

MARS ARTS

Steve Mumford's Place in the History of Wartime Realism

Text Bill Powers

Portraits Steven Brahma

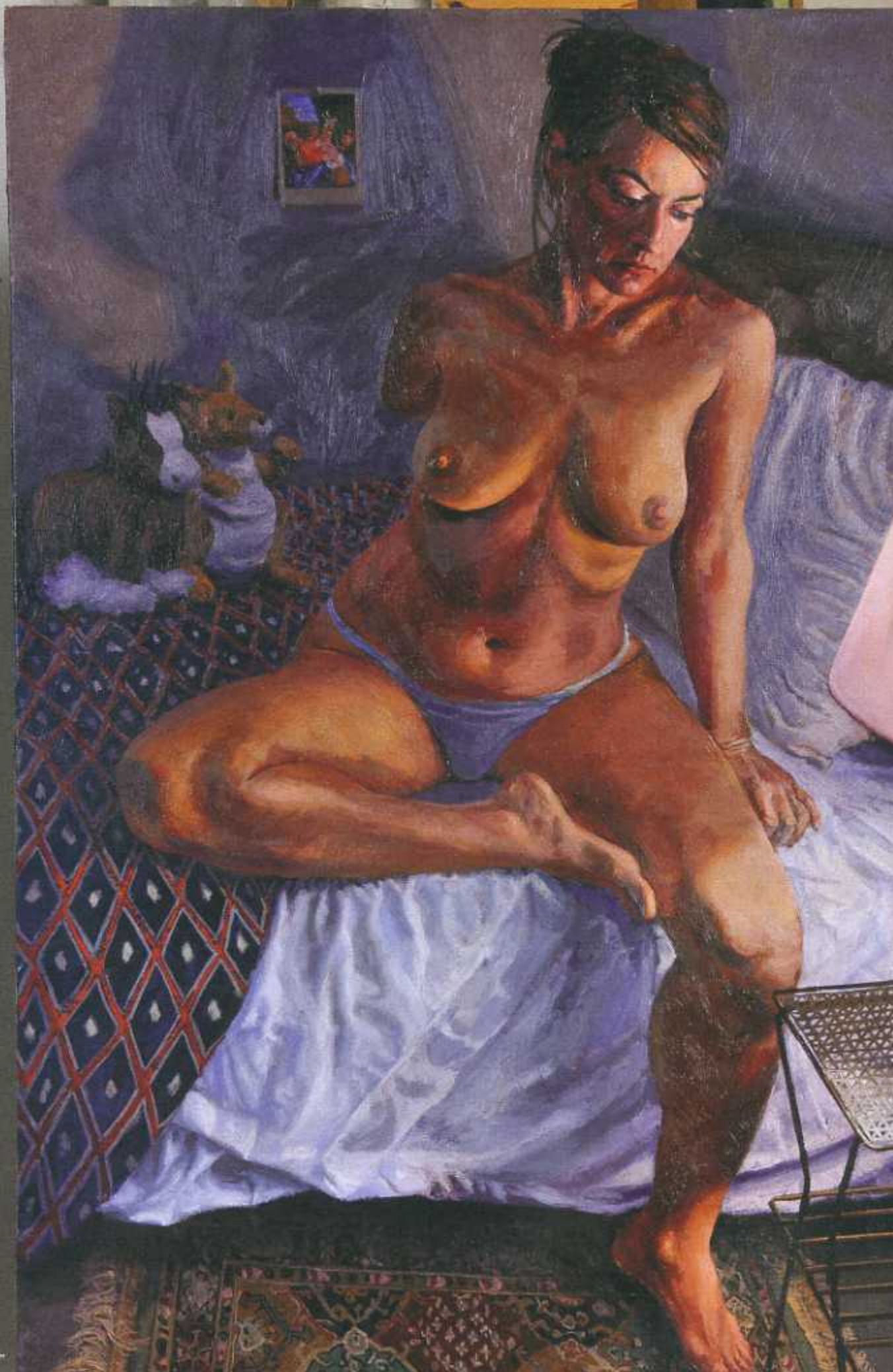
Artwork Steve Mumford

GI graffiti, ER deathbeds, topless amputees, and IEDs: Steve Mumford paints his experiences in Iraq with exquisite detail and painstaking attention to the experiences of the participants. After six trips, in-country, Mumford is now contemporary art's leading chronicler of America's perpetual war. Postmasters Gallery in New York City unveils the latest in his ongoing series.

