

scarred veteran of tantrums. "Recently we were in Rajasthan for a Nagesh

"They were ruined. Perhaps god wants us to keep feeding the filmwallas till eternity."

"Now my area will look good," he said in a satisfied voice, and sprayed on a fluorescent red heart on the wall.

(Painting will go on from 9.00 am to 8.00 pm on Sunday)



Pronoti Datta | TNN

What tempts one to become a soldier? What's it like to patrol a border when the temperature is minus 60 degrees? How does it feel to stare at an uninterrupted expanse of snow day in and day out? Questions such as these were running through visual artist Baptist Coelho's mind when he embarked on his first solo show in Mumbai, *You can't afford to have emotions out there*, two years ago.

The show, which has got mixed reviews, is on at Colaba's Project 88 till August 26. It's thoughtful and extremely well put together if a little earnest. *You can't afford to have emotions out there* imagines what life is like for soldiers on the Siachen glacier. Coelho, who studied at the LS Raheja School of Art in Mumbai and

An art show freezes images of a soldier's life high up on the glacier

Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, has previously exhibited in England and Delhi. In 2007, he participated in Peace Project, an initiative of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver. It was this proj-

COLD WAR

ect that got Coelho thinking about Indian soldiers.

The first exhibit you see in the show is a propped-up assemblage of a soldier's stained and battered outfit. Nearby is a bottle full of

stones, each of which represents a soldier's memories. In a note by its side, the soldier writes that he misses his little niece.

To get an idea of the conditions that soldiers operate in, Coelho travelled to Ladakh and surrounding regions. Siachen has a climate that's far harsher than what Ladakh offers but Coelho said that without having any army connections he found it difficult to travel to the glacier. "The entire project is about understanding," he said. "I was a civilian trying to understand



BOOT CAMP Baptist Coelho collected objects used by jawans

as much as I could."

Since he couldn't go to Siachen, Coelho travelled to

Panamik, the closest a civilian can get to the glacier. He had to imagine the region be-

yond that. "I travelled from Panamik to the glacier via narratives of truck drivers, mountaineers, soldiers," Coelho explained. "As an artist it was interesting to illustrate their experiences."

One of the exhibits is a sound recording of an interview with an officer in which he talks about the routine of life in Siachen. As there are soldiers from across the country encamped on the glacier, the base gets newspapers in every language. However the papers reach them three days late. Because they're so hungry for news, the officer said, they read papers over and over again, even the classifieds. "Because your mind

wants to do something to get rid of hallucinations, loneliness," Coelho said.

Adjacent to the sound piece is a cold display unit, the kind that you see in bakeries. It's stuffed with objects from the terrain—an abandoned ice pick, a piece of bursera, a shrub that's used to light a fire—and every day things from a soldier's life—gloves, rolled-up newspapers, snow boots. After listening to the officer and observing the objects, Coelho hopes that the viewer will get an inkling of the army's harsh living conditions.

One of the exhibits, however, is at odds with the others. In a tent is a mattress covered in expensive sheets. Coelho has arranged towels and little bottles of shampoo and cream, the kind you get in hotel bathrooms. The idea, the artist explained, is to show relative notions of comfort.

The soldier he met told him that they found the tent perfectly comfortable. When Coelho tested a two-man tent that's really adequate for just one person, he couldn't believe the soldiers slept in them. "That's when I started to intervene with the work," he said. "I'm questioning politics of what we've made our soldiers do."

The process of gathering information was not easy. Coelho said he was met with suspicion in Ladakh when locals thought he was asking too many questions. "I'd heard a lot of stories of people being investigated," he said. "I've never seen so much army presence in my life." As a defence Coelho carried with him a newspaper clipping that showed he's an artist. It might sound feeble, he said, but it made his passage much easier.