

# The Medium and The Messenger

Steve Mumford went to Iraq as an artist-reporter soon after the U.S. invasion. Twenty stories posted during six trips made over seven years make up his *Baghdad Journal*. With drawing after drawing after drawing, a triangulated narrative picture of the war emerges, one rarely experienced elsewhere in the highly mediated spectacle of the invasion and its bloody, deteriorating aftermath — JAMES TRAINOR



Image

Stray dogs at Combat Outpost Hotel, 3rd Armored Cavalry  
Regiment, Mosul, Iraq, in April, 2008  
2008, ink and watercolor on paper

All images are courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery,  
New York

Night has fallen and the worst of the day's oppressive mid-summer heat has given way to a balmy, breezy July evening. Even a few stars can be made out twinkling in the hazy sky. Down below, on an expanse of asphalt, a group of men in orange prisoner jumpsuits and white blindfolds are being lined up, their ankles shackled one to the next with leg irons, their hands bound with plastic wrist ties, each person so close to the other that movement is awkward, painful and ill-advised. Around them, apparently tasked with monitoring the situation, stand a smaller number of men and one woman dressed in the combat gear of the U.S. military in Iraq. All have heavy automatic weapons casually slung across their bodies. One man, weighed down in full body armor, is sweating in the clammy air. The young woman in the desert-toned camouflage fatigues of an Army MP has one hand on the grip of her M-16, the other holding a steel baton by her side. Another man, older than the others and with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, an olive drab T-shirt and cargo pants, is clearly the one in charge – the figure of authority who knows how this operation will go down and to whom the others look for procedural guidance. With a calm, clear and precise firmness he instructs the prisoners when to squat on their haunches and assume a nearly-impossible-to-maintain stress position, when to stand up and when to start shuffling up the large ramp before them. He also tells the soldiers – who seem mildly nery and unfamiliar with this task – what to do, the proper way to handle the prisoners, how close to get to them.

Under the harsh glare of floodlights, the atmosphere is both charged with preparatory

expectation and at the same time prosaic, one of instructions and protocols being carried out, the kind of thing that happens when people are being readied and processed for something they know little-to-nothing about. At one point, a prisoner at the end of the gang begins to complain that the ankle cuffs are cutting off his circulation; another chimes in that there seems to have been some kind of mistake and asks if he can call his talent agent. Giggles and laughter run through the group, a sudden release in the genuine nervous tension, and even the guards start to laugh. Someone offers to loosen the shackle but no one can find the key. It is the last thing you would expect to see during a transfer of suspected insurgents at a U.S. air force base in Iraq. But this isn't a tarmac runway in Iraq. It is a tar-papered rooftop on the Lower East Side of New York City. The man in charge is artist Steve Mumford, who with the patient, good-natured confidence of a seasoned Outward Bound instructor is conducting a nighttime photo shoot on the roof of his studio in a decommissioned schoolhouse, reconstructing, with the help of friends, acquaintances and hired actors and models, the scene of a prisoner transfer that he witnessed in Mosul, Iraq, in 2008, in which rows and rows of accused militants were being loaded onto giant C-130 transport planes, possibly bound for Guantánamo or points unknown. "Okay, the laughing – definitely not so authentic," Mumford points out, also grinning. He later told the group that, "Only in New York could we do something like this and not have someone call the cops." Mumford, who showed up on most peoples' radars in 2003 when he went to Iraq as an artist-reporter soon after the U.S. invasion and subsequently began chronicling life in Iraq under occupation, sent home drawings

