

NEWS / BLOGS / LIFESTYLE / Untold stories of conflict

LIFESTYLE

## Untold stories of conflict

August 10, 2023, 4:02 PM IST / Sahar Zaman in Living With Arts, Lifestyle, TOI



**Sahar Zaman**

Sahar Zaman has been on the arts beat long enough to know that arts and artists often boggle people's minds. She sees herself as a translator of the creative works in music, d...  
MORE

What can temporary paper planes, that we used to make in school as kids, possibly be doing in a world class museum? I wondered, during one of my visits to the World Heritage Transport Museum in Manesar. I ended up sitting and folding a few planes along with a top contemporary artist, back in 2013. The artist was Baptist Coelho and he was promoting his philosophy on the importance of these planes. The project encourages children to fold paper planes, incorporate their dreams and create artworks using their folded planes and selected objects. He took this idea to schools across the world since 2006, to 16 countries like Cambodia, Belgium, Bulgaria, India, Indonesia, Norway, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, UAE, etc.



I dare admit, that it was an almost meditative process for me, to fold some of these planes with him and stick them up the wall leading to a window. His philosophy actually worked. I remember him telling me, "It doesn't matter if my work is fragile or not permanent. What matters is how it makes you feel, what it changed inside you."

Looking behind the obvious and finding new layers of meaning is what Baptist does in his art practice. It's a lot like what journalists like me try to read between the lines or look beyond the headlines.

Today, Baptist is out with his monograph which is an overview of his works since 2006. More than a beautiful piece hung on your walls, Baptist has mostly been focussed with creating art that educates us on grave issues that aren't spoken about as often. His work addresses unspoken traumas of past wars and present conflicts. He also invites his viewers to observe the history of conflict with empathy and concern.

In an apt partnership, the In Flanders Fields Museum in Belgium, which is dedicated to the study of the First World War, has decided to publish his monograph. His latest work is a mixed media installation titled in Punjabi, *'Agar is dharti tay koyi jannat hai, o ay hi hai, ay hi hai, ay hi hai, ay hi hai.'* (If there is a paradise on this earth, it is this, it is this, it is this)

The original lines of these were famously written in Persian by poet Amir Khusrau to describe the beauty of India during the Mughal rule. But the Punjabi version of this verse was written in Brighton on January 16, 1915 by an injured Sikh soldier to his family back home in India. He was fighting for the British on the Western Front in World War 1. His words disguise and suppress his pain and exploitation by the British during the war, amidst beautiful propaganda photos of the make-shift hospital that sported a gigantic chandelier inside the Royal Pavillion. The idea was to convince families back home that this was a lavish military hospital for the wounded.

Baptist's work is inspired by this grand chandelier as a brutal camouflage to the Indian Army's pain. The artist's chandelier is made up of iron grids, wire mesh, sharp safety pins, bandages, syringes, pipes, knives and broken bed pans.

Similar empathy for those serving in the Army can be seen from his show in 2009, titled, "You can't afford to have emotions out there...". It was dedicated to the hardships of the Indian soldiers serving at the Siachen Glacier, one of the world's highest front line at a height of about 6,500 meters. The exhibition focused on the life of the soldier not as a machine of war, but as a man with vulnerabilities, who serves up to three months on the glacier.

As toothpaste freezes and speech blurs in sub-zero temperatures, frostbite and chilblains are common. The cold causes more deaths to the soldiers than the bullets of the enemy.

An installation of army sleeping bags, military decorations recreated using trousers blankets, boots and jackets used by soldiers, photographs showing the intertwining of the human body to indicate frostbite – have all been an attempt to start a dialogue on the real sufferings of our soldiers which does not get reported in the news media.

This is just a glimpse of the artist's oeuvre, a deeper understanding of which is offered in the monograph. While the artist continues to delve deeper into the world of untold stories, the monograph offers a selection of 56 artworks and ten essays about him written by academics, curators, historians and a mountaineer.

### BLOGS BY SAHAR ZAMAN

- 1 India's irreplaceable 'Hunar'
- 2 The return of art activism
- 3 Why shouldn't art be fun?

### TOP VOICES

- Dia Mirza**  
TOI Edit Page,Voices
- Bachi Karkaria**  
Erratica,TOI Edit Page,Tracking
- Jug Suraiya**  
Juggle-Bandhi
- Speaking Tree**  
TOI Edit Page

