

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Boston Globe

An artist's view of war and remembrance

By Dean Inouye, Globe Staff | August 27, 2006

From his vantage point in the streets of Iraq, Steve Mumford had what he believes is a unique perspective on the Iraqi war.

"If artists have dealt with the war in Iraq at all, it's been on strictly political terms from the comfort of their studios," said Mumford, who took four trips to Iraq in 2003 and 2004. "My drawings are not overtly political. It's kind of a new thing for artists to put themselves in the eye of the storm and draw what they were looking at, rather than drawing to represent a polemic."

Mumford, a Boston native who now paints in New York City, created about 500 drawings and watercolors in Iraq. About 40 of those works, along with eight watercolors of disabled Iraq War veterans at the Brooke Army Medical Center near San Antonio, will be displayed at the Tufts University Art Gallery, beginning next week.

Most of the drawings show American soldiers performing their everyday tasks, often interacting with Iraqi civilians. Among the subjects are snipers at an observation post in Tikrit, soldiers hitting golf balls from one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces, and Baghdad children scrambling for candy tossed by soldiers on patrol.

"The thing that always struck me was how the situation in Iraq never seemed as bad on the ground as what I was reading in the news," said Mumford, who added that the military did not restrict his movements. "If there were things I wasn't allowed to do, I wasn't aware of them."

"Obviously, Iraq is not a peaceful country," said Mumford, "but within the context of a war going on, marketplaces were open and thriving, kids were going to school, businesses were open, Iraqis were out and about, and usually the interactions with American soldiers were relatively friendly."

The visits to Iraq were inspired by Winslow Homer's paintings and engravings of the Civil War, said Mumford. "The tradition of the combat artist has been phased out by the camera," Mumford said, but "when this war started, it struck me that there was nothing to prevent me from doing something similar."

Mumford will give a talk on his works at a reception Nov. 2 at 6 p.m. His drawings from Iraq can be seen on artnet.com and have been collected in the book "Baghdad Journal." The works have been exhibited in such places as Miami, suburban Detroit, and New York City, and he was named ABC News's "Person of the Week" on Dec. 14, 2004. In October, he will mount an exhibit of oil paintings about Iraq at the Postmasters Gallery in New York.

All of his works over the past decade fit within a framework of "dramatic, realist, narrative painting," he said. "I'm interested in telling a story." ■

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