BOTH IMAGES: POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

IMAGES: POSTMASTERS
ERY, NEW YORK

LEFT:
Steve Mumford drawing in Tikrit, Iraq, 2003

OPPOSITE:
Steve Mumford
Going Back In, 2006.
Oil on linen, 62 x 84 in.

Truth or Fact?
Artists venture into journalism's territory.

EARLIER THIS YEAR Steve Mumford spent a couple of weeks embedded with an army unit in Afghanistan, as hundreds of journalists have. Shortly after he returned, *Harper's* magazine asked him if he'd be willing to go to the Gulf of Mexico to cover the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion. Mumford jumped at the chance, caught a flight for Louisiana, and drove south toward the small bayou town of Venice, to get as close to the action as possible.

Sounds like the travel schedule of a CNN correspondent, right? But Mumford is not a journalist; he's an artist. For several years he has made watercolors and oil paintings where the news is happening: Iraq, Afghanistan, the South China Sea, and now the Gulf. He showed his most recent Iraq paintings at New York's Postmasters Gallery last February.

Why would artists choose to make current events the subject of their work? When they make art about real-world drama, how close are they approaching journalism? And why do current events have such appeal, and value, to artists?

It is out of vogue for art to be so direct and rooted in the above-the-fold part of the front page. This is an era of press-release art, art requiring viewers to read an explanation before seeing it. Mumford rejects that tired pseudointellectual formula. His art, like that of Zoe Strauss and Emily Jacir, among others, relies on shared experience. That's all it needs.

One reason artists tap into major current events is that they want to make works that don't require pre-viewing annotation. News stories relate experiences that are shared by a nation-size, even global community. In the case of Iraq or the Deepwater Horizon blowout, the events are so large that their images are on the world's televisions all the time. Art rooted in those events doesn't need a statement; it

The BP disaster was particularly well suited to Strauss, who will be the subject of a retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2012. Her modus operandi is to tell a personal story through a series of color photographs taken over many months or longer. As soon as she realized that the oil spill was a long-term event, she raised $5,000 with the help of United States Artists, an artist-advocacy nonprofit, to fund several trips to the region. Like Mumford, she took advantage of resources—boats, planes, and so on—made available primarily to journalists.

Both Mumford's and Strauss's similarity with journalists, however, ends there. Neither is concerned with fact-finding, telling whole stories, or even putting the events they "cover" in a larger context. Instead of making work that responds to an hourly or daily news cycle, the two artists give images months or years to gestate. They don't want to make something that will fit easily in tomorrow's paper; they both take great pains to make art that will resonate in 50 years, when Deepwater Horizon will sound more like a sci-fi series than an oil rig.

"An artist's job is to help make people think, to try to make something that will be part of the dialogue," Strauss says when asked if what she does flirts with journalism. "I know it's hard—with photography in particular, it's very difficult to find the line between photojournalism and fine art. It's slippery in terms of how people perceive photography."

Journalists too want to be part of the dialogue, but their emphasis is on the conversation taking place right now. Strauss is partly interested in the right now—she posts many of her images on Flickr or on one of her blogs shortly after shooting them—but she's more interested in keeping her subjects in a broader dialogue for years and decades. She's less interested in the

catastrophe, elicits.

Strauss's explanation brings to mind Jacir's 2003 video installation *Crossing Surda*, in which the Palestinian artist surreptitiously chronicles her fraught daily journeys from home to work. To get there and back she has to pass through an Israeli military checkpoint, an experience that is sometimes routine and sometimes terrifying. To make the piece, Jacir hid a camera on her person and then edited the footage into a 132-minute nonnarrative reel. Using a hidden camera to reveal something crooked is a well-worn journalistic trope, but it also makes me think of Lucas Cranach's hunting scenes, which often show not just the kill at the end but the pursuit. Whether she's on her way to teach a class at university or on her way home, Jacir's shaky-camera style enables her to suggest that she and other Palestinians are perpetually stalked by the Israeli army.

"Some artists are stylists. I don't think of myself being one of them," says Mumford.

