

LET ART SET THE NARRATIVE

In a world of soft power, it is in any establishments' interest to promote new versions of art of its young artists.



The business of tourism, especially in these parts, has tried to maintain a discreet distance from art that remotely dares to make a comment on social issues or even political circumstances, howsoever objective it might be in its presentation.

Often discussions with the usual pundits (or czars, if you please) of the art world on how it could promote a destination, nation or civilization leads to a sort of impasse. It stops at the argument that art is the holy cow which must never be used as a tool for promoting any 'ism' or narrative. Any effort to use art to transmit some social message, howsoever kosher, is anathema to some purists.

The young do not have such boundaries- in fact they thrive on using creativity to respond to happenings.

It is in this context that a recent published monograph by an Indian artist working in Belgium, Baptist Coelho, piques curiosity. It also, unintentionally, delineates a direction which could create a whole new niche for promoters of either tourism in general or soft power of India in particular.

Mumbai born Baptist had previously won several awards including the prestigious Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2016. He also performed and exhibited his works worldwide such as at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, Pump House Gallery, and London.

One of his noted works was in which he interpreted an online satellite view of the Siachen glacier through deftly arranged bandages. Using bandages as a metaphor, Coelho's installation tried to convey the pain and wounds of the soldiers posted in

Siachen. He actually went to Ladakh to speak with officers, mountaineers and locals to understand the mindscape.

Beyond that particular exhibit, his art is an exploration of war and its human toll which is a universal story. His installations and photographs focus on articulating unspoken stories in war and conflict. He has exhibited worldwide in museums and galleries and his creativity has been noted for its global appeal. In his creative pursuits Baptist uses interdisciplinary projects with diverse mediums such as installation, photography, sculpture, print, drawing, collage, audio-video and performance.

Now this monograph of Coelho is an overview of his works from 2006 to date which includes a selection of fifty-six artworks, ten essays by international academics, curators, historians and a mountaineer, and a conversation with the artist himself. While the book was published and printed by the In Flanders Fields Museum, Belgium in June, 2023 after his year-long residency there, it speaks a global language that speaks beyond the context of his immediate works.

While an artist by definition actually transcends national boundaries and represents more of a human canvas than a geographical angle, his work definitely carries the impressions of his milieu. To put it blandly, it also highlights the background of the work and opens a door towards creating interest in the subject, location and origin of it all.

Baptist's work as an artist, though never intended that way, does create a space for the Indian story to be told in an international idiom.

A year from now a massive and ambitious museum, probably larger the Louvre, is opening at the stately Rajpath at New Delhi. It will bring the story of India's millennia old civilisation to the world in a modern setting.

Since art transmits a story better to the audience, it opens up the usually receptive mind of people to appreciate contemporary situations and developments in a broader and more perceptive sense. That's good for promoting sensitivity. It's good for developing a confident narrative as well.

Museums displays offer interpretations which visitors interpret on their level of engagement. The narrative, however, is nudged on by the exhibits and their display through careful curation. Any museum therefore is a subtle vehicle of soft power, creating an influence with its own agenda. The necessity of incorporating art, especially the installation form, can be an ideal way to bring greater relevance to any such project.

Wonder if the exhibits in this truly ambitious upcoming project will dare to go beyond artefacts? Will the museum delve into installations that reach out with a more contemporary idiom?

Baptist Coelho's works could indeed provide an example how.

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