

At war, with just a pen and brush

Steve Mumford joined the ranks of combat artists armed only with a sketch pad. He spent 10 months embedded with US troops.

By April Austin Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor / December 14, 2005

From the beginning of the Iraq war, Americans have been inundated with news, photos, and video footage of the conflict. They show a country under siege, a dangerous and inhospitable place. But one artist, New York painter Steve Mumford, wasn't convinced that chaos was the whole story. He made four visits to Iraq between April 2003 and October 2004, attaching himself to United States military units, and deploying pen and brush to document what he saw.

The results of his 10-1/2 months in Iraq - a remarkable series of pen-and-ink drawings and lively watercolors, along with his stories - have been collected in a new book, "Baghdad Journal: An Artist in Occupied Iraq" (Drawn & Quarterly Books, Montreal).

Mr. Mumford says his goal was not to take sides, but to provide a visual record of the time he spent and the people he met - including both soldiers and Iraqi citizens.

Combat art has a long tradition. In the days of Lord Nelson and British dominance at sea, painters depicted daring naval victories based solely on survivors' tales. During the American Civil War, Winslow Homer covered major skirmishes as well as the daily life of soldiers for Harper's Weekly. In World War II, the US armed forces hired more than 100 military and civilian artists to capture the war for posterity.

Mumford "combat artist" as shorthand to explain his presence and to persuade commanders to let him go on missions with troops.

On his first trip in April 2003, armed with only a press pass from the online art journal artnet.com, Mumford paid his own way to Kuwait City and caught a ride into Iraq with two French journalists. On that trip and subsequent visits, he sought out smaller bases where he could stay with soldiers and record their doings with minimal Army red tape.

"One thing in my favor," Mumford says in a phone interview, "is that most people in the military are familiar with the concept of 'combat artist.'" The real point, for him, was "to go to the source. That's my mantra," he says: to get out of the studio and into the world. He is strongly against what he calls the "distancing of contemporary art."

But painting pictures in a war zone? Mumford says that while it was a challenge to pull out a drawing pad each time, no one questioned why he was there. He writes that people took for granted the fact that history was being made, so why wouldn't an artist be interested?

Mumford did not see much combat during his four trips, but security was clearly deteriorating by the time of his last visit in October 2004. The units with which he traveled were mostly guarding installations, searching for insurgents and weapons, and trying to sort out problems the Iraqis brought to them. Unlike news media, Mumford was not obliged to cover the latest bloody attack. But that didn't shield him from hostile fire and dangerous situations, which he describes in the book.

At least one commander told him, "Follow the soldiers' instructions, because they'll put their lives at risk to save you." But no one tried to censor his drawings or discourage him from going out on missions.

In a village or cafe, the sight of Mumford with a sketch pad attracted attention. Iraqis would crowd around him as he drew, pointing and making comments in a friendly way. "Iraqi men are just crazy to have their pictures taken or painted," Mumford says. The women, in line with Muslim customs, did not approach him. Rarely did anyone object to being drawn - except a suspected insurgent who strongly protested, the artist says.

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Mumford would ask before sketching a soldier if he felt he might be intruding on a private moment. Nonetheless, the watercolors and drawings in the book reflect what seem to be dozens of private moments - soldiers on guard duty in a state of suspended watchfulness, an Iraqi shopkeeper's son sitting patiently in the street, an Iraqi man staring pensively at the ground in a tumbledown neighborhood. These are moments that make up the human drama that Mumford experienced in Iraq, in all its tedium, fear, anger, patience, pride, and hope.

These qualities animate Mumford's work, which started as sketches that he photographed digitally in Iraq and sent home as computer files. About one-third of his pieces were worked on further after he returned to New York. "Drawing is more subtle and can tell a story better than a photograph," he says.

Although Mumford praises the work of photojournalists, he sees drawing as more finely tuned to the subjective rather than the literal. We all recall things differently, he says, and in the hour or so spent drawing, he can bring aspects to the fore for emphasis, whereas a photographer captures strictly what the lens sees.

For many combat artists, the depiction of hardware - weapons and machinery - is the key to authenticity. Mumford's work contains convincing images of razor wire, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and M-16s, but they are incidental. The real story is conveyed in a soldier's stance, an expression, or a gesture. "I wanted to capture the human drama, and props were crucial to let you know you were in Iraq," he says, "but the people came first."

The Iraq trips, which Mumford pursued as a means of building a body of drawings for the book, troubled his wife. "We had a deal that I could stay as long as I wanted on the last trip, but it would truly be the last," Mumford says. "I would call her every day, so she would know I was OK. I sometimes lied about what I was doing so she wouldn't worry too much."

Now, back at home in New York, Mumford recalls with greatest fondness the Iraqi artists he befriended. "They told me how bad things were under Saddam - the psychological damage [done] to several generations of Iraqis." Mumford did not support the American invasion, but after his visits, he says he began to separate US government policies from the actions of the military men and women who were sent there.

This view did not sit well with some in the art world who were opposed to the war. Still, Mumford's work garnered attention from ABC News to National Public Radio. Audiences responded to his evenhanded treatment of Iraq.

"He showed a constructive effort running alongside the destructive element," says Kenneth Baker, art critic of the San Francisco Chronicle. Mumford's art "embarrassed other politically oriented contemporary art.... The risk involved [in doing the drawings] was real. You don't see that very often," Mr. Baker says.

Mumford came away from Iraq with a favorable, though not uncritical view of the military. "It's about patriotism, about getting the job done, not about the politics. They take pride in their work, and want to be appreciated."

Soldiers responded positively to Mumford's postings on artnet.com, he says.

"They liked the grittiness and the realism, probably because I kept all the swear words," he says with a laugh.

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