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CONFORMITY

Correspondent

by Steve Mumford

Steve Mumford recently returned from his fourth trip to Iraq, where he spent some ten-and-a-half months drawing. He was embedded with numerous units in the U.S. Army, and also spent time with Iraqis, particularly in Baghdad, where he got to know many young artists. Through drawing Mumford hoped to depict the day-to-day experience of the war zone, from the point of view of both the soldiers and the Iraqis he got to know.

Interview with Steve Mumford by Noah Post

Noah Post: When and how did you first set foot in the Iraqi landscape?

Steve Mumford: I first flew to Kuwait in April 2003, as the invasion was well underway. I hung around the pricier hotels from where the journalists were leaving to cross the border. After a couple of days a French reporter I had met on the plane asked me if I'd like to join him and a colleague in their rented SUV to Baghdad. I jumped at the chance.

NP: The physical presence of a sketch artist is very different than a photographer and/or reporter. After making your first connection with the American military, how did the soldiers react to having you around, with sketchbook in hand?

SM: Actually I think they saw me as just another media type, with the exception of the commander at the first US Army base I stumbled upon. Lt Col Scott Rutter was perched upon a tracked vehicle, heading out on a patrol with a bunch of soldiers. I shouted up at him over the engines that I wanted to draw his battalion's

a patrol with a bunch of soldiers. I shouted up at him over the engines that I wanted to draw his battalion's missions in Baghdad; he said, "Sure, hop on." It turned out that he and his wife had a condo in Manhattan and he knew a bit about art.

Being embedded was a very casual thing in the early months. I would just show up in a taxi at the concertina wire with my sleeping bag, identify myself as 'the artist', and they'd let me in for a few hours or a few days. I didn't encounter any censorship. Everyone was just tired and busy.

NP: I am figuring that there was a lot of "Downtime" spent with the military. In conversations with the soldiers that you were living with, Was there an unexpected general viewpoint about the War and why the invasion was happening at such a rushed, and in some instances, reckless pace?

SM: I never heard that kind of discussion, although I wasn't embedded during the invasion, when one might be privy to a lot of soldierly speculation. However, I felt that most soldiers weren't especially interested in politics, beyond a vague reflexive Republicanism, perceiving the Democrats as generally anti-military. Officers I talked with were more aware of the lack of strategy after the fall of Baghdad, and worried about it.

NP: After a few weeks of being in Iraq, did you start to have second thoughts about your mission?

SM: No, the opposite. Actually the first few days were very difficult. I couldn't figure out my role – was I pretending to be a journalist? Was I a war tourist? When I finally decided that I was really going to try to draw from life things got easier. I'm someone who likes a lot of undisturbed time in the studio. I never wanted to be a courtroom artist, so drawing publicly didn't come easily.

Iraq, right after the invasion was a great place to be, aside from the looting of course. Many Iraqis were very friendly and you could go anywhere. I spent a couple of weeks traveling north by bus to Mosul, Kirkuk, and Dohuk, drawing, chatting with Iraqis and staying in cheap hotels. The Kurds are very social, big partiers, and were always trying to get me to go out drinking. It was kind of a relief to get back to the sober Arab culture of Baghdad.

I joined Rutter's battalion on night patrols. I hired a driver to take me out to Hilla, where Shias were uncovering mass graves from the suppressed uprisings following the Gulf War, and drew the diggers and exhumed bodies. Altogether, it was an intense artistic and personal experience. I was hooked, and already planning a second trip.

NP: I understand that you have made trips to Iraq at least 6 times since the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and have recently spent some time in Afghanistan. What positive developments have you noticed throughout

these periodic visits?

SM: It's hard to make generalizations about "progress" when you're in a war zone. I find that one's viewpoint is totally colored by happenstance. For instance, I used to take the route into Iraq from Jordan, sharing a hired car with Iraqis. I took it many times without incident. One time I met a woman who arrived by the same route a couple of days after me. Her car had been forced off the road by a firefight outside Falluja; she saw an Iraqi cop get shot in the back. Her sense of safety and the war zone was utterly different from mine. I was traipsing around Baghdad by myself, drawing street scenes. In a way, we were both right.

NP: And, what profound negative effects of the war have you seen firsthand?

SM: Well I saw a fair amount of combat cumulatively over all the trips, which is always scary although you rarely see bodies; you hear over the radio that a soldier was killed a block away, or an Iraqi was shot.

I was in a battle in Baquba in 2004. During a lull in the fighting a car drove out into the main street, towards one of the tanks. A warning shot didn't have any effect so the soldiers lit that car up, thinking it was a bomber. But it was the wife of the local electric company manager. He said that his kids were in the car too, although I only saw her body in the street, after she'd crawled through the windshield and died.

