

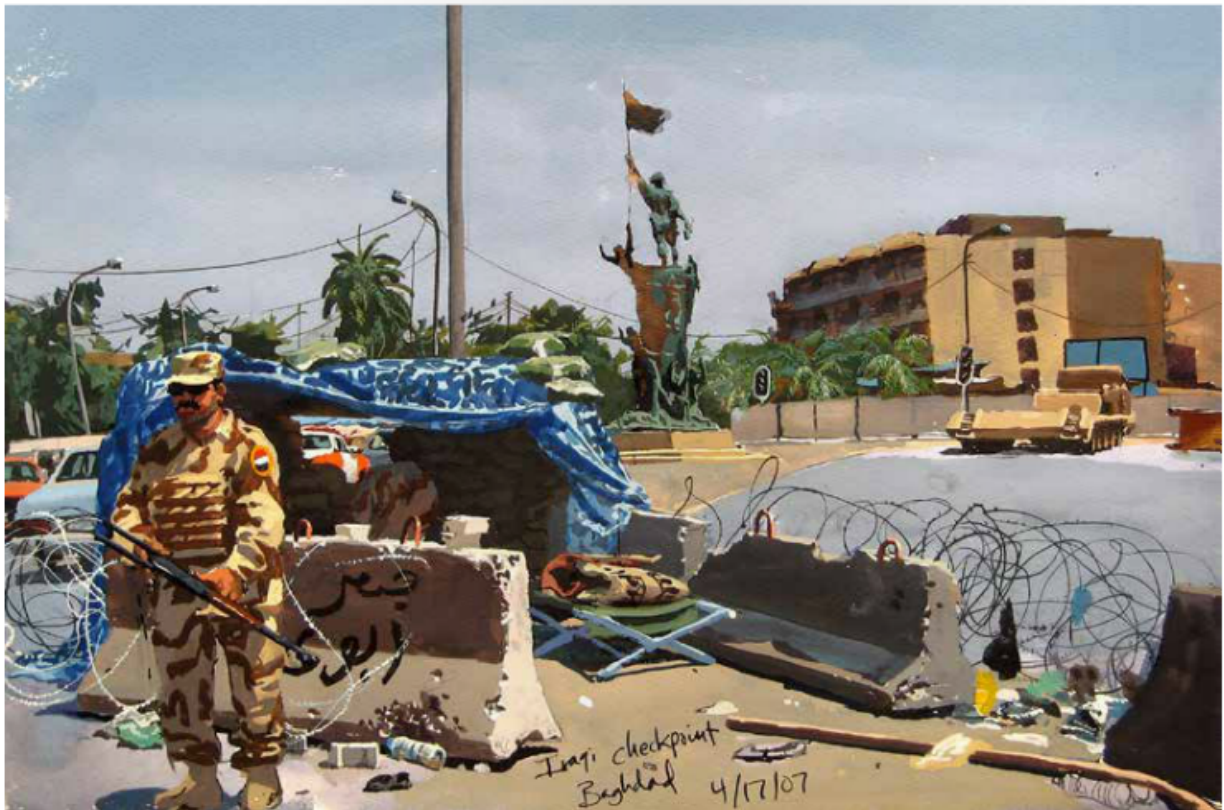
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Steve Mumford, *A typical Iraqi checkpoint in Baghdad in 2007 as the US raced to get Iraqi forces in place. It seemed to me that what the Iraqis lacked in finesse, they often made up for in boldness.* 2007, ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper

# THE DISASTERS OF WAR

Two Views of Conflict at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts through June 8

by Daniel Tidwell

Two very different views of war and its impact on ordinary people—one brutally frank, the other cool and detached—take center stage at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts through the work of Francisco Goya and Steve Mumford and their singular meditations on the nature of war and its inherent tragedy.

Goya's iconic series of prints, *The Disasters of War*, graphically depicts the horrors of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in the Peninsular War from 1808–14. In these intimate works, which were inspired by eyewitness accounts and imagination, Goya dives head first into the atrocities of the conflict, presenting scenes of



Francisco Goya, *No se convienen (They Do Not Agree)*, ca. 1811–12, Etching and drypoint, burin, and burnisher, 5.7" x 8.5"



rape, murder, torture, dismemberment, combat, execution, and famine. Although the series was first published in 1863, time has lessened none of its visceral power to shock. Describing the unflinching quality of the work, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti once wrote, "In Goya's greatest scenes, we seem to see the people of the world exactly at the moment when they first attained the title of 'suffering humanity'. They writhe upon the page in a veritable rage of adversity."

*The Disasters of War* occupies a special place in art history—as an important anti-war statement and as one of the first works to break with academic practice, laying bare Goya's own true feelings about the war. "Goya broke from a tradition that exalted individual military leaders as heroes—such as the grand equestrian portraits of Napoleon by David, Gericault and others being made around the same time—to focus on the negative aspects of war and the terrible impact it has on ordinary soldiers and civilians," according to Frist Center Curator Katie Delmez.



