



Steve Mumford on Painting the War

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NEW YORK—New York-based artist **Steve Mumford** garnered national recognition in the press for his "Baghdad Journal"—a series of watercolors and drawings he created as an embedded artist with the U.S. military in Iraq between 2003 and 2004. He published 16 of those artworks, along with written accounts of his experience, on Artnet, and he also created a book, *Baghdad Journal: An Artist in Occupied Iraq* (Drawn and Quarterly) in 2005.

Now Mumford teaches a course at the **School of Visual Arts** entitled *The Mythology of War*. On November 1, he will give the keynote speech for the school's public symposium "The Art of War," and in February his work will be featured in the exhibition "Testimony to War: Art from the Battlegrounds of Iraq" at SVA. He took a few minutes to talk to ARTINFO about the symposium and his experiences in Iraq.

What issues do you plan to address in your keynote speech at SVA?

I'm going to talk about my work, not only as an artist embedded in Iraq, but also my most recent set of drawings, which I did in March and April of this year when I spent three weeks at the Baghdad ER and a week on Haifa Street. I also want to talk a little about approaching art from a propagandistic purpose versus approaching it with a more open mind.

Which of those categories does your work fit into?

I was not making art to protest the war, nor was I making art to further the "war on terror." I just wanted to see what it was like and document it.

You documented the war in Iraq through drawings and watercolors during four trips between 2003 and 2004, plus your non-embedded trip this year. How long did you stay each time?

The shortest was one month and the longest was five months. I was there a year in total.

How does an artist drawing or painting scenes from the war differ from the way photojournalists would capture it?

A photojournalist snaps a picture. What I'm doing is sitting there, making decisions about everything that goes down on the page. That takes at least 45 minutes, so everything is also changing in front of me, making things even more complicated. A drawing is much more subjective documentation than a photograph, and it reflects those changes and the sensibilities of the artist.

Why was capturing the war through an artist's eyes important to you?

Anything that enhances our understanding of the war in Iraq, particularly coming from people who aren't the usual talking heads, like reporters, is a useful thing.

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Courtesy the artist

Steve Mumford, "Shi'ite marchers demonstrating for speedy elections, Baghdad" (2004)

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Courtesy the artist

Steve Mumford, "Spc. Jose Lopez at Bravo Co.'s front gate, Ramadi" (2004)

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Art has kind of stepped away from its representational role in the last 150 years because of photography, but anything this important—the blood and treasure of the nation—is important enough to include artists and have them record it in their own ways. There is virtually no contact between the art world and the military. The Army and the Marines should be actively recruiting artists through grant programs whether they're in combat or not.

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Where did your initial interest in war come from?

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I've been fascinated by the topic of war for a long time. I'm old enough to remember the Vietnam War as a child, and seeing pictures of the My Lai massacre in *Life* magazine. Winslow Homer's work also interests me a great deal.

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How did you get to Baghdad the first time?

By the time I went, the embedding process was long over, so I had no idea if I would be able to get in. I flew to Kuwait and got a ride with a group of French reporters who were on their way to Baghdad. That was just after Baghdad had fallen. Once I got there I just found myself at a hotel and started walking around until I encountered some military units, hooked up with one of the patrols, and started drawing.

How were you treated by the Iraqis and the U.S. soldiers?

Generally very well—I wouldn't say I never felt like I was in danger, but for the most part I felt well treated. I felt safe. Up until the end of 2004, I was still walking around Baghdad on my own or with groups of Iraqis. Iraqis are pretty hospitable.

As for the U.S. military, the difference is that they were very focused on the mission they had to do. They were always helpful and polite, but I never felt like I got really close to them, probably because I'm a civilian. I did feel pretty accepted, like they understood what I was doing.

How many artworks came out of the experience?

A lot—at least 700 drawings and watercolors.

Tell us about the upcoming exhibition "Testimony to War: Art from the Battlegrounds of Iraq."

All of the work is by veterans or people like me who were there. It covers a wide variety of responses, from Michael Fay, who is a gung-ho, straightforward Marine combat artist, to Aaron Hughes, who is an anti-war artist and a veteran and whose work is in some ways propagandistic. I'll probably show about 20 pieces.

What kind of changes did you see in Iraq in the three years between your last embedded trip and your visit this year?

My overall impression is that things are getting a lot better. Haifa Street, just outside the Green Zone, used to be one of the worst neighborhoods, but during my last trip I didn't hear a single shot. The Iraqi nationals, backed by the U.S. military, have been successful at driving out insurgents. It looks like things have taken a really remarkable turn for the better, which was completely unexpected. I'm feeling hopeful for the first time. I hope it will last.


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