

MARS ARTS

Steve Mumford's Place in the History of Wartime Realism

Text Bill Powers

Portraits Steven Brahma

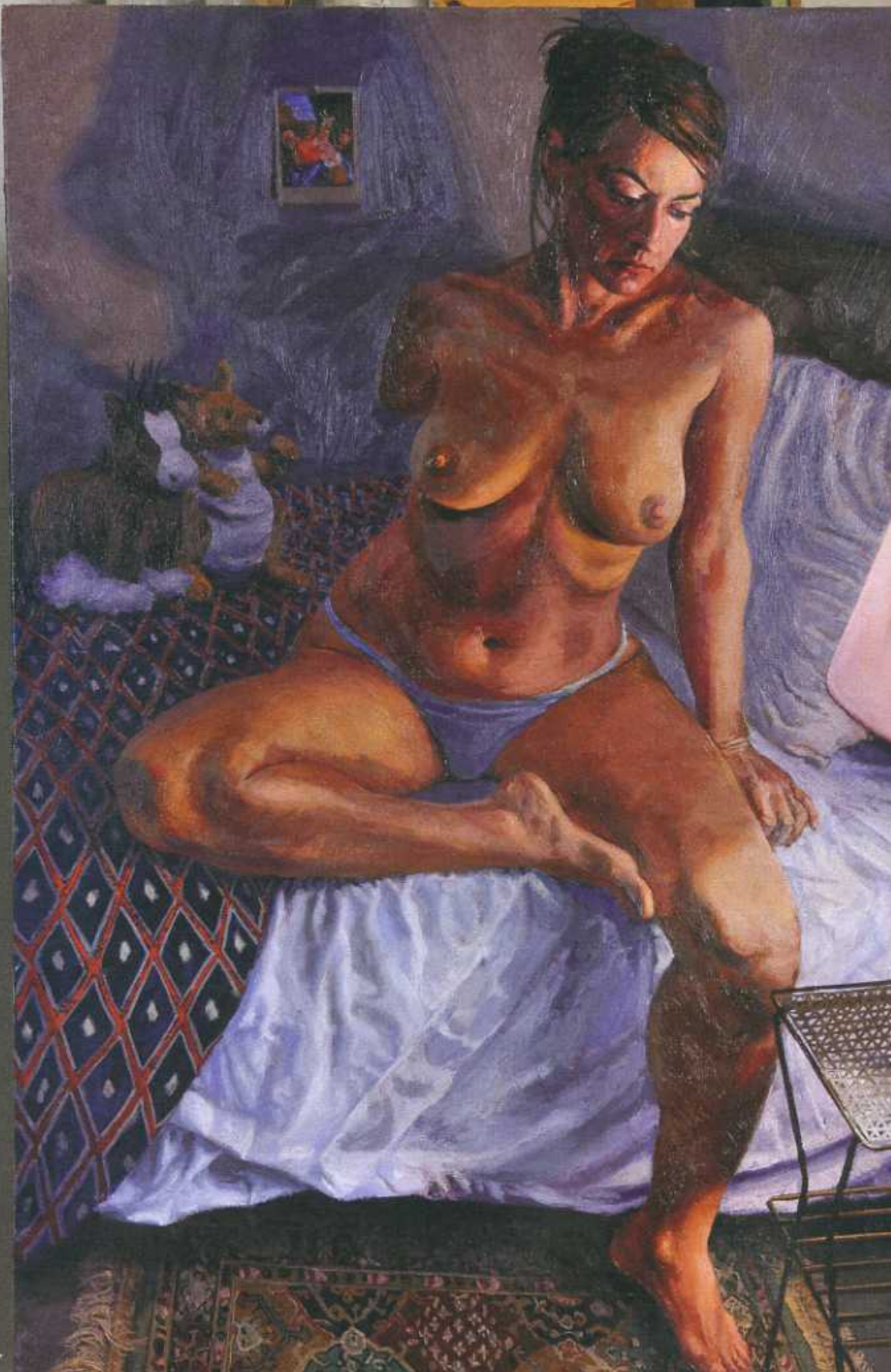
Artwork Steve Mumford

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 Hueves. I remember once

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 got 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

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