and reports posted directly to the online art news Web site Artnet.com, offered as a series of personal visual missives, sketchy epistles from the field. With drawing after drawing, a triangulated narrative picture of the war began to emerge, one rarely experienced elsewhere in the highly mediated spectacle of the invasion and its bloody, deteriorating aftermath: a personal, episodic, acutely observational and consciously subjective account of everyday life in a place in extreme and escalating crisis, a society in which the bottom had dropped out of "the everyday." Whether drawing, in real time, U.S. infantrymen conducting house searches in narrow trash-strewn back alleys or killing time knocking golf balls into the Tigris river or Iraqi civilians rushing tanker trucks to procure precious drinking water or calmly congregating in dark teahouses, documenting the scenes of suicide or roadside bombings or the matter-of-fact stances of people loitering near the lip of a recently discovered mass grave, or simply capturing the off-hand quotidian beauty of a dusty crimson sky as twilight descends over a barren stretch of Baghdad highway, with children playing in the peripheral rubble, Mumford's hand – the literal physical presence of his hand working its way over a sketchbook with ink or pencil or watercolor – gave an unvarnished account of what lay before his eyes that was simultaneously empathetic and blunt, deeply human and unapologetically honest. On occasion he would find a moment of unsentimental lyricism in an otherwise dismal scene.

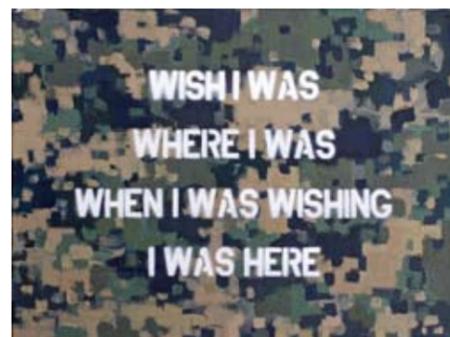
There would ultimately be more than 20 stories filed in Mumford's *Baghdad Journal*, posted during six trips made over seven years, primarily from 2003 to 2004 and 2007 to 2008. During that time he remained largely



“unembedded,” preferring to range around on his own, traveling to Kirkuk, Mosul, Tikrit, Ramadi, Samarra, Baqubah and many other locations around the country making friends with Iraqis and getting to know Iraqi artists; befriending journalists and their translators and fixers; attending meetings between U.S. military officers and local tribal leaders and imams; riding (all the while drawing) in humvees and APCs during frequently uneventful yet occasionally violent patrols; visiting U.S. rehabilitation centers for maimed and recovering soldiers being fitted with prosthetic limbs, or visiting the hospitals and emergency rooms of Baghdad where they and much of the civilian population were often dying. During that time, he also published several portfolios in *Harper's* magazine, from Baghdad and also from the Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas, consciously echoing work done by another artist-correspondent, Winslow Homer, in the mid-19th century. Homer, who like Mumford was a native New Englander and has been a profound and abiding influence on his work, was famously



sent by the same publication, *Harper's Weekly*, to chronicle the American Civil War in the 1860s with timely illustrational dispatches from the front at a time when photojournalism did not yet exist. His drawings brought the stark realities of that war into the homes of Americans everywhere. The reenacted scene playing itself out on the roof in July 2010 was in some ways nothing new for Mumford – both the memory it represented (based on hasty ink sketches and two blurry surreptitious snapshots) and the independent situation as it was experienced by the participants (who were all variously aware of a strange sense of dislocation, the disquiet of learning how easy it is to slip into assigned roles and power dynamics and feel the tug of a radically different reality suddenly informing their identities and senses of self). Mumford has become accustomed to returning home to New York and enlisting people to collaborate on these tableaux vivants. His practice can be divided into two main categories: The first are the drawings and sketches and watercolors produced in the field and on the fly; the second is his studio work, richly elaborated and highly constructed oil paintings that function in a completely different manner. Working in a way that references narrative and history painting in the grand tradition, recalling the stylistic and compositional conventions of Courbet and Manet, Caravaggio and Gérôme, as well as 1970s American Photorealism, these works are more like altered, fictionalized or confabulated perspectives on his experiences overseas, capturing things that eluded his eye in reality, occurrences that may never have been possible to see. In some ways they feel like stage-directed memories, fantasies or home front fever dreams. One painting, *Baqubah* (2009), shows a squad of Marines skinny-dipping

