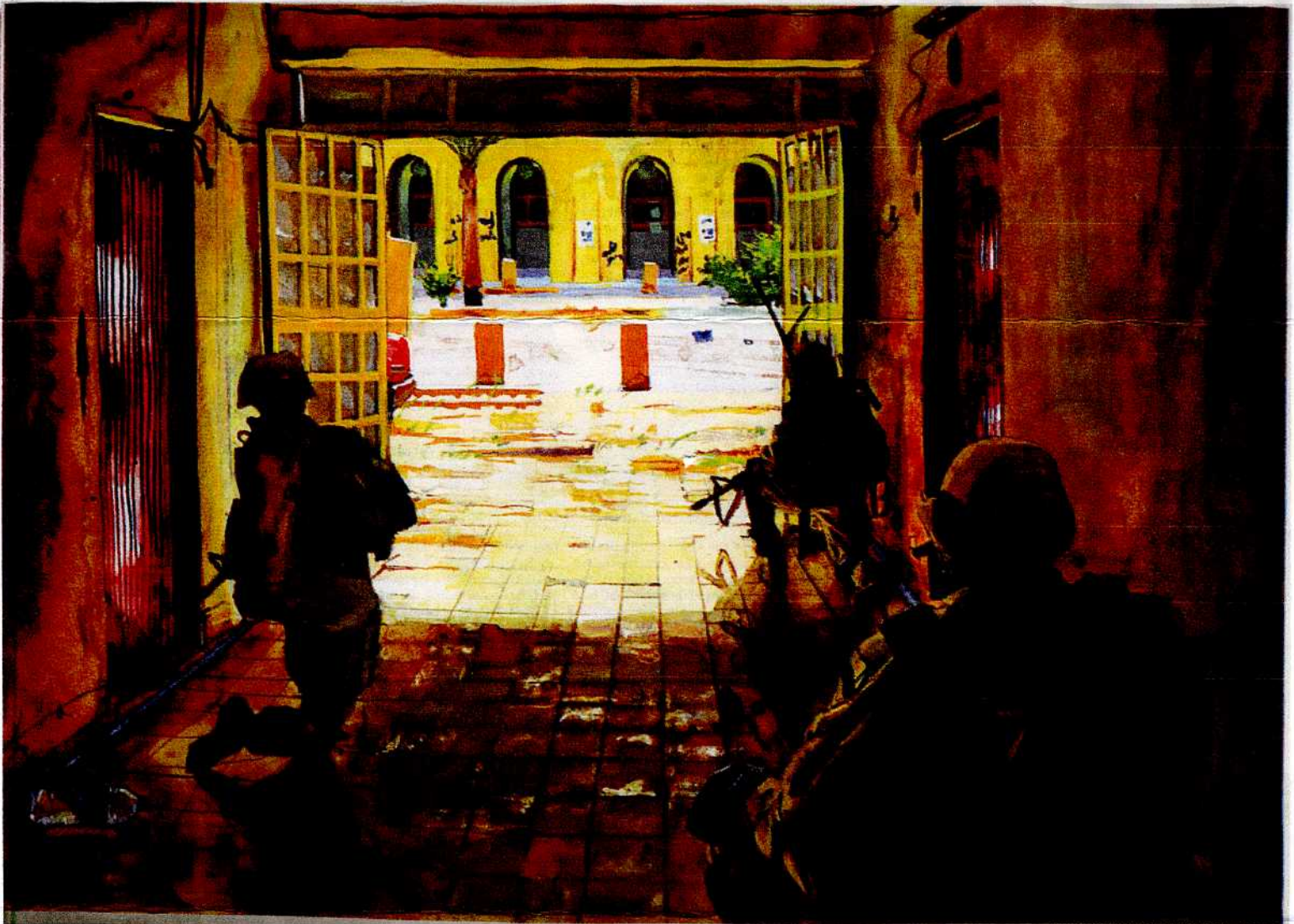


# Arts & Performance



Steve Mumford's ink and watercolor works, such as this view of American troops approaching a sniper's location, were done in 2003-'04, when he was embedded with American forces in Iraq.

## The tug of war

A combat illustrator captures the view from the ground in Iraq

By Ken Johnson  
GLOBE STAFF

Before Sept. 11, 2001, Steve Mumford was just another painter working his way up the food chain of the New York art world. A graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and a Boston native, he'd gotten into a good gallery and his neo-surrealistic paintings were receiving respectful reviews.

Then came the attacks on the World Trade Center and the US invasion of Iraq, and Mumford came to an unusual, life- and career-altering decision. He decided to go to Iraq; not as a soldier but as an old-fashioned combat illustrator.

