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

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On his last three visits, he also spent time exploring Baghdad, making drawings of the people he encountered. He said he had felt relatively safe until his last trip, when he began to sense he was being watched. For the most part, the people he met seemed to have regarded him as a curiosity. "Iraqis are so sweet and so forgiving," he said, "that even though they may resent the U.S. Army being there, most of them are sort of tickled to see an American."

Mr. Mumford also became friends with several Iraqi artists, who aided his deeper exploration of the city. In one dispatch, he discusses contemporary Iraqi art. During Saddam Hussein's time, he writes, the prevailing trend was abstraction, "a convenient technique for a time when all narrative content was suspect."

With such broad scope, "Baghdad Journal" differs from most journalistic endeavors. The writing, full of anecdotes and visual details, reads nothing like a news article. Nor does it resemble a blog. Though he took working photographs and made sketches and notes on the spot, Mr. Mumford often fleshed out his writing and drawings later, sometimes

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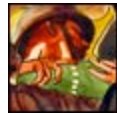
Artwork from Mr. Mumford's "Baghdad Journal" includes "Artillery Crew in No. CA165."

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to New York to finish and file dispatches. And then, of course, there is the project's raison d'être: the paintings themselves, all elegantly composed and coolly direct, yet strikingly different from one another in both subject matter and technique. Some were obviously made quickly, with ink and watercolor on paper. Others are more complex, fully worked in gouache, watercolor and oil. These Mr. Mumford painted later, working from snapshots – an approach he believes is similar to that of Homer, who seems to have used his own sketches to compose elaborate engravings of large-scale battle scenes. (Mr. Mumford plans to make his own large-scale oils in future.)

The very act of drawing often led to deeper engagement, with soldiers and civilians alike. "Because I would be sitting there drawing for so long," Mr. Mumford said, "everyone around me could see what I was doing, so there was none of the fear of the photograph. A lot of the time Iraqis who might not like their photograph taken would be happy to have me make a drawing, and this would lead to conversation."

Seen on their own without much writing, as they were in Mr. Mumford's solo show last fall at the Postmasters gallery in Chelsea, the drawings perplexed some critics because the Iraq depicted seems relatively tranquil. But after pointing out that he wasn't in Falluja, Mr. Mumford counters that this was the Iraq he found. Though the situation deteriorated over the course of his visits and anti-Americanism increased, he said that "90 percent of the

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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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time I was there it was a relatively peaceful situation, where people were trying to make the best of a difficult place."



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

Within the art world, which tends to operate under its own rules of engagement, there has also been unease about the illustrative aspect of the work, and for some it lacks the expected political edge. "I think it's difficult for them to look at what I'm doing because I don't take an antiwar position," Mr. Mumford said. (A selection of his drawings is on view at White Columns in the West Village, through Jan. 30.)

His own position changed over the course of his travels. He initially went to Iraq convinced that the war was a huge blunder, and now he is on the fence about whether the occupation can succeed. As he put it, "The Bush government made some really insane mistakes." Yet he began to understand the invasion differently after hearing firsthand about life under Mr. Hussein. "My consciousness was raised by the Iraqis themselves," he said.



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