and provisions for the soldiers, helping them climb the glacier, maintaining stocks of supplies and other day-today activities. Unlike the soldiers who've been posted to the glacier, the porters are usually born in and around the Ladakh region and are very adept at navigating the extreme terrain of the Himalayas. Their in-depth knowledge of the mountains also helps with search-andrescue operations.

Tsering Puntsog #1 (2019) Digital print on archival paper

Stanzin Padma #1 (2019) Digital print on archival paper

The porters and their families play a key role in protecting these freezing borders. The idea of doing extensive research on the porters was always brewing in my mind, but it was only in 2015, when I met the porter and Thangka artist, Stanzin Nyentak, at LAMO in Leh, that I actively started my fact-finding. In the past few years, I had travelled to the remote villages in the Nubra Valley and met porters (of various age groups) and their families. These conversations helped me to get a glimpse into their life, their day-to-day struggles on and off the glacier. Their services have spanned many years without adequate acknowledgement by the state. However, in recent years, there has been some recognition for

As we speak, I am developing a large body of mixed-media works on the Siachen porters. In 2019, for my solo exhibition, Body-Automaton, I

Kiran Bhat: You also have a lot of work which focuses on the body, and where you place a lot of emphasis on your space as a corpulence.

presented some photographic works about these porters, among other artworks.

Would you like to share more in regards to your process in merging your physicality with your art?

Baptist Coelho: Since 1984, the Indian government has employed porters to assist the soldiers on the Siachen glacier. A porter's job involves a

"Beneath it all... I am human..." (2009) DVD stills

break-up.

Backside (Kovalam - Kerala) (2007) Digital print on archival paper

Attempts to contain (2015) 10 digital prints on archival paper

You, me and them (2019) Digital print on archival paper

least expect it.

Baptist Coelho: The body as a medium, as a means to process and confront questions, has always found ways to seep into my practice. During my initial years as an artist, I personally wasn't even aware of how much I leaned towards the body as a catalyst. This enabled me to address various queries about air and its intrinsic relationship with the human form. The body clearly surfaced in, Kovalam - Kerala, a series of photographic works which deals with the psychological and physical codes of a gay relationship, its intimate frictions and eventual

As years passed by, the body became a means to have a dialogue with inhibitions and fears within the heroic rhetoric of the armed forces. Siachen uniforms got peeled, bit by bit, to expose vulnerabilities of the soldier's body. This act of unclothing was further developed in, Attempts to contain, a set of 10 photographs. Here a bare body is seen weaving a mesh with

itself to construct a protective fabric that would eventually hold and contain it.

"What have I done to you?", a foot-washing performance in Battersea Park, London was initiated to excavate memories of the Indian British Army during the world wars. To view the performance please click here. And a recent set of works entitled, Camouflage, explores whether it was possible for the sepoys during the world wars to not only conceal their

bodies and location but also their intentions, opinions, fears, and so on.

The body for me remains a tabula rasa, a medium to complicate, to disturb and to ambiguously seep under deliberations where one might

Camouflage #2 (2018) and Camouflage #3 (2018) Digital prints on archival paper

Kiran Bhat: That desire to connect to the unknowable gives your art a certain edge. A lot of casual viewers who look at your work, they see something of Eastern Europe in the aesthetic. That was making me think of something. I was wondering if there's also something somewhat universal about how we construct narratives of war. And perhaps there was something that the Eastern-European references are not like actually Eastern-European references but a certain sub current that comes with depictions of conflict. Or do you believe that your attempt to

Baptist Coelho: It is indeed connected to the land, but there are also exceptions. I want to think that in Pakistan, their feelings, their ways

The land bears witness to all – directly or indirectly, is like a common denominator that knows all and brings everyone together in a certain manner. It would be completely naive of me to make blanket statements, which I fully acknowledge. There will always be differences in

ONE CAN ARGUE THAT THE DESIRE TO ESCAPE THOSE CATCHWORDS IS ALSO A PERFORMANCE IN ITSELF.

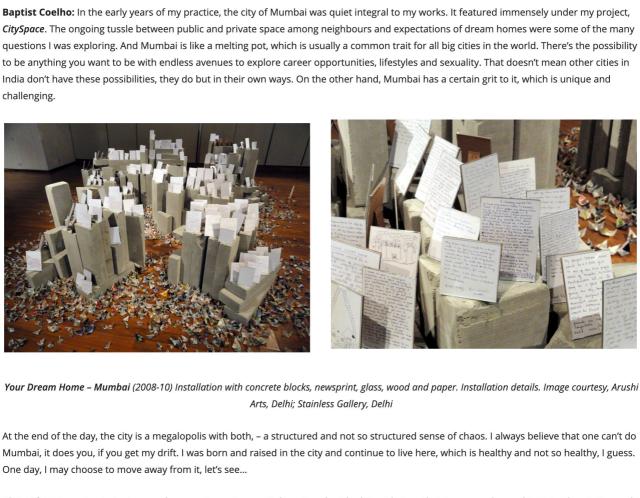
Kiran Bhat: So, you love Bombay, I love Bombay, we both met each other there. How does Bombay shape the artist you are?

bring out the kind of disasters or catastrophes of conflict on civilians is tied directly to a land?

aren't so different from mine. At the end of the day, we were once one country.

language, opinions, views and so on.

challenging.