With press credentials provided by the online artnet Magazine, Mumford made four trips to Iraq in 2003 and 2004, and he created hundreds of ink and watercolor drawings documenting many different experiences of the war. He drew gun battles, crowded street scenes, landscapes, portraits of local citizens, prisoners behind bars, and images of US troops playing games and sleeping. Now 41 of those drawings, plus eight from a recent

MUMFORD, Page C16



Mumford witnessed and recorded many aspects of the war, from suspects awaiting interrogation (left) to injured troops in a rehabilitation center (right).



# Exhibits trigger meditations on humanity, technology

► **MUMFORD**  
Continued from Page C4

series about injured troops in a rehabilitation center, are on view in "Baghdad and Beyond: Drawings by Steve Mumford," a gripping and thought-provoking exhibition at the Tufts University Art Gallery.

**SEE MORE MUMFORD**  
Check out an audio slideshow at [boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts](http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts)

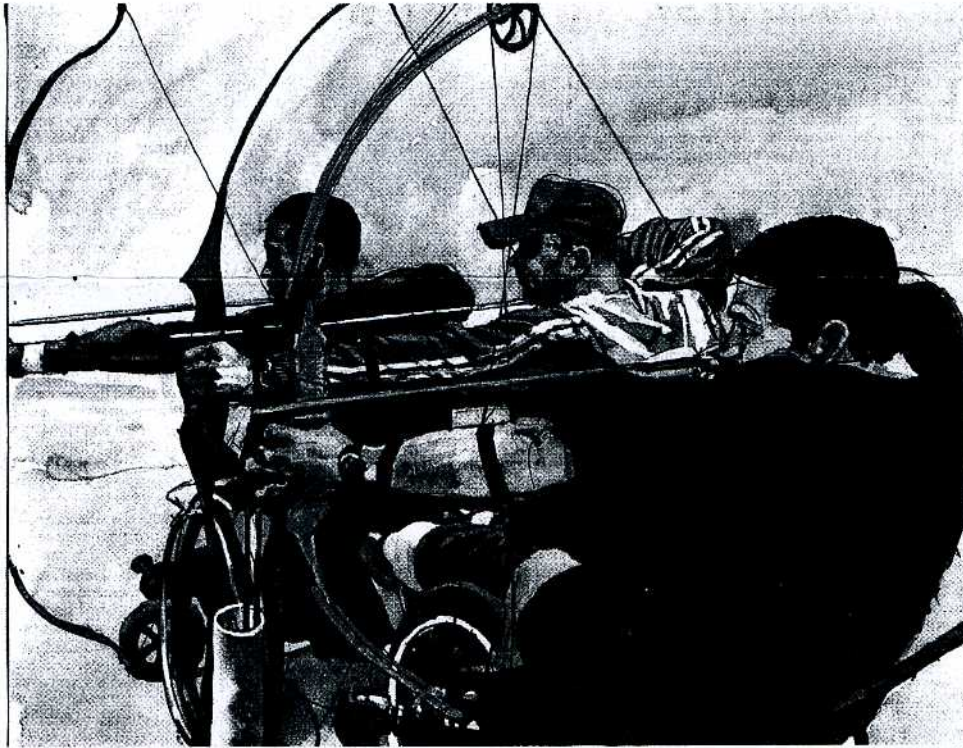
Mumford's drawings are made with a loose, deft touch, but they are not so technically polished as to divert attention from his subject matter. A big part of what makes them absorbing to study is his determination to get down on paper as clearly and thoroughly as he can just what he is seeing. Each has a brief explanatory caption written by the artist. Some depict moments in the heat of battle. The patrol crouched in a shadowy passageway that opens onto a brightly lit area beyond are "getting ready to bound forward to a sniper's location, minutes after the death of Specialist Josiah Vandertulp." Many show more peaceful moments, like the one of troops hitting golf balls into the Tigris from the roof of one of Saddam's palaces at sundown.

The drawings of troops in rehab are not sentimental, but they are heartbreaking in their matter-of-factness. "Staff Sergeant John Jones, 1/7 Marines, Charlie Company, lost both legs below the knee," reads the caption for the picture of a man riding a stationary bike with an American flag-patterned piece of fabric wrapped around one of his prosthetic legs.

Mumford's drawings don't tell you how he feels politically about the war. Like a newspaper reporter, he is just trying to convey what it is like to be on the ground in the midst of a conflict in a distant country. He also wrote a blog for artnet, and his drawings and writings are gathered into a book, "Baghdad Journal: An Artist in Occupied Iraq," published by Drawn + Quarterly (2005).

