

# POSTMASTERS

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## Steve Mumford

★★★★★

**Postmasters**, through Sat 2  
(see Chelsea)

Steve Mumford traveled to Iraq four times in 2003 and 2004, trips that yielded hundreds of small drawings, watercolors and snapshots. Now he has translated his experiences into nine paintings; images range from pitched battles and maimed American soldiers in rehab back in the States, to an elegiac portrait of the late art critic Steven Vincent (with whom Mumford shared a Baghdad apartment) on a bridge overlooking the Tigris.

*The Battle of Baquba*, a 15-foot panorama, shows a firefight between Iraqis with rocket-propelled grenades and a convoy of American tanks. A photographic crispness pervades: Helicopter blades are frozen in a cloudless blue sky, and an RPG is suspended in midair. But the artist also skews perspective, so we can see down four streets simultaneously, conveying a cinematic sense of movement. Despite his considerable rendering skills, Mumford restrains



himself from painterly pyrotechnics when depicting a burning car or an explosion on the side of a military vehicle, favoring a matter-of-fact, documentary style instead.

Four American soldiers sit cramped in the claustrophobic green interior of a tank in *Going Back In*. Their baby faces register apprehension and resignation—one dejectedly hides his face behind his hand and the butt of a gun. The scene is as convincing as any Old Master painting. By employing anachronistic methods favored by artists for centuries—Winslow Homer painted on the front lines of the Civil War, for example—Mumford captures the look and tenor of a very contemporary drama.

—Joseph R. Wolin

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