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Sketches From the Front: An Artist's Dispatches, Rendered in Ink and Paint

By CAROL KINO

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Though contemporary American art often flirts with politics, it is not usually noted for its head-on engagement with war. Yet some of the most compelling commentary on Iraq has come from a New York painter, Steve Mumford, who has been embedded with military units in hot spots like Baquba, Tikrit and Baghdad on and off since April 2003.

Mr. Mumford has posted frequent dispatches on [the Web magazine Artnet](#). Each is accompanied by drawings and paintings – many made on the spot – illustrating people and places in the story. Titled "Baghdad Journal," the project strikes a somewhat incongruous note amid the magazine's usual fare of reviews, gossip and party pictures.

The 16th and final entry, to be posted this week, chronicles the attempts of the Third Brigade of the First Cavalry Division to quell insurgents in Baghdad in late October, toward the end of Mr. Mumford's last visit. He opens with a description of the city and the military blimp that hovers above it, gathering intelligence.

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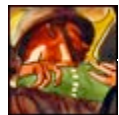
Artwork from Mr. Mumford's "Baghdad Journal" includes "Artillery Crew in No. CA165."

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"I often imagined the view from up there," he writes, "especially on one afternoon in mid-October when I found myself running across Talaa Square with Third Platoon just after a young soldier had been killed by a sniper."

The dispatch ends with the memorial service for Sgt. Jack Hennessy of the First Battalion, Ninth Cavalry, killed by friendly fire from an Iraqi National Guard unit. As a first sergeant in the battalion calls out the dead soldier's name a third and final time, the company falls silent. "In the quiet that follows I find my own tears falling onto my drawing pad," Mr. Mumford writes. The accompanying drawing, a modest sketch made with sepia ink, shows a soldier saluting before Sergeant Hennessy's helmet, rifle and boots.

Now 44, Mr. Mumford had been comfortably embedded in the London and New York gallery worlds. He was known for paintings that seemed to pit two disparate Americas – wilderness and society – against each other by depicting, for example, a car seen against a sublime landscape or a wild animal about to pounce at a house. The work was technically impressive but creatively confused. Like many contemporary artists, Mr. Mumford seemed fascinated by 19th-century American art but stymied by the task of making it new.

Yet in the end, that art helped set him free. Mr. Mumford says his inspiration for the project stemmed directly from his admiration for the painter Winslow Homer, who was sent to the front during the Civil War to sketch for Harper's Weekly.

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Another painting from Mr. Mumford's "Artillery Crew in Paladin, Baqubah."

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James F. Smith/Boston Globe
Steve Mumford in Tikrit, drawing an infantry unit that is destroying Iraqi surface-to-air missiles.

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Mr. Mumford was already working on a Vietnam series when the war in Iraq began. By that time, the subject of war had become "an all-consuming interest," he said. "It sort of hit me: why don't I go over there?"



Boys at an army base, hoping to earn money running soldiers' errands.

He called around to military bases in an attempt to have himself embedded, but his efforts were fruitless. Nor did he get far with magazines and newspapers: the only taker was Artnet, which gave him a press pass. Eventually, Mr. Mumford said, "I realized the only way to do it was to buy a ticket." (He financed the project with sales of his own work and with a little help from his wife, the painter Inka Essenhigh.)

Mr. Mumford made his first trip in April 2003. After arriving in Kuwait, he hitched a ride to Baghdad with a French reporter. He soon happened across an approachable army unit patrolling the banking district. He hit it off with the commanding officer, Lt. Col. Scott Rutter (now retired and a military analyst for Fox News), and within minutes, Mr. Mumford found himself embedded.

After this visit, he returned to Iraq three times, spending 10 and a half months there in total, much of it in Baghdad. Like an embedded journalist he outfitted himself with special protective gear – flak jacket, helmet, goggles and earplugs – when accompanying soldiers on patrols. He also carried brushes, ink, watercolors and drawing pads along with his notebook.

Like Winslow Homer before him, Mr. Mumford spent most of his time at military bases, chronicling the routine, monotony and constant togetherness of soldiers' daily lives. Often they are seen dozing on cots, doing paperwork, watching television or playing cards. But he also shows them standing guard, attending neighborhood council meetings, searching homes and hunched inside tanks, tensely watching the road.

Though he had not had much contact with the military before, Mr. Mumford said, he came away with strongly favorable feelings. "Most of the soldiers are really trying to do the right thing," he said. "I wanted to do them justice because I was really impressed."



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