

Person of the Week: Steve Mumford

Combat Artist Continues Proud Tradition in Iraq

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New York artist Steve Mumford until recently was a combat artist in Iraq. He was embedded -- just like news reporters and photographers -- with the Army's Third Infantry Division out of Fort Stewart, Ga.

"I've been trying to paint or depict scenes that show some sort of dramatic narratives involving human emotions," said Mumford, who started drawing as a child. "Probably that's what attracted me to the war. In a sense, war is the ultimate dramatic human narrative -- certainly one of them."

When Mumford arrived in Baghdad, the city had already fallen to American forces. He spent a couple of days getting his bearings, found the Third ID, and approached the unit's commander.

"I kind of shouted over the noise of the engines of the Bradley what I wanted to do," said Mumford. "I told him I was an artist. And he seemed interested so he said, 'Yeah, jump on.'"

Mumford would paint and sketch whenever the unit stopped moving. When it was too dangerous, he would snap a quick photograph and paint when he reached safety.

"When the battle was going on, I stayed below in the armored personnel carrier and passed up ammunition," he said. "I took some photographs by holding the camera up just above the lip of the carrier and photographed what I could. Basically, it was incredibly loud and quite scary."

As many artists will attest, there is nothing like a sketch pad to attract the curious. In Mumford's case, it was a way to meet Iraqis.

"I would have a small crowd of Iraqis around me every time I would start to draw," he said. "There was kind of an interaction between me and the people of Baghdad, which was a lot of fun and usually led to another drawing. Usually somebody would see me and invite me to come over and have tea with him, and I would wind up getting about six good drawings out of a good day like that."

Mumford's paintings and sketches include the mundane -- such as people playing Dominoes -- to the moving -- like a memorial service for a fallen soldier.

"Most people in the room were crying eventually -- including me," he said, looking at the memorial painting.

Tradition of Combat Artists

Mumford is part of a great tradition. Every country that has gone to war -- including Britain, France, Russia

and Canada -- has had combat artists. Mumford says he was influenced by Winslow Homer, an artist who rose to fame during the Civil War.

After the world wars, however, combat artists were largely replaced by combat photographers.

"Part of what I'd like to do is to revive an interest" in artists, Mumford said, "because I think that art can bring a lot that photography can't."

After spending more than 10 months in Iraq, Mumford felt it was time to leave.

"The security situation in Baghdad was rapidly deteriorating," he said. "It was harder and harder to leave the hotel. I felt increasingly like I was being watched."

Today, at home in New York City, he is finishing some of the work he started overseas. In every way, he says, it was an extraordinary experience.

"It was actually fascinating," he said. "We did everything from stopping bank robberies that were in progress to checking on other battalions strewn around Baghdad. I didn't know what I was going to find when I got to Iraq, but I certainly found a lot of subject matter that I think I am going to be chewing over for years to come."

Mumford's artwork can be found at www.artnet.com/magazine/features/baghdadjournal.asp.

Peter Jennings filed this report for "World News Tonight."

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