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Steve Mumford: *The Battle in Baquba*, 2006, oil on linen, 60 by 188 inches; at Postmasters.

Steve Mumford at Postmasters

In his first show of oil paintings based on his four trips to Iraq during 2003 and 2004, Steve Mumford depicts fraught scenes—a sniper on a roof, amputees practicing archery, a dying boy—in a straightforward realist style with an extreme degree of strength and feeling. Unlike the numerous on-site ink and watercolor sketches that he has exhibited and published [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '04], the nine new oils slow time down, on occasion turning a frozen moment into an epic encounter.

The Battle in Baquba (2006), the largest work on view at 5 feet high and over 15 feet wide, re-creates Mumford's experience riding with the 2/63rd Armored Battalion on June 24, 2004, during a mission to reclaim the titular city from insurgents. While written accounts of this incident by Mumford and others highlight the ferocious combat, the painting, set on a multi-street intersection on a clear sunny day, also reveals the land and life that exist beyond the fighting. The wide-angle panorama recedes to a distant horizon, showing the flat terrain of Baquba. We see date palm trees; buildings and homes lining the five visible streets; and the poles and wires of electrical infrastructure. Formally, the light and two-point perspective recall, surprisingly, a Rackstraw Downes painting.

A column of armored vehicles and tanks curves through the foreground. The vehicle in which Mumford traveled (as he notes in a gallery handout) is almost flush with the bottom edge of the canvas, bringing the viewer into the picture space. Details such as handprints and splatters of mud on the camouflaged side of this carrier underscore the work's firsthand nature. Soldiers in open hatches prepare to fire weapons. Clouds of smoke rise in different areas: thick gray from a burning car; toxic-looking browns and yellows from an explosion on the right. The climax of the scene, somewhat buried in the middle ground, is the flight of a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) caught in midair. The RPG heads toward a tank in the foreground with the name Ali Baba and the 3 Thieves on its gun. Tracing the course of the grenade back into the picture, we see an insurgent crouched in a doorway firing his weapon.

Two other works mesmerize through the sensitive attention to facial expression. In *Going Back In* (2006), four soldiers are crowded together in an armored car's interior, the near darkness depicted with an impressive range of greens and blue-blacks. The emotive body language of the men has the effect of humanizing the seemingly invulnerable figure of the soldier. In particular Mumford imparts compassion through his rendering of the deeply contemplative face of the man

whose helmet reads "Hartley."

The young man in *Dying Insurgent* (2005) sits on a smoke-swept street with his leg twisted abnormally behind him, awash in a glaze of bloodred paint. Mumford does not portray a grimace of suffering but the appearance of preternatural calm as the boy meets the eyes of the viewer.

The smallest work in the show, at 20 by 48 inches, shows a man looking out over the Tigris River in Baghdad. Although he is turned slightly away from the viewer, I instantly recognized Steven Vincent, the art critic (for this magazine and others) and journalist who was murdered in Basra. The painting is a stirring tribute to Mumford's friend who—like Mumford—felt compelled to go to Iraq after the March 2003 invasion.

—Cathy Lebowitz

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