FADED



Detail from "Baqutah"



"Veteran"

have to take a picture of you and your friend because I still need background figures for this one painting.

Bill Powers: Sure, what is it?

SM: It's a scene of two Iraqi prostitutes in the pool at the Sheraton Ishtar, which was one of the big western hotels in Baghdad. I was invited to a party there -- I can't remember if it was a contractor's group or a reporter's group. Everyone there was milling around, eating hot dogs, and these two girls were sunbathing in the swimming pool. An Iraqi friend of mine who had gone to high school with one of the girls said they were prostitutes working at the hotel, which is kind of a rarity there because there's such an Arabic injunction against mixing with foreigners.

BP: So you didn't see that many call girls hanging out in the hotel lobbies?

SM: You never would. And if you did, they were very subtle about it, because it meant that if they left the hotel area, their throats could be cut in ten minutes. In fact, many Iraqis were quite paranoid about women who worked on American bases, and they would sometimes execute them. The Arab men tend to be very paranoid over women's sexuality.

BP: Except that your painting of this hotel party scene has almost an Eden-like feel to it.

SM: It's an oasis of sorts, but you can still make out the razor wire over the walls and that the palm trees look a bit blighted. You can see a small helicopter in the distance. So there's a sense that the war is going on right outside.

BP: I love your portrait of the naked amputee. It's very sexy despite the fact that this woman is missing an arm.

SM: The title of this painting is "Veteran." I drew soldiers recuperating from their wounds at both Walter Reed and Brooke Army Medical Centers. I always wanted to get a drawing of a woman over there but none would ever give me permission to draw them. I realized that women have such a different sense of body image. For a man to lose an arm is a real drag, but it's also a badge of honor, in a way.

BP: It's like the ultimate back eye.

SM: Exactly, but for a woman it's a whole different thing. I think there's a deeper sense of loss and incompleteness. Something that may always be a cause of shame.

BP: Your portrait shatters our ideas of what an amputee veteran should look like.

SM: I met girls like this one who were painters in the Basques. I remember once

travelling with them to the Basque triangle. And I'm sitting in the Humvee. I look up, see a rather sexy star tattoo on a very feminine hand, and realize that it's a woman manning this .50 caliber machine gun. I asked her if she'd seen much action. In fact, she'd been in a few firefights. You never knew where the front lines will be.

BP: Talk about the GI graffiti paintings that you've done. How did you come upon these slogans?

SM: On two of my trips into Iraq, I joined the military in Kuwait first and then flew in. This was 2007 and 2008. I get to this big-ass base, which is a staging ground for all these soldiers going not only to Iraq but also Afghanistan. There are literally thousands of troops coming in and out of this place every day. Everybody just waits there to go somewhere -- it's huge. There's a McDonald's and stuff like that, but not too much to do. The soldiers can't leave base; Kuwaitis don't want to see any American military uniforms around. So I'm told that hopefully in the next 24 hours I'll be sent out, but I need to keep manifesting for those rights. It's like flying on standby. And they wouldn't allow me to draw or take photographs because they're afraid it might help the terrorists. So I'm really just twiddling my thumbs. I spent a lot of time going in and out of men's rooms, which are full of graffiti. I looked for graffiti that referenced the war in some way: "Goin to Iraq. Hope I make it back." To me, they were like little pieces of poetry. No dates.

