



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Iraq in conflict is his canvas

By Alina Tugend

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New York — IT'S hard, Steve Mumford says, drawing with a flak jacket and Kevlar helmet on. It's hard drawing when sniper bullets are flying.

But it's also hard to capture the quiet moments -- a woman lying dead on the side of the road, a soldier saluting at the memorial service for a fallen comrade.

The work of Mumford, a Manhattan-based artist who spent 11 months over the last two years in Iraq, looks back to a pre-digital, even pre-photography age, when drawings and paintings of combat were often the only way civilians grasped the bloodiness of war.

On Oct. 15, a compilation of Mumford's drawings and essays, "Baghdad Journal: An Artist in Occupied Iraq," will be published. A traveling exhibition of the work, which has shown in museums and galleries across the country, will open Oct. 6 at Southern Methodist University's Meadows Museum in Dallas.

Mumford uses pen-and-ink drawings and watercolors to present a multifaceted view of the Iraq war: soldiers creeping down alleys with guns at the ready, or playing golf at Saddam Hussein's palace; a boy sitting at a kebab stand; Iraqi prisoners lined up against a wall.

Even in this high-tech age, paintings can offer a different vision than photographs, Mumford says: "A drawing is generally not about a decisive moment. It's more about

scenes between the moments. The drawings slow down the war.”

The Iraq paintings were a change for Mumford, 44, who is known for dramatic landscapes -- oils and collages.

He was working on a series of paintings about Vietnam when the war in Iraq broke out. He had always loved the Civil War paintings of Winslow Homer, he says, and saw the Iraq conflict as an opportunity to become a modern-day combat artist.

He bought his own ticket and arrived in Kuwait City in April 2003, carrying a camera, paint and Japanese brushes. Reality hit, and he wondered how he would get into Iraq with no contacts, armed only with a press pass from artnet.com, an online arts magazine.

Eventually Mumford hooked up with two French reporters who offered him a seat in their rented SUV.

At his first stop in Iraq, a Basra hospital, “I had an urge to return to Kuwait, but realized that there was no way to do so,” Mumford writes in the introduction to his book. “The only thing I could do was to start drawing.”

He arrived in Baghdad after the city had fallen and showed up one morning at the headquarters of the Army’s 3rd Infantry Division. Over the roaring engines of a Bradley fighting vehicle, Mumford asked if he could become embedded with the division.

A unit commander, Lt. Col. Scott Rutter, seemed interested: “Make art? Terrific! That’s great, just great! Jump on!” Mumford writes in his first online journal entry, which he began posting, along with his art, on artnet.com in August 2003. Fifteen installments followed.

Over a total of four trips to Iraq in two years, Mumford spent about 70% of his time embedded with American troops; the rest of the time he was on his own.

Some drawings he did on the spot. At other times, often when it was too dangerous to dally, he snapped photos and painted later.

Mumford's drawings and watercolors -- he did more than 500 of them -- cover a variety of subjects and styles. Some are filled with color, such as one of women in bright red and orange clothing waiting with their children while soldiers search their house. Many are bursting with activity, like the painting depicting kids scrambling for candy tossed by soldiers. Others are simple pen-and-ink drawings, such as those of reporters sleeping in their barracks.

Then there are the placid scenes that scarcely look like the Baghdad that appears on the nightly news, such as Iraqis enjoying a garden teahouse.

Esrām Pasha, an Iraqi artist, met Mumford while working as an interpreter with the U.S. Army. He introduced Mumford to his friends

“I look at the paintings and they remind me of the times we used to sit there and talk for hours,” Pasha says. Mumford “didn’t wait for anyone or anything. He just got himself into Baghdad and started working as a professional artist.”

For Pasha, there’s no question that war photographs and Mumford’s paintings embrace very different concepts. “You can capture the whole world in one painting,” he says.

At P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, which included pieces by Mumford in its “Greater New York 2005” show, director Alanna Heiss calls the work “beautiful oddities.” In the galleries, she says, she would see how his drawings and watercolors drew viewers in.

They “manage to be static and moving at the same time,” she says. “When we look at realism now, it tends to feel very artificial because it’s not the current vocabulary of art. Steve’s very gifted. Otherwise, his work would seem as stilted or childish or propaganda. There’s no artifice there.”

Kate Sheerin, an assistant curator at the Meadows Museum, says it was the combination of journalism and art that drew her to Mumford’s work, but “what really put it on the front burner was how beautifully done the pieces are.

“Looking, you can see the ones he’s done on the spot and the ones he’s done from photographs -- he doesn’t hide that, and to me it’s conceptually interesting. There are interesting angles and compositions, and each one is stylistically different -- some are very elegant line drawings. He clearly didn’t just find a formula and start cranking it out.”

Sheerin points out that Mumford’s ambiguous feelings about the war are reflected in the work.

“He shows respect toward Iraqis but also a lot of camaraderie with the soldiers,” she says.

Mumford acknowledges his mixed sentiments.

“I didn’t go in with pro- or anti-military feelings. I didn’t feel Iraq was connected to 9/11, but I felt the possibility of creating a democracy was legitimate and still might work,” he says. “But you can’t have too many illusions. There’s a very fine line between not letting the Islamists gain too much control but acknowledging it is an Islamist country.”

A band of illustrators

IN his time in Iraq, Mumford says, he gained respect for the professionalism of the soldiers he was with. He says he also was usually greeted warmly by the Iraqis, who would gather around as he was sketching.

Invariably, he says, the women would disappear if he tried to draw them, while the men were eager to pose.

Although Mumford is a rarity, he is not alone. The Marine Corps, in fact, has 50 of its own active-duty combat illustrators.

Mumford says he wasn't in constant danger -- in fact, there would be stretches with no fighting at all. But he knew well the risk he and others confronted by being in Iraq. Steven Vincent, a freelance journalist who was kidnapped and killed in Basra in August, was a friend. The men shared an apartment for a few months in Baghdad.

Mumford says he met a number of journalists and photographers who were drawn to war zones, and "many different fantasies get played out in that realm. Deep down you don't believe you're the one who's going to get killed."

Even so, he says he has no wish to return to Iraq.

"If I went back, I would be a professional war artist," he says. "And that's not great for a marriage."

He and his wife, the painter Inka Essenhigh, agreed that he could stay as long as he wanted on the last trip -- but that it would be the final visit.

For now, he is following in the footsteps of Winslow Homer by working on oil paintings of his Baghdad work. And he is attempting to get officials at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to allow him to paint the wounded soldiers there.

He also acknowledges that he is enjoying the acclaim his work is receiving, seeing it as proof that “realism is making a comeback.

“Art shouldn’t be an inside joke that most people don’t get,” he says. “It should be appealing on a very basic level.”

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