Kiran Bhat Kiran Bhat is a global citizen formed in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, to parents from Southern Karnataka, in India. He has currently traveled to over 130 countries, lived in 18 different places, and speaks 12 languages. He is primarily known as the author of we of the forsaken world... (Iguana Books, 2020), but he has authored books in four foreign languages, and has had his writing published in The Brooklyn Rail, The Colorado Review, Eclectica, 3AM Magazine, The Radical Art Review, The Chakkar, Mascara Literary Review, and several other places. His list of homes is vast, but his heart and spirit always remains in Mumbai, somehow. He currently lives in Melbourne.

> **ABOUT US** Outcast is a lgbtg+ literary magazine based in South Asia. We aim to bring change via sharing stories, poetry and art that thrust narratives from a local context into the limelight and allow people to understand better and start a conversation that can lead to Contact us:

Website: ☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment. Post Comment

www.baptistcoelho.com | Vimeo | Twitter | Facebook | Instagram \* Unless otherwise mentioned all images are courtesy the Artist and Project 88, Mumbai. TAGS artwork interview **y** G+ ₽ Porphyrian Euphoria (i)

At the end of the day, the city is a megalopolis with both, – a structured and not so structured sense of chaos. I always believe that one can't do Mumbai, it does you, if you get my drift. I was born and raised in the city and continue to live here, which is healthy and not so healthy, I guess. One day, I may choose to move away from it, let's see... Kiran Bhat: I'm going to try to rework my next question, so it doesn't make it look too obvious that I'm a pseudo-psychiatrist at heart. You and I are both gay men, and that affects us in certain ways, whether we like it or not. Do you believe that there are any incidents in your life that occurred because you are gay, which caused you to become the artist you are? Blueys (2016) Installation with various objects and audio/video. Installation details. Image courtesy, Somerset House, London Baptist Coelho: I try to keep away from labels, but also understand that for some it's a matter of convenience to pigeonhole. And for some it's a necessity as it gives a certain context and agency. I am also told that a frequent feature in my work is the body, which for some, leans towards questions around gender identity. I find labels of any kind quite restrictive and they can also be detrimental especially in the arts. As an artist, I want to be independent of anything and everything. One can argue that the desire to escape those catchwords is also a performance in itself. One really has no control over it. Kiran Bhat: Absolutely. And it never does any good for us to escape the body. Because when we try to escape our body, we're usually try to escape into a certain type of body, which is a very privileged, heteronormative, able-bodied, white skinned type of body, which we associate more with the Western parts of the world.

accidentally recorded my long conversation with an immigration officer on my Dictaphone, which was extremely telling but I accidentally deleted that file and that was quite the loss! Another memory from childhood was that for several reasons best known to me, I made a conscious decision not to speak 'Konkani', my mother tongue. However, I ended up understanding the language as I was constantly surrounded Kiran Bhat: I concur, Baptist. It's been fascinating to interview you. I thank you for your time, and I hope that our readers will get something Baptist Coelho, is a visual artist living and working in Mumbai. His focus has been to conjure meaning from psychological and physical

Sweekar The Rainbow Parents Gro Comment:

We're always born into a context, whether we want to align ourselves to that context or not. We may believe that we're in control of our context, or that we exist outside of identity, or out of another person's imagination. But in reality, it's when we've purely and completely imagined ourselves, fully from what we are, that we can be most liberated from this desire to be worldless as a whole. Pompidou, Paris

The truth is that we are born in a certain nexus built on race, caste, class, nationality, part of the world, and they shape us into the artists we are. Even though I write from a global perspective, a lot of people see Hindu narrative in my work, and they feel that sometimes the elements that I imagine come from a perspective different from theirs. I can write about a family in Peru, but something about the way I describe their

family structure and its concerns still has a strong South Indian context to it.

What have we done for you? (2018) Performance with army uniform and various objects. Performance stills. Image courtesy, Hervé Veronese & Centre Baptist Coelho: With a name like mine, when I travel outside the country, I often face the common confusion: "That's not a very Indian-sounding name!" It used to worry me, but in recent years, I appreciate that my name gives me an opportunity to talk about the past Portuguese colonial rule in Goa, where my parents were born. At times, I think I could write a book about my conversations with immigration officers at airports, who can't help but profile me from my arrival in the country. It used to bother me but today it is what it is, not that I accept it, but one goes through it. Many years ago, I once even by it. Baptist Coelho: Likewise. About the Artist disruptions caused by war. Baptist has exhibited in India and worldwide. To view a selection of Baptist Coelho's mixed-media artworks please click here.

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