BP: What about the line, "Remember ladies, your [sic] just a plane ride away from being ugly 'again.'"

SM: This is one of those abiding soldiers' jokes. That an American woman can be an Iraq IO, but that an Iraq IO ranks as an American 2. It's a real misogynistic conceit that goes on constantly. These are a bunch of young guys in a high state of boredom and, generally, there aren't that many women around. It's simply a fact of life on base. And the women in the military need to quickly figure out what kind of persons they're going to adapt. They have to figure out how to deal with this attention.

BP: So like if you plan on being totally asexual.

SM: Well, you're either going to be a bitch or a slut, and both have their power, but ultimately being a bitch leads to more self-respect and promotions and stuff like that. Lynodie England opted for the slut.

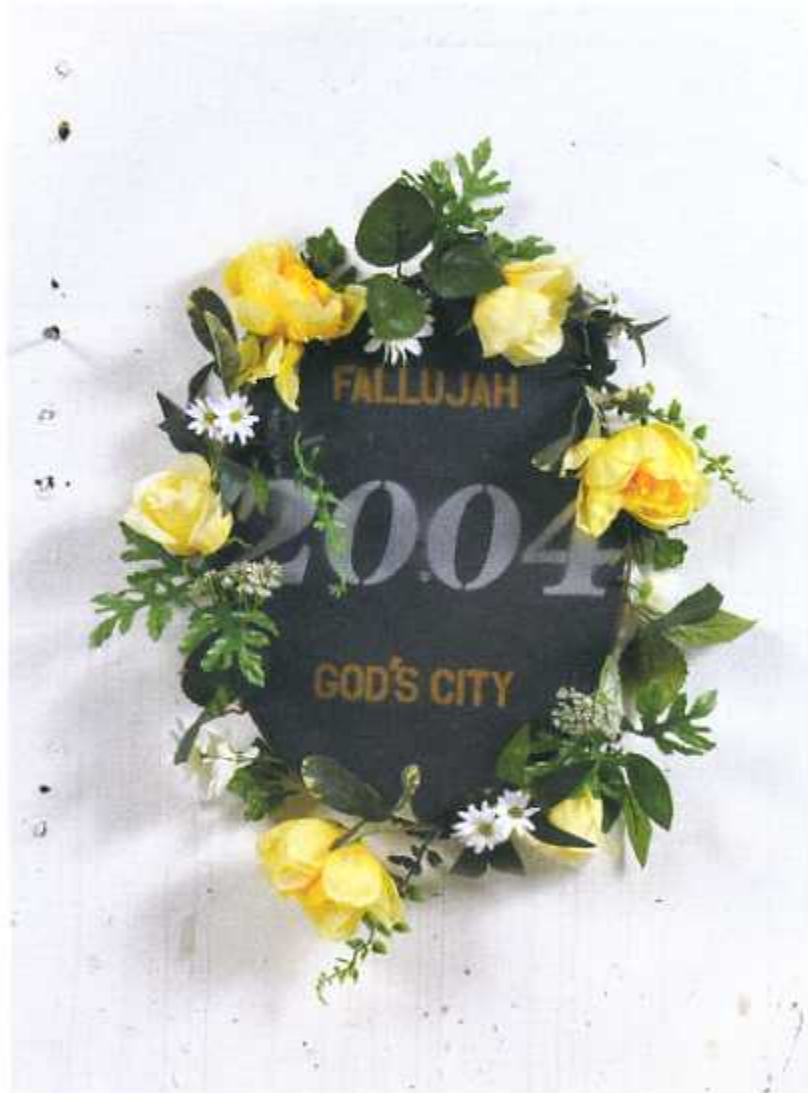
BP: And look where she is now. A lot of your work reminds me of themes they touched on in that movie, "The Hurt Locker," especially individuals' internal conflict of wanting to be

For a man to lose an arm is a real drag, but it's also a badge of honor, in a way. Women have such a different sense of body image. I think there's a deeper sense of loss and incompleteness.