Steve Mumford, *Under cloudy skies a 2/3 Marines platoon waits to leave as their replacements arrive.* 2011, ink and watercolor on paper

"Even the medium can be seen as a reflection of this more 'democratic' and bleak perspective with the limited color palette and smaller scale of the work. There really is nothing heroic or grand in these images." According to Delmez, "He was not making them with a particular patron in mind. In fact, they were only published for distribution thirty-five years after his death."

Goya is the creator of some of the great masterpieces of Western art, including *The Third of May*, a heroic depiction of Spanish resisters; *The Nude Maja*, a groundbreaking depiction of the naked female form, and wildly inventive and dark works such as *Saturn Devouring His Son* from late in his career. "Goya is sometimes called the last of the great 'Old Master' painters because of his subject matter," according to Delmez, "and the first of the modern artists because of the psychological intensity of much of his work. I think this dichotomy is what makes his work so compelling now, two hundred years later."

Steve Mumford's *War Journals*, 2003–2013, provide a twenty-first-century counterpoint to Goya's ruminations on war. Where Goya's outrage over war's bestiality and horror is clear in his images, Mumford's personal views of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are nearly impossible to glean from his journalistic approach to portraying life in a war zone.



Francisco Goya, *No saben el camino (They Don't Know the Way)*, ca. 1813–14, Etching, drypoint, burin, and burnisher, 6.9" x 8.7"

Since 2003, Mumford has worked on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, embedded with U.S. troops, creating sketches, watercolors, and large-scale paintings that provide an insider's look at the mundane nature of daily life during wartime and the tragic consequences of combat. Mumford's original intent was to capture his own experiences with troops along with Iraqi and Afghan citizens, according to Frist Center curator Mark Scala. "While striving to be accurate in what he depicted, Mumford acknowledges the inherent subjectivity to his process in which a drawing or watercolor takes awhile to complete, and the scene changes in front of him," says Scala. "These are impressions, not documents."

Many of Mumford's watercolors have the poetic, color-washed look of Winslow Homer, while others have the more awkward feel of a courtroom sketch. "There are clearly different intentions from one body of work to another," according to Scala. "Some are more pure reportage; others are meant to be more aesthetically pleasing." In 2013, Mumford was allowed access to Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba to create illustrations for a story in *Harper's* on the trial of an accused terrorist. Scala feels that these are "perhaps



Francisco Goya, *Y no hai remedio (And There Is No Remedy)*, ca. 1811–12, Etching, drypoint, burin, and lavis, 5.7" x 6.5"





Steve Mumford, *A patrol from 1st Cav 4/9 checks in with Iraqi checkpoints throughout Haila Street and Khark in Baghdad in 2007. I had been in this area in 2004 when it was a Sunni insurgent stronghold and US forces couldn't move down the street without being attacked. 2007, Ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper.*

the most evocative of his courtroom sketches." These works round out the exhibition and are fascinating because military censors have redacted information from the works—bringing to mind the larger, more complex issue of U.S. foreign policy as it relates to war.

In addition to these smaller works, Mumford creates large-scale, heroic paintings that reference history painting to ironic effect. In one monumental work from 2010 *Empire*, measuring 8 x 11 feet, he shows a group of blindfolded prisoners in orange prison jumpsuits as they are ushered into the belly of a large military plane by armed troops under cover of night. It's an arresting image but again one that has no clearly discernible point of view. For Scala, "The work conveys irony and ambivalence regarding the politics and morality of the war . . . providing a broader historical context . . . as an astute counterpoint to the more immediate sketches of the war zone."

Unlike Goya, Mumford's goal has never been to portray the extremity of war or to be political. Rather his goal has been to point out how oftentimes not much happens in a war zone. Troops and civilians alike go on living their daily lives. Even though the threat of direct combat may loom large, they are able to "find normalcy in the spaces between conflict."

The pairing of these exhibitions provides viewers with "a fascinating opportunity to examine the ways two artists working in very different times with different motivations and levels of entanglement with each conflict handle the subject matter," according to Delmez.

"Neither Mumford nor Goya tells the whole story of war. Who could?" says Scala. "But together, they cover an enormous amount of territory."

**Goya: *The Disasters of War* and Steve Mumford's *War Journals, 2003–2013*, Frist Center for the Visual Arts through June 8. For more information visit [www.fristcenter.org](http://www.fristcenter.org).**



Steve Mumford, *A patrol from India Co, 3/6 Marines get a visit from a couple of tough old Afghans, possibly Taliban themselves. 2010, Ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper*



Francisco Goya, *Que valor! (What Courage!)*, ca. 1811–12, Etching, aquatint, drypoint, burin, and burnisher, 6.2" x 8.3"