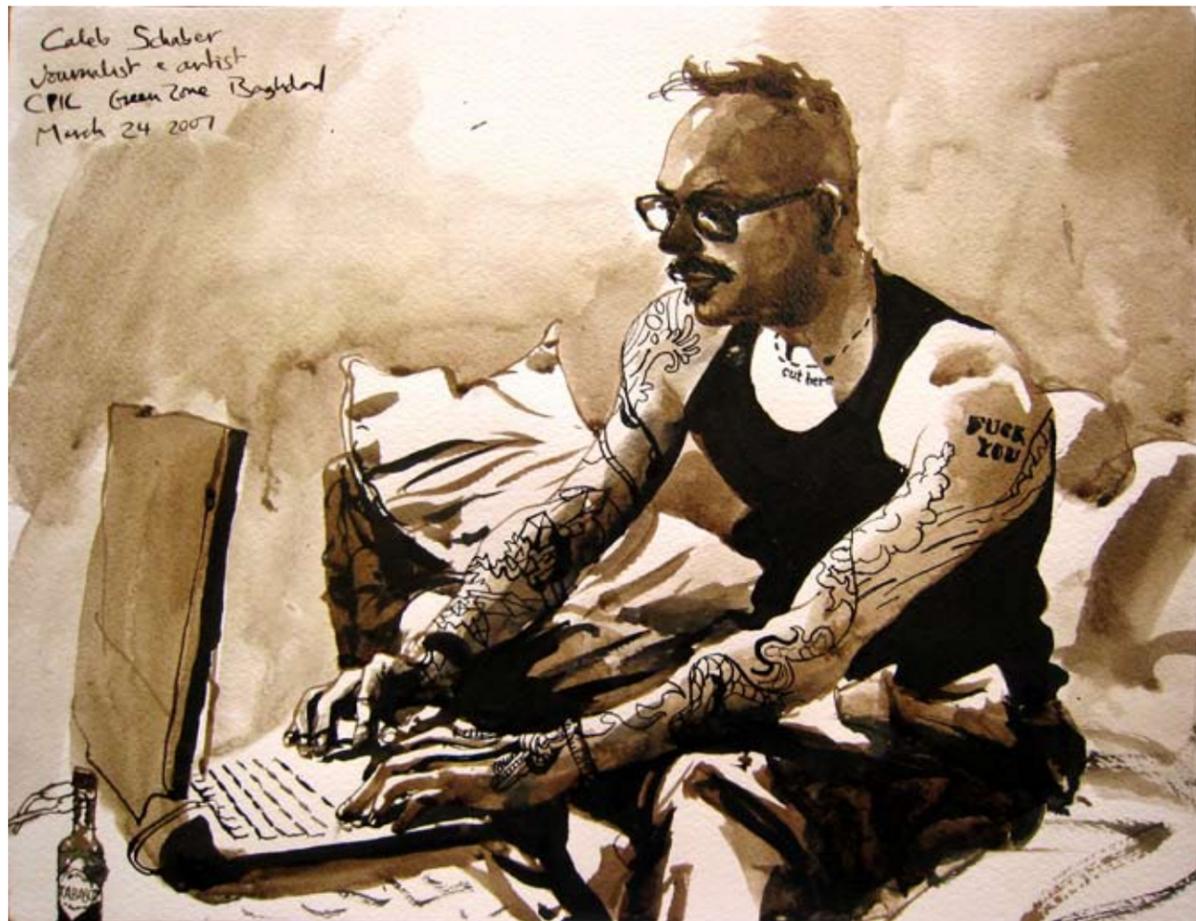


Images  
Top: *Wish I Was*  
2009, oil on linen, 11 7/8 x 16 inches

Bottom: *82nd Engineers on a Counter-Mortar Patrol in Farmlands Near Baqubah, July, 2004*  
2004, ink and watercolor on paper

