



'NJ9842 #12024', monotype on archival paper

SATELLETI.K, IEPER

Artist Baptist Coelho uses bandages as a metaphor for war

Through his multidisciplinary practice, Baptist Coelho looks at the war and the everyday

Avantika Bhuyan

There is something about the photograph *Bandages-Bullets#1* that makes you keep coming back to it. At first, it seems like an image of a series of rolled bandages arranged in rows. On closer look, the visual of soiled bandages seems to resemble rows of bullets. And that's exactly the message that multidisciplinary artist Baptist Coelho hopes to convey. "The photograph captures a paradoxical relationship between the bandages as tools of healing, and bullets as instruments of war," writes Coelho as the description of the work.

This photograph is part of the artist's ongoing multimedia series, *Bandages-Bullets*, and was developed during his year-long residency at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium, starting in 2022. It was shown until last week at Coelho's solo exhibition, *It still hasn't ended*, at the Bâtiment IV, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg. Preparations are afoot to take this travelling show to other cities in Europe.

Bandages-Bullets carries forth the artist's ongoing engagement with the paradox of war and the everyday—its lasting imprint on histories, cultures and personal lives of soldiers. Coelho, born in Mumbai and currently living and working between Ypres and Paris, explores different facets of this idea through installation, photos, sculpture, print, drawing, collage, audio/video and performance.

His exploration of war in everyday life started in 2007 when he returned to India after a Master's in Arts from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, UK. He had been asked to respond to the idea of *The Peace Project* by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, US. "The exhibition, through installations and performance art, explored issues of overpopulation, pollution, war and more, which threatened the idea of peace," states a 2016 article in *Mint*. As part of that, he created 537, a set of white gauze bandages rolled and assembled together. "Using bandages as a metaphor, Coelho is trying to heal the pain and wounds of the soldiers posted in Siachen," it further stated.

Siachen has been a constant presence in his work. He started going to Ladakh in 2007 and with each trip, he tried to get closer to the glacier by navigating remote villages in the Nubra Valley. He wanted to broaden his understanding of the conflict that takes place in Siachen, the coldest battlefield on earth located at 5,753m, by speaking to the locals, travellers and officers. This has resulted in a large body of work created over time. While some of it was shown at the *Traces of War* exhibition at the Somerset House, London in 2016, a vast series of both recent and previous multimedia works were exhibited at *It still hasn't ended*.

Those who want to delve deeper into Coelho's artistic process, and the connections he makes between war and healing to create critical points of view, can now read a monograph published by the In Flanders Fields Museum in 2023. This publication not only offers an overview of his works from 2006 till today, but also contains 10 essays by academics, curators, historians and a mountaineer. The monograph—the first for Coelho—is available for sale at the museum's webshop.

It features 56 works, including those based on exchanges of letters between soldiers and families. "For the Siachen Glacier project, I had various conversations with former army officers. At the British Library in London, I started looking at Indian soldiers' presence in the World Wars based on reports of letters exchanged between them and their families. Various artworks look at how thoughts and day-to-day conversations were recorded in these letters," says Coelho. He feels that an artist needs to constantly reflect on past and present happenings while hoping for the future.

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