

Embedded Artists

By: Steven Heller | September 12, 2014

Artist-witnesses have been in the field chronicling wars and warriors since time immemorial. More recently, they served in Korea, Vietnam and in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This tradition continues today with artists Michael D. Fay, Victor Juhasz, and Steve Mumford. They'll be presenters at an event hosted by the Society of Illustrators Wednesday, Sept. 17, from 6:30 – 8:30 pm.

The artists will discuss their experience creating imagery during combat, as well their visual records of wounded veterans recovering from their injuries. (Tickets for this must see event are on sale [here](#).) Prior to the formal discussion, I asked the artists about the what they hope the SI audience will take away from their experiences.

What is your aim for this panel?

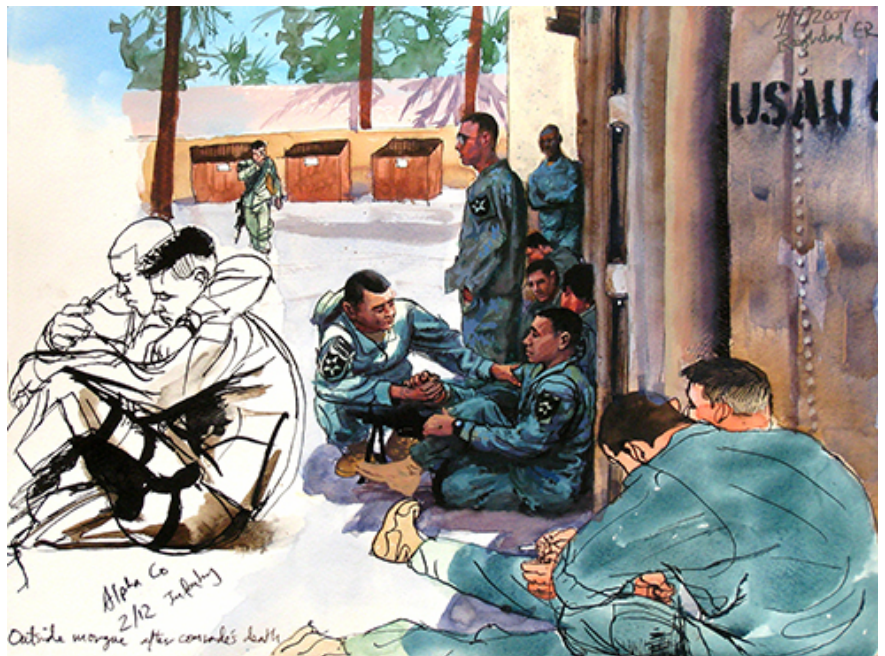
Michael D. Fay: To give students, fellow illustrators and artists, and the art public the opportunity to gain some insight into a small, but active art niche, devoted to creating art from direct experience with war and warriors. Also, to perhaps give the audience an appreciation of the degree war has played an integral part in the arch of art history.

Victor Juhasz: We feel very strongly that combat/war (also known as 'witness') artists bring unique and significant visual observations from their front line experiences that are different from photo journalism. The camera takes in all the facts in a split second. Drawings and paintings take time even under the most pressured circumstances. The artist must observe and in the process make visual editorial decisions to tell a story.

One thing that will make this evening's presentation interesting is that we'll have perspectives on documenting the events from both a civilian and military artist's point of view. What are the similarities, what are the differences?

Steve Mumford: I'd like to describe the highs and lows of being and trying to make art in a combat zone: fear, boredom, looking desperately for something or somebody to draw, drawing with 50 lbs of gear on in 120 degrees, and no handkerchief to keep the sweat from obliterating the ink on the pad. Or, occasionally, the tears.

What was the last combat situation you covered?



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Fay: In May of 2010, I embedded with Marines in Afghanistan.

Juhasz: My only actual embedded situation was in August 2011 in Kandahar, Afghanistan, documenting the 1-52nd Arctic Thunder Army helicopter MEDEVAC unit. The drawings and my writings were published in GQ online [in] July 2012. The feature also had an app created for it — one of the first for GQ online.

Mumford: Helmand, Afghanistan in 2011 and (not precisely combat!) [and] Gitmo in 2013, both for Harper's Magazine.



You've been doing this for years. What do you want viewers to take away from your images?

Fay: First and foremost, the humanity of warriors, and secondly, the appropriateness of artists experiencing war, one of the most universal of human conditions and a deep informer of art history.

Juhasz: I'd like them to connect with the soldiers, Marines [and] civilians I draw, and the stories I tell visually and sometimes with words. The battlefield can be overseas or back home in a hospital ward recovering from life threatening wounds. Hopefully, I can stay as objective in my documentation as possible and allow the viewer to come to his/her own conclusion.

Mumford: A feeling of what it's actually like, through a sense of my being there. I think viewers can tell from the mark-making when you're sweating out a drawing, plugging away mistakes and all. It's very personal, I hope.

What is the virtue of art versus photography in war?

Fay: Art is like poetry and photography is the prose. Both have intense narrative content, but art, with its deep analog roots, is a more intimate experience both for the artist and the viewer. Art condenses and edits many moments down to one vision. A photograph captures one moment recorded expertly with a machine. This is not to say a photograph or the photographer are any less profound in their work, just different.

'Distance' is an element in art and produce different responses in the overall aesthetic experience for both the creator and the viewer. I believe there is more an element of 'distance' in a photo and a greater degree of intimacy in a field sketch or watercolor.

Juhasz: The strange element of intimacy that is inherent in the very act of taking the time to observe, digest and draw as well as the artist's relationship with the subject or subject matter. That connection can happen even in

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the most compressed of circumstances and certainly in the more extended situations of sitting and spending time drawing a wounded vet. The eyes start connecting. The expressions and body language are noted. Guards are let down.

We're not invading space — as is the nature of photo journalism "spray and run" as I heard it described recently by a cameraman — as much as being allowed into someone's space. It sets up a different experience for the viewer.

Mumford: There's so much awesome photography of the wars, including by Iraqi and Afghan photojournalists trained through AP and others. Photos are really immediate, much better for showing action and decisive moments. Drawing captures something much slower, the moments in between, which make up the actuality of a combat zone. And, of course, they're much more subjective.