Men's rooms are full of graffiti. I looked for graffiti that referenced the war in some way. To me, they were like little pieces of poetry. No dates.



of a war, never mind that it could lead to your own death.

SM: They say that one of the classic symptoms of PTSD is wanting to go back; guys that want to go back for their third deployment. They need to be checked out a little more closely.

BP: And then on the flipside to the GI graffiti, you have these plaques to Iraqi cities which were made by locals.

SM: Part of the fun behind these "Fallujah, City of God" pieces was that I noticed fake flowers. You can't go to any kind of official meeting without giant bouquets of them around the room. I used them in these paintings as a framing device. Fallujah, before the Marines conquered it, was a real hotbed of the resistance and the Jihadis. The whole city was taken over by these hardcore Wahhabis. They would make sure barbers didn't cut people's beards. They really enforced strict Islamic Sharia Law. For them, it was almost like Shangri-la for a minute: the perfect city. They looked at it with the same kind of romanticism that radical hippies did towards Paris in 1968. I'm trying to think how these hardliners would have romanticized Fallujah in 2003 or 2009.

BP: Say it with fake flowers?

SM: That's just part of it. This is my imaginary tribute. I also want to work with *AF 47* magazines, which have a distinctively aestheticized look. The idea of using the fake flowers and butterflies in these paintings is to invoke a sense of paradise, even though Fallujah was not an attractive city, I'm told.

BP: Another new painting of yours issues a warning "to all the fags in Kuwait." Did you see a lot of homophobia over there?

SM: No, it almost never came up. Then again, I'm not a soldier, so I wasn't with them all the time.

BP: They probably thought you were some art fag, anyway.

SM: Quite likely. Actually, I think I probably just seemed like some old guy to them. Besides, "fag" was a term they threw around in a meaningless way, the way some blacks might throw around the term "nigger." You know, trash talk. What I suspect is that because these guys are young and horny, a lot of small bases have what you might call a whack room -- a place where they'd all go to jerk off. And I'm sure that sometimes that might get into small acts of homosexuality -- that the soldiers didn't exactly see as that, but that were simply a release. I don't know if there exists the same level of homophobia that

BP: Tell me about your image of the Koran next to a dead bird.

SM: Yes, the bird is a kingfisher. I'm not sure if I'll exhibit this painting or not. I have to talk to my gallery about it, depending on how they feel, because to some people this piece could be particularly inflammatory.

BP: No one wants to be the next Salman Rushdie in that regard.

SM: To me the dead bird is about suicide bombers using the Koran as a justification. The kingfisher is indigenous to Pakistan and India, maybe Iraq, too. It's known as the halcyon bird from Greek mythology. They believed it nested on the water; if the Greeks spotted any that meant smooth waters ahead. So I think of that as being a metaphor for paradise, but in this case, the bird is dead. This is definitely a painting that you couldn't show in Iraq or a Muslim country.

BP: Have you ever thought about having a gallery show in Baghdad?

SM: I did have an offer from a gallery owner there to exhibit my drawings. At the time, it wasn't convenient. If the security was right, it's something I would definitely consider.

BP: But you'd have to do it in the green zone, right?

SM: Oh no, you'd want to show it in a gallery that got some traffic. During the worst years of the war, most of them shut down, but when I got there in 2003, I saw maybe twenty large galleries in Baghdad. I hear they've since reopened. Artistically, Baghdad was very much like a medium-sized American city along the lines of a Columbus, Ohio or Detroit, where there is a thriving art culture -- but as if it had emerged from the Ice Age. You know, it hadn't changed in 35 or 40 years, and they're still doing Abstract Expressionist painting.

BP: Sometimes it's fascinating to take paintings back to the settings which inspired them, because that audience can have such a different read on the subject matter.