Images  
*Diamondback Airfield, Mosul, Iraq, April, 2008*  
2008, ink and watercolor on paper

Mumford's hand – the literal physical presence of his hand working its way over a sketchbook with ink or pencil or watercolor – gave an unvarnished account of what lay before his eyes that was simultaneously empathetic and blunt, deeply human and unapologetically honest



in and lounging around a lush agricultural canal, their youthful nakedness and the presence of their guns and tattoos giving an unexpectedly erotic edge to a scene of weary repose, a moment of stillness seemingly re-imagining Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in a testosterone-saturated combat zone. Another painting, *The Great Good Friends, (Suicide Bomber)*, (2010), imagines the comradeship and emotional bonds of the "other," depicting in a theatrically composed tondo format the farewell of an Islamist suicide bomber, clad in white, and his secular friend tearfully dissuading him from his mission. Other recent works, stenciled text paintings as dry and wry as Baldessarri or Ruschas, are lifted from American graffiti he came across in latrines and military bases in Kuwait, part anonymous swagger, part vandalistic rage, part mournful koan.

Mumford has now, despite himself, become a bit of an old war hand. After going on assignment to cover the BP oil disaster in the Gulf for *Harper's*, in July 2010 he traveled for the first time to Afghanistan for an initial two-week scouting trip. There he experienced comparatively minor hardships (the air carrier lost his gear including all of his art supplies, and he was forced to scramble to source some inferior Chinese-manufactured pens, paints and paper in Kabul – a place not currently known for its selection of artist materials) as well as major ones (he spent a week following the 3/6 Marines in the very active combat zone of Helmand Province, walking through irrigation ditches to avoid booby traps and roadside IEDs, and getting shot at during a Taliban ambush). Running to take cover during one firefight, he threw himself with some soldiers into a shallow

fetid canal, ruining his satellite phone as well as his chances to call his wife, the artist Inka Essenhigh, in New York, to let her know he was okay. But he was okay, and a little more than a week later he was back in New York calling up friends and inviting them over to help out on his roof. A short time after the photo shoot, he was up north at his summer studio on the coast of Maine recalling how a New York artist found himself sitting in Kuwait in mid-April 2003, waiting for a chance to enter Iraq. —

Images  
 Caleb Schaber, Journalist and Artist, CPIC, Green Zone Baghdad, March 24, 2007  
 2009, ink and watercolor on paper



## Steve Mumford in conversation with James Trainor

August 5, 2010

**James Trainor:** During a panel discussion for 'The Storyteller' exhibition at Parsons School of Design in New York earlier this year, you mentioned realizing in 2003, with journalists becoming 'embedded' during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, that you could 'just go to a war zone.' Was it really that simple?

**Steve Mumford:** The hard part was finding someone who would give me a press pass. I called Jerry Saltz, the art critic at the *Village Voice*, who said it was a great idea but he couldn't do anything for me. Walter Robinson of Artnet.com was someone I knew socially and Artnet's online magazine was a work in progress, and I think he was open to anything. I told him he didn't have to pay me anything, I'd just be happy to get a press pass. They didn't have press passes, so they worked one up in Photoshop and sent it to me. That

was all I needed, because I had to present something that could pass for credentials to the U.S. armed forces. I didn't want to be entirely embedded, so up until the later trips I tried to spend at least half my time 'un-embedded' living in Baghdad. That gave me a chance to meet Iraqi artists, and it was through getting to know the art scene in Baghdad that I got to hang out with Iraqis and understand their point of view.

**JT:** Was this kind of project percolating somewhere in the back of your mind?

**SM:** I'd had experience traveling and drawing before – I spent about a year in the Amazon when I was younger doing that, so the idea of drawing in a documentary style was not new to me. But certainly going to a war zone was. I made a bunch of calls to see if I could get embedded. At that point the military had

Image  
 Steve Mumford, Drawing from Life, Iraq, 2003  
 Unknown photographer

a waiting list and it was too late. So I figured I would get a ticket to Kuwait, see if I could find a way into Iraq or see if I even felt comfortable going that far. As it happened, I met a French journalist who had some space in his SUV, so I wound up driving with him and his companion up to Baghdad as they did stories along the way.