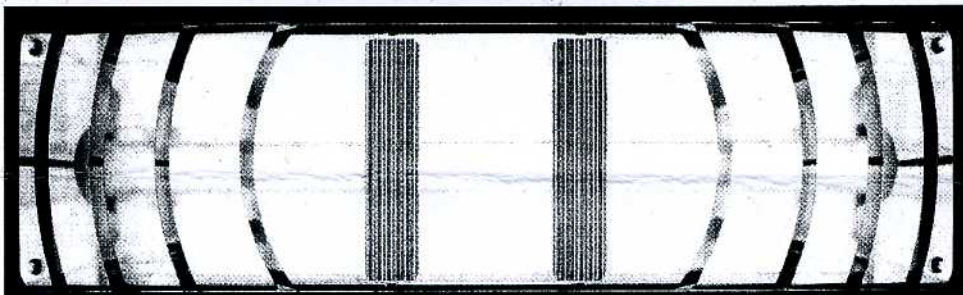
Some of the drawings are so complicated and so profusely detailed you may wonder if Mumford used photographs as visual aids. More substantively, you may find yourself thinking about the differences between drawing and photography. That photography can capture and represent things that a human draftsman can't is obvious. Do Mumford's drawings do something that a camera can't?

One difference is that a camera is not selective. It just mechanical-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Artist Steve Mumford depicts injured US troops practicing archery at a rehab center (above). Günther Selichar explores how much of reality is mediated by machines in large-scale photographic works such as "Exposure c" (below).



ly records what is in front of it, and it often reveals things that the photographer did not at first realize were there. In a drawing, you know that the artist put in every detail on purpose. You are aware that a real live person was on the scene trying to describe and depict what he saw. The drawing may lack photographic verisimilitude, but it can have a kind of auto-

graphic conviction that photographs don't.

What drawing cannot be is objective, which raises the question: Does drawing have any practical value in a world where visual documentation is taken care of mainly by machines? In a courtroom, where cameras are not allowed, it does, but otherwise it seems that drawing by hand for utilitarian

purposes has become an endangered craft.

It is illuminating, then, to consider the work of Günther Selichar, an Austrian artist whose large-scale photographic works are on view in "Media Machines," a separate exhibition also at Tufts.

Selichar is preoccupied by how much of reality these days is mediated by machines and by electron-

ic communication networks. He does not scrutinize, critique, or manipulate the content of contemporary media. He focuses, rather, on the machines that deliver our information and entertainment. The most prominent works in this exhibition are large, glossy photographs of computer and television screens that are blank because they are off or in

**Baghdad and Beyond:**  
Drawings by Steve Mumford

**Günther Selichar,**  
Media Machines

At: Tufts University Art Gallery,  
through Nov. 19. Mumford talk with  
book-signing, reception Nov. 2 at  
6 p.m. 617-627-3518,  
[ase.tufts.edu/gallery](http://ase.tufts.edu/gallery)

standby or test modes.

Laminated to rigid panels and composed so the images of the screens exactly fit the outer rectangles of the photographs, these works are like Minimalist paintings. A set of three screens, one with all its pixels red, one all blue, and one all green, is titled "Who's Afraid of Blue, Red, and Green?" — a play on "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?" the famous proto-Minimalist, three-color triptych by Barnett Newman.

Selichar's larger purpose is to invite meditation on that paradoxical, distinctively modern kind of experience in which we regularly travel to different virtual worlds while remaining physically immobile and staring through the thin, transparent window of an electronic machine. We are prompted to think about a split between our physical experience and our increasingly virtual mental experience — a widening gulf between mind and body.

Selichar has also orchestrated a public art "intervention": He has had huge tarps printed with digital-style letters spelling "Embedded" attached to either side of a tractor-trailer truck, and he has directed the truck to be driven around Boston on certain days, including Sept. 19, primary day, and Nov. 7, election day.

The meaning of this action is unclear. People who notice the truck might guess it to be a protest against the Iraq war or an advertisement for a new television show. For gallery visitors, it obliquely resonates with the art of Mumford, who was in fact an embedded journalist in Iraq.

The ideas about the mediated experience in Selichar's technochic work are not new, but the proximity to Mumford's drawings heightens their implicit critique of our electronically activated culture. Can the transformation of physical reality into machine-processed virtual reality be resisted? Should it be? Mumford's art argues with persuasive moral urgency that it can and it must.

Ken Johnson can be reached at [kjohnson@globe.com](mailto:kjohnson@globe.com).



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## The tug of war

The Boston Globe

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By Ken Johnson, Globe Staff | October 27, 2006

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Ken Johnson can be reached at [kejohnson@globe.com](mailto:kejohnson@globe.com). ■

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