

THE last time we saw Baptist Coelho he was wielding a camera. Today it's replaced with hammer and nails. The artist, dressed in shorts and a collared tee, has not switched to carpentry but is willing to get his hands dirty working with carpenters and electricians to set up his solo exhibition which he calls "You can't afford to have emotions out there...". The hot noon air and the whirring of electric saws and hammering nails set the backdrop for this behind-the-scenes peek at the artist at work.

With just two days to set up his solo, Coelho only stops for a coffee and then he is off again, lugging iron rods, lights and props. The slightly built 32-year-old artist confesses to an acute aversion to cold. His trip to the Siachen Glacier seems to have cured his fears. "As a civilian, I could not make it to the glacier, but I reached Panamic, the closest site to Siachen and set up camp and began talking to soldiers who patrol the world's highest battlefield. Of course, it was done on conditions of anonymity," says Coelho whose sortie to the icy Himalayas resulted in a solo show of photographs, videos and installations, all inspired from his trip. Capturing his visceral experience of the paralyzing cold and the fight to survive, the exhibition is Coelho's biggest so far. The show is on at Project 88 from August 5 to 26.

"Soldiers shared with me how losing fingers and toes was an everyday occupational hazard. How craving for fresh milk, a change from condensed milk, could become a preoccupation. How missing family was a pain buried deep inside and how daily ablutions like shaving was not possible.

Man in uniform

Artist Baptist Coelho's take on soldiers, martyrdom and his shift from advertising to art

Drinking water was a ritual that had to start two hours before the ice melted," says the alumnus of the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD).

His stubble and exhausted expression belie that he is a bright new star in the art fraternity. Evidently, Coelho has no airs on the buzz he is making. His stint as a

graphic designer in advertising has primed him visually but the Mumbai-born lad was hesitant to call himself an artist.

"I began to explore and research subjects that interested me through photo-documentation in 2006. I found it gave me a thrill that surpassed my work in advertising. It was a plunge to give up a regular



job but once I did it, I realised I was meant to do this," he says with a smile. That he has had several public art projects, gallery exhibitions and site-specific work around the world, is evidence that the art fraternity share a similar belief.

A coffee break and Coelho sits down to fiddle with the DVD projector that plays a very interesting performance-based video work, titled "Beneath it I am human". In this, Coelho removes six layers of clothing in a stop-animation piece to reveal the vulnerable and naked flesh beneath the layers of 'armour'. "I wanted to reveal the human side of the soldiers. I think somewhere we have forgotten that they are not impenetrable machines," he explains.

Getting down on his hands and knees, Coelho supervises the building of a tent made from a metal armature and canvas. "One of the soldiers I interviewed said he felt most comfortable in a tent. So I tried to recreate my idea of comfort by making the interior of the tent like a hotel bedroom, with lights, pillows and bed linen," says Coelho pulling out the props from one of the several blue plastic bags that scatter the gallery. Of course, it's an ironic tongue-in-cheek comment about the hardships faced on the battle front.

"When a lady whose father died at the front walked me through my show explaining how each work touched her I knew that I had managed to convey my thoughts."

INSPIRATIONS

Joseph Beuys, Carl Andrea, Richard Serra, Richard Long, Gustav Klimt