The fighting was essentially over at that point, but on my first day inside Iraq, these journalists were interviewing people in a hospital in Basra and it was a pretty dire scene. I found myself pretending to be some sort of news photographer taking photographs, but it seemed to be for nothing and I had no place for these photographs to go. I suddenly felt like an imposter. I went outside to smoke a cigarette and I realized that there was no way for me to go back, to go home; there were no buses, nothing. I was kind of stuck. So then I took out my drawing pad and began to draw. And little by little I began to overcome this sense of panicked stage fright and the feeling that I didn't have a right to be there. I began to convince myself that an artist had as much right to be there as a photojournalist or any other kind of journalist and that I had a legitimate role to play. Once I got over that, it got easier.

**JT:** Your *Baghdad Journal* not only show the grim and bloody side of the conflict (often witnessed in its aftermath) but also aspects of everyday life under occupation that are nuanced, textured and often poignant.

**SM:** Well, it is certainly true that people's perceptions are shaped by the media, and in the media 'if it bleeds, it leads.' There is an imperative to seek out those situations of violence. My philosophy was to travel around randomly and draw whatever happened in front of me. In some ways, it was effective

because I was able to depict this whole side of life in Baghdad that at least showed how people were making do and trying to find some way into normalcy. In retrospect, I feel there was a downside to that approach because as I wasn't looking for the violence, a lot of pictures could have been done in Syria or somewhere else, except for all the trash and soldiers on the streets. There is an interesting balance you have to negotiate in portraying a war: On the one hand, you want to be honest to your own experiences and not manipulate the scene too much, but, on the other hand, you have a responsibility to look for the war, such as it is. Primarily I saw my role as that of a subjective artist, not an objective reporter. I figured the journalists were there to look for the objective story.

**JT:** Did anything in your background prepare you for such extreme experiences like this?

**SM:** No, but I guess what I noticed was that life in a war zone has its oddly attractive qualities. Because everything is so intense, even the banal moments seem important, and you feel like you are in the center of where everything interesting and important is happening. And so I can see the attraction, and I think a lot of people are drawn to a war zone for that particular reason. I think in a way if you feel that pull, it can be quite easy to stay there. And the intensity of the worst moments can feed that as well. I think that is part of the dangerous pull of war on human beings – that it is awful and at the same time seductive.

**JT:** You've clearly stated that you are an artist, not a 'war artist,' even though you've allowed that the latter term was sometimes useful in Iraq because it helped people

make sense of what you were doing there. You've also said that you are not a 'war junkie,' as the journalist Chris Hedges has described himself in examining conflicted feelings in his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Does that issue of repulsion-attraction ring true for you personally as well?

**SM:** I don't consider myself a war reporter or war artist, because my experiences have not been as intense as the people who have really covered these wars deeply and lived there for years. As an artist, I have dipped my toe in the water and looked for stuff that would be useful to make art about, and then been quite happy not to chase the bullets any further. You take chances in a danger zone and cross your fingers that nothing is going to happen. I think I have a greater sense of self-preservation than some of these hardcore journalists. And what I am doing is something different and it doesn't require me to be in the worst places or stay as long. Some people go back again and again and again. But I guess I do have a little of that bug, that fascination, that draws me back.

**JT:** I'm interested in how you are consciously using this very fundamental human act of drawing and introducing it as an anachronistic visual form of reportage in a media-saturated context. What does your choice say to you about being a reporter in this age?

**SM:** These days, with the fact that people can post some video that they shot on their cell phone in the middle of a riot and so many people can see it over the Internet, there is a privileging of subjective experience feeding into the overall sense of what is going on in the world. It's this phenomenon that deemphasizes the professional reporter.