As a painter, Mumford is even less tied to faithful representation than Strauss and Jacir. "I do enjoy being reasonably accurate," Mumford says. "I feel like I have the privilege of having gone to these places, so why not try be fairly accurate. I think there are plenty of discrepancies that a soldier might see—a rifle or something like that—that I wouldn't care about. I have my limits. But the emotional impact is what's primary. Some artists are stylists. I don't think of myself being one of them. I want the painting to have a sort of monumentality, drama, and artifice that pull the viewer into the narrative that's going on."

"There was clearly a want to record exactly the impact. Now you can't say he recorded exactly the appearance, but the feeling of the impact was there," says National Gallery of Art curator Arthur Wheelock. He isn't talking about Mumford, however. He's dialing back to several 17th-century Dutch artists who strove for almost the same thing that Mumford and Strauss are striving for today.

Take two of the most significant disasters of the Dutch Golden Age: the fire that destroyed Amsterdam's old town hall in 1652 and the explosion of 90,000 pounds of gunpowder at the Delft magazine in 1654, which killed hundreds of people, injuring thousands more and flattening the northeastern part of the city. Both events were commemorated by painters, notably Jan Beerstraten and Pieter Saenredam in Amsterdam and Daniel Vosmaer and Egbert van der Poel in Delft. It's not surprising that artists rushed to record the disasters. But that's not to say they did so with any more interest in what we now call journalistic truth than their contemporary counterparts have. Beerstraten's famous picture of the town-hall fire depicts an impossible scene and viewpoint, and no one knows how accurate Vosmaer's and van der Poel's paintings of Delft are. Because so many of the details in their paintings are similar, we can have some confidence that they recorded at least one view of the postexplosion scene somewhat truthfully.

Looking at Vosmaer's and van der Poel's images of Delft citizens helping the wounded and picking through the rubble for belongings, one feels the emotional toll of the event. Across the centuries, Beerstraten, Vosmaer, van der Poel, Strauss, and Mumford agree that good art delivers feeling. And that's a key difference between press-release art and work that takes shared events as its impetus.

Both Mumford and Strauss embrace this relationship with art history in a much more direct way than Jacir does in her work. Mumford's *Prostitutes*, 2009, shows two women in a hotel swimming pool, a military installation visible just beyond the wall, and men sitting around the pool, apart. The women are neither exotic nor exceptional. They would not be identifiable as prostitutes had Mumford not included that information in stenciled gold lettering on the frame. Because the work was motivated by a scene he witnessed in or near what used to be called the Orient, it's easy to read the painting as an explicit rejection of Jean-Léon Gérôme's Romanticism and exoticism. Mumford seems to be saying that whether in Baghdad or in Boise, a Sheraton is a Sheraton, and war sucks, as does simply being there in apparent comfort while conflict is going on around you.

ABOVE:
Zoe Strauss
Bathers on Beach with Boom, 2010. Digital image from "On the Beach."

RIGHT:
Steve Mumford
The Accused, 2005. Oil on linen, 48 x 48 in.

Strauss's works are plainly indebted to Robert Frank's landmark series "The Americans" and the way in which Frank looked at America as an outsider traveling through. Her work, however, has narrower, more immediately topical content. She hasn't decided how her Gulf oil-spill series, titled "On the Beach," will be presented, and she's inviting people to watch her solve that question in real time on her blog (http://onthebeach-zs.blogspot.com), but it will likely be a multiyear project published in book form. The most gripping of Strauss's pictures shows two boys, wearing only bathing suits, playing on an oil-scarred beach while yellowish-brown water laps the sand behind them. She says it is an explicit nod to Paul Cézanne's *Bather*, with the postapocalyptic present replacing Cézanne's quiet timelessness.

One reason artists ground their pieces about current events in art history is that this prevents their art from becoming stale. Perhaps because she is working on a major museum retrospective, Strauss is particularly aware of making something that will hold up decades hence. She notes that, like many other daily stories, the Gulf oil spill dropped out of the news once the next crisis came along. "But we fetishize art in a way that allows these things to remain relevant in museum collections for years and generations. I do think about how a public event can have a certain kind of longevity within art collections, how artworks continue to move those specific moments to the forefront of thought even after the fact, which I think is kind of interesting."

It's more than interesting—it's how artists join the process by which history is remembered. MP

FROM TOP: © ZOE STRAUSS, COURTESY BRUCE SILVERSTEIN GALLERY, NEW YORK; POSTMASTERS GALLERY