I was embedded at the Baghdad ER for 3 weeks in 2007 and saw a lot of carnage. Oftentimes I'd draw a soldier in the ER who would be pronounced dead in the operating rooms. Many Iraqi civilians from Ramadi were being brought in. The Sunni insurgents were blowing up canisters of chlorine, which atomizes and destroys the lungs. I drew several children who survived this, including a baby boy. The US docs from the operating rooms would stop by his crib to hold him and try to get him to stop crying. I noticed that the docs needed the cuddling maybe more than he did. The broken bodies were non-stop for those guys, and they had to bottle it up.

Sometimes, you could get a window into the intense weariness of the Iraqis. A patrol I was on in Mosul in 2008 had an armored vehicle break an axle, so the soldiers fanned out, occupying several houses to provide overwatch. I joined one group and in the house talked with an Iraqi woman while I drew her sons, as they waited for the Americans to leave. They looked so tired and scared and yet shy. The house was nice, with some comfortable furniture like what you'd see in somebody's parents' house in Columbus. I think there was a clock or something, with the phrase 'Home, Sweet Home' in English, on the wall. It turned out that the woman's husband had taught at Ohio State University! They'd bought all their furniture there and brought it back to Iraq. But her husband was dead. She looked so resigned and exhausted, I couldn't bring myself to ask how he had died. Would she even have asked me not to draw if she had felt her privacy invaded? Perhaps I wasn't helping, but adding to her sense of violation.

NP: As compared to Iraq, what notable differences in the wartime landscape and culture did you encounter when you visited Afghanistan?

SM: Afghanistan is quite different, much poorer, although there seemed to be a wild building boom going on in Kabul when I visited in 2010 as a result of all the US development money flowing in. Helmand Province felt rougher than anything I'd encountered in Iraq, very conservative, very hostile.

At the same time, as is much remarked, the people are beautiful. Actually, you don't really see the women, except in full-length sky-blue burkas riding behind their husbands on a motorcycle. The men are strong and broad-shouldered, with full black beards and incredibly stylish turbans in beautiful fabrics.

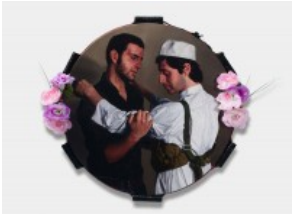
The adobe walls and floors, swept clean, the brightly-colored cheap plastic water jugs with decorative threads and tape added, even the AK-47s with tassels or painted decorations – everything seems to radiate this amazing austere beauty. You forget what a hostile place for Westerners this is, how narrow and sternly sanctioned the culture is.

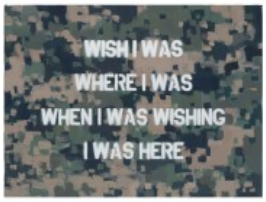
NP: Since the War made its shift from Iraq to Afghanistan (and Pakistan), and president Obama took office, there has been quite an increase in Drone attacks. Some consider this to be mostly because of advancements in weapons technology and increased accuracy of the "Reaper". Did you notice this difference during your more recent trips? And, in your first-hand experiences, what has been the general attitude about Obama (as compared to Bush) in the Middle East?

SM: I had no experiences around the drones, which are controlled through very specialized parts of the military, although I sometimes heard the whine of their motors.

I suspect that Arabs or Afghans "on the street" regard Obama as simply continuing Bush's policies. However in 2003-2004 I noticed in Iraq that opinions about Bush, the US, and the war could be quite divergent, and not as uniformly negative as I sometimes felt the media portrayed it (in particular the BBC, which I heard in the hotels via satellite).

How Iraqis feel about the US in hindsight could improve a lot after we've left, if the situation there improves.





NP: In one of your Baghdad Journal entries on Artnet, you wrote about your experiences meeting Iraqi artists and hanging out in a really interesting Iraqi art gallery. How was discovering this arts community inspirational for you as an artist?

SM: I wouldn't call it inspirational so much as enjoyable. The Baghdad art scene in 2003-04 very much

SM: I wouldn't call it inspirational so much as enjoyable. The Baghdad art scene in 2003-04 very much resembled that of a small American city, with cliques that hung around certain galleries, rivalries, friendships and hatreds.

I got to know the crowd at the Hewar Gallery, run by the avuncular silver-maned Qassim Septi, an artist himself. There was a lovely garden café attached. It was the place to be on Saturday mornings. If you were lucky Qassim would invite you to a lunch of Masgouf, traditionally-grilled Iraqi river fish.

I became particularly close with two artists, Esam Pasha and Ahmed al-Safi, as well as Nasir Hassan, a poet. I used to bring breakfast up to Ahmed's studio near the Bab Sherji marketplace, and we'd paint in the mornings.