His practice can be divided into two main categories: The first are the drawings and sketches and watercolors produced in the field and on the fly; the second is his studio work, richly elaborated and highly constructed oil paintings that function in a completely different manner



Images

**The Prostitutes**

2009, oil on linen, 77 1/2 x 77 1/2 inches

For me there is an obvious peril to that: I would never want my 'reporting,' such as it is, to be substituted for the professionals, because to have people like the *New York Times* correspondent Dexter Filkins and others who can sort through the bullshit pretty quickly and figure out what is really going on – that's essential. The tragedy of the news media is that there are far fewer people like that these days. On the other hand, the more professionalized that mainstream news reporting gets, the weirder it is for someone like me to arrive in a war zone. I love storytelling and I want the viewer to understand that there is a narrative unfolding that could have many different endings and they are in the middle of it. It's probably no coincidence that I am interested in doing this just as [the cartoonist-reporter] Joe Sacco and others have done it, finding themselves washed up on these shores and starting to draw.

**JT: When you return home from your trips, you start working on elaborate and complex oil paintings, which often operate as a process of reconstituting or confabulating these intense experiences and memories.**

SM: Memory is already so suspect. Even when you're standing right there, the way you perceive something is so subjective that it may completely disagree with what someone else is experiencing at the same moment. As an artist, that's the space where there is room for individual subjective creativity. Some of the paintings are based on things that I saw but it didn't even occur to me to try to draw at the time, but then a scene kind of sank in, or I dwelled on some narrative that had a striking poignance.

For example, there is a painting of a couple of Iraqi prostitutes who were in the swimming

pool of a fancy hotel in Baghdad, a compound where the Hotel Palestine and the Sheraton Ishtar were, with its own security complex that was several blocks wide, across the river from the Green Zone. The setting was a journalists' barbeque that I went to. I knew that these girls were prostitutes because an Iraqi friend and I had had breakfast in this hotel and he spotted one of the girls and said that she was working with the prostitutes there. This kind of floored me because it is extraordinarily rare that any Iraqi girl would be working as a prostitute servicing westerners – that is a tremendous taboo. So these girls' lives were eminently in danger and they were living in this hotel compound and I couldn't help feeling that they hoped they would be taken out of the country when the reporters and contractors left. It was a situation where I don't think those girls would be able to leave that place.

Anyway, everyone was standing around having these little discrete conversations around the swimming pool not noticing these two girls who were in the middle, and I just thought, Wow, that really sums up the experience of civilians in a war, those who want to be there and all the others who are stuck there and



Images  
Shi'ite Demonstrators, Baghdad, January, 2004  
2004, ink and watercolor on paper

have to make difficult choices just to survive. So there was a scene that I only had a memory of – no photographs, no drawings. It gave me a lot of latitude and I hired a couple of models and I knew some people who had a swimming pool in New York. I posed the girls in the pool and others as the journalists and I'd located some photographs on the Web of a different hotel pool in Baghdad, and sort of adapted all this different source material to my purposes and recreated this scene from scratch that I had this probably very imperfect memory of. But it is beautiful when you don't have to hew too much to truth or specific sources in order to reach out and grab stuff and cobble together something that seems powerful to you.

**JT: You painted it in this very grandly theatrical but realist manner.**

SM: I was thinking of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, and the whole French Salon-style history or narrative painting tradition, and a period when Western Orientalism was at its height. Gérôme would do these harem scenes, and there was often a pool and maybe some reflections of palm trees. And in a way, that is all there in my painting. So I think it is kind of funny that the painting also references these Western fantasies about Arab sexuality and availability, and images that had this sort of function of titillation. And here these girls are as contemporary prostitutes, but their expressions and their body language are anything but languid and available and sensual. So I think it was a sort of nice conceptual full circle in that painting, because what you see instead is their worry, their vulnerability and how they are utterly alone. —

“I love storytelling and I want the viewer to understand that there is a narrative unfolding that could have many different endings and they are in the middle of it”