SM: Except many Iraqis don't want reminders of the war. I suspect [the paintings] are something they wouldn't want to look at. On top of which, there hasn't been a tradition of Iraqi realism for a very long time. They would wonder, "Why are you making art about such an ugly thing?" On the other hand, Iraqi artists are very aware now of what's happening artistically in other places, and they want to catch up. So notions of realism in paintings may start to change. I think the thing that would



This Page:

Top "To All the Fags in Kuwait..."

Bottom "Goin to Iraq, Hope I Make It Back"

Opposite Page:

Top "The Awakening"

Bottom "Fallujah, God's City"



"Dying Soldier"

Iraqi street scenes, which they would recognize, but from a different perspective. If I saw street signs in Arabic I would faithfully copy them down, but my lettering might be off in places. My Iraqi friends loved reading them. They could feel my interest in their culture.

BP: Who thought you were a bigger freak for being there as an artist doing research: the American military or the Iraqi people?

SM: Soldiers understand that there's a tradition of combat art, so it's not an entirely unfamiliar idea. After initially wanting to know what you're doing, they lose interest right away, because they had their missions to do. The Iraqis though, especially if I'm not embedded -- like if I'm just walking around Baghdad -- were just tickled, amazed. When I'm on the street, just drawing, it is completely different from taking a photograph. A camera can seem like a menacing thing.

BP: Like you're tracking them or something --

SM: But when you're drawing, you're totally vulnerable. It takes at least 30 minutes to make a drawing, and they gather around you and watch. You are performing for them whether you like it or not. You become both this entertainment and in a small way the face of Western occupation. It turns into something where they have the upper hand, where they have the opportunity to appreciate what you're doing. Or they might ask you to draw them. "May I buy you a cup of tea?" It turns into this very pleasant interaction.

BP: I think most Americans would be surprised that you had such a good time.

SM: I think that Americans on the whole are pretty ignorant about Arab culture. Arab culture is all about hospitality. Now, if you're a soldier, that means an entirely different thing. You're a combatant.

BP: Don't you imagine that the Iraqis thought you were some CIA spook walking around?

SM: Not when I was drawing. I think if I'd been taking photographs, then yes, absolutely, but the act of drawing is so blatantly un-technological. There were so many fantasies about what American technology can do. For example, there was a persistent rumor that the sunglasses soldiers were wearing had X-ray abilities to look through Iraqi women's clothes. The rumor just wouldn't die. But me, drawing -- using a dip pen and ink is the most ancient of technologies. There was just no way to place any conspiratorial power into this act. Drawing almost became this sort of diplomatic passport for me.

SM: Winslow Homer was my artist hero for this whole endeavor. Harper's Magazine sent him to the [American] Civil War as a combat artist -- this was before photography had the ability to capture movement. Some of the drawings are so spontaneous and beautiful, with this amazing shorthand.

BP: But what about combat photographers who we now see in an artistic vein? People like Robert Capa?

SM: In general, I'm not that inspired by photography, because it's so much its own thing. That said, Larry Burrows is the guy who covered Vietnam for Life magazine, and his photos have almost a Baroque grandeur to them. It's that rhythmical arrangement of bodies on a plane enacting timeless drama that I'm trying to get in my larger oil paintings.

BP: Is Burrows still alive?

SM: No, he was killed in Vietnam during one of the Cambodian incursions. He was shot down riding in a South Vietnamese helicopter. Interestingly enough, Burrows was one of the photo assistants at Life magazine when they brought in Capa's famous D-Day pictures. Someone in the lab ruined all the rolls of film except for the twelve images that were rescued. Apparently, an assistant grabbed them and left the film in the heater a minute too long and all the film melted except for a few frames. The rumor is that the assistant was Larry Burrows.

BP: So he went out in the field decades later to do his penance?

SM: Burrows always said that he wanted Vietnam to be his war.

BP: And I guess Iraq is destined to be yours.