NP: What do you consider to be an important general misconception about the Iraqi people?

SM: That they would have a consensus about the war and America.

I don't think Americans realize quite how much Iraqi society is divided by Sunni and Shia and other religious minorities, by Arab and Kurd, and by tribal affiliations, which in some cases can encompass both Sunnis and Shias.

Many Sunnis are more secular and would sooner ally with the US than with Iran. Many Shias are happy that Saddam was overthrown. How this will play out, it seems to me, is completely unclear; I think it's short-sighted to scoff at the notion that Iraq might become a relatively stable democracy in 10 years.

Of course that's a different question from whether that outcome would have been worth our sacrifice.

NP: When you find yourself back in the U.S., going to art openings and hanging out with artists, do you get a vibe that the art world has changed at all, or that young artists' work has, in the last decade of war in the Middle East?

SM: Going to art fairs one sees that the contemporary art world's most powerful function is marketing luxury goods to rich people, so a lot of times political convictions expressed in the artworks seem kind of rote. The art world insulates itself from politics, aside from a sort of soft, pervasive leftism, reflected mostly in race and gender politics.

I actually don't think artists are that interested in politics, at least most of the painters I know. In an odd way, they're a bit like the soldiers I met in Iraq, quick to express a vague political conviction but really more interested in getting back to doing what they like, in this case, painting in their studios and hoping to sell to collectors who can advance their careers, or at least help pay the rent.

However, one change I've noticed is a resurgence of narrative realism. The rendering skills of young artists are remarkable compared with 15 years ago. It sounds trite to make a connection between this desire to depict narrative and 9/11, and yet it seems possible to me.

NP: I noticed in interviews that you have cited Winslow Homer as an inspirational artist. Are there any current painters that you consider to be important "Wartime Artists"?

SM: I've always thought that Kim Jones is an important artist whose work reflects his time with the Marines in Vietnam.

I like Botero's Abu Ghraib series. I like Ronald Ophuis's paintings. There are several good young artists who are veterans such as the ceramics artist Jesse Albrecht, as well as military combat artists Kris Battles and Mike Fay. The illustrator Vic Juhasz has done some beautiful drawings recently in Afghanistan.

It's important to make a distinction between artists who draw from life in a war zone in hopes of gaining some subjective truths to make art about, versus activist art, which seeks to show the immorality of war. If Winslow Homer is the former, Otto Dix and, say, Nancy Spero represent the latter. Comparing the two is like comparing apples and oranges. Both depict war, but with utterly different motives.

NP: The ink/watercolor drawings that you make "from life" in Iraq, are examples of an amazing sense of draftsmanship. When you get going on a series, you must feel your "drawing chops" getting better and better. Explain your on-site technique a little bit, and how some of these pictures are later translated into larger and more detailed canvases.

SM: Well the trips are all about drawing from life, which means working while wearing a flack vest, helmet, eye and ear protection when embedded outside the wire. So I've evolved a kit – a photographer's vest with a million pockets, including one where I can fit a plastic water bottle for washes, a small palette, all my inks and pens, etc. I lost the palette during a firefight in Afghanistan recently. On the way back to base the sergeant was telling his men over the radio, "keep an eye out for the fuckin artist's uh, fuckin watercolor

palette, OK?" I never found it, so probably some Afghan kid is using it now.

I also carry a small point and shoot that I habitually snap pictures with while I'm drawing.
For the large paintings I often hire models and restage a scene. For example, I had around 15 people on my studio roof last year, recreating a dramatic night-time prisoner transfer onto a C-17. I advertised for Arab models on Craigslist, and dressed them in orange prison jumpsuits, blindfolds and shackles; I had others dressed as MPs, hustling them onto a platform that represented the ramp. It was an intense photo shoot. I had explained what I was after ahead of time, but the models had powerful and ambivalent feelings about it, both the prisoners and guards. It felt like a performance piece.

NP: When you are back in NY, working in your studio, what news sources do you rely on to get proper information about what's going on in the Middle East?

SM: The usual ones: the NY Times, NPR. From my experience I think they have excellent and balanced coverage. Reporters like Dexter Filkins, or Anthony Shadid – I think they're very good at what they do.

NP: What would you like to change about your work? Are there improvements you look forward to making in your next series of paintings?

SM: It's all about finding the narratives that effectively distill the experience of our wars. It's certainly not about objective truth. I always liked the way Michael Cimino used that game of Russian roulette in The Deer Hunter as metaphor, even though no one was ever actually made to do that by the Viet Cong.

NP: Any shows coming up?

SM: A group show in Munich next summer; then I suppose, my next one-person show at Postmasters.

One Response to *Correspondent*

mac *says:*
October 8, 2011 at 9:06 pm

Excellent. Interview are poignant and inviting.

Reply