



**STEVE MUMFORD
WAR DIARIES**

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OCTOBER 3 — NOVEMBER 14, 2008

A WAR FOR ALL OF US?

Beneath the hard October sun recalcitrant Baghdad throws up a fistful of dust, so fine the soldiers call it moon dust. It hovers, despite the breeze, mixing with diesel fumes, wreathing this sprawling, dyspeptic city.
— Steve Mumford, *Baghdad Journal: Two tales of a city.*¹

There is no single Iraq. Iraq, and the US military presence there, is colored differently in each of our minds. Herein lies the intrinsic difficulty, and possibility, of Steve Mumford's work. His pictures and journals of the Iraq war come at us from a neutral stance. They don't compel us to adopt his perspective on the war. They do, however, aim to present the war as it is, and fluidly color a place most often politicized as rigidly black or white.

Between 2003 and 2008, Mumford traveled to Iraq six times to work as a combat artist, both embedded within various units, such as the Army's Third Infantry Division, and living in cheap hotels and apartments in Baghdad and hanging out with Iraqi artists. Mumford has described his work as bound to the strange chronology of a day in Iraq. Whereas traditional war journalism highlights the action, many of Mumford's pictures lack the expected charge, and rather focus on the routine life of US soldiers — at rest, playing dominoes, in grief, waiting. In Iraq, moments of intensity surge from "relatively peaceful" situations. In these circumstances Mumford would

"snap a few photographs and then work up a drawing based on those photographs to give some sense of what that was like. But as an artist, I usually felt somehow that I was drawing in between the bombs or in between the bullets ... it was like the spaces in between, the people kind of waiting and filling the time, people kind of making the best of a situation that wasn't always great."²

Mumford has maintained he was not driven to develop a political stance as subject matter for the work.

"I never felt that my role was to be objective about the war. It seemed to me that my privilege as an artist was to be subjective ... not in terms of the politics of the war but in terms of people that I liked and bonded with, and that could be Iraqis or American soldiers. It wouldn't matter. But I wanted to have a sort of subjective sense of what it was like for me to be there."³

What may seem a contradiction — to be subjective, without coming down hard on one side of the war — actually seems to have opened the terrain for him. His images of soldiers, Iraqi civilians, KBR contractors and wrenching pictures from the emergency room are equally sharp, engaged and suffused with impartial compassion.

At times the pang of neutrality in Mumford's pictures leaves me desiring the rest of the story. Looked at in succession they appear as if obsessive storyboards disembodied from their extraordinarily complex narrative. We get all the color of Iraq — its tangles of barbed wire and crazy seeming electrical infrastructure, its pathos and boredom. He's given us reams of material — sketchbooks filled with quickly dashed cartoonish faces and spaces built up through atmospheric washes of color. Yet I find myself asking, where is the hardcore emotion and where are the bomb-riven tectonics? But then, it's not Mumford's job to tell us the complete story of Iraq. It's also not his job to end the war or put down the insurgency. He's just one guy there to draw, duck when it's called for and call his wife on cue. In that sense, his pictures say pointedly, "Here I am in Iraq, where are you?"



An 18-month-old Iraqi boy from Ramadi, whom the staff dubbed Henry. He inhaled chlorine gas after an insurgent gas attack. Two children with him died at the hospital. An uncle from Baghdad came by to visit him every day. 28th Combat Support Hospital, Baghdad ER, March 24, 2007



A soldier hit with an IED was being readied for surgery, but died between operations. 28th Combat Support Hospital, Baghdad ER, March 31, 2007



A typical scene in the ER after an IED blast, here with an Iraqi soldier. 28th Combat Support Hospital, Baghdad ER, April, 2007

Our air campaigns in Iraq made for stunning television as bombers alit the Baghdad sky with a petrochemical sunset. That green glow seared millions of minds thousands of miles away, not as an impression of its destruction, but for the surreal quality of the image, so unlike any war we thought we knew. Mumford's pictures do alleviate our distance to Iraq. Yet, it's still not what we expected. How can one represent the normalcy of war? From Mumford's unheated perspective, even moments of particular chaos appear part of the sober, routine life of US soldiers and Iraqis. We imagine our war correspondent disengaged during combat, ducking for cover, sneaking photos and passing ammo, just until things cool off.

I imagine the asymmetry between one's expectation and lived experience to be the only constant of war. In Mumford's case, the action was hard to find. He asserts

"most Americans would be surprised at how little of the shooting and dying war I actually saw, not due to lack of looking for it. One's subjective understanding of events is defined by what one actually experiences, and, as an artist trying to record reality I think anything else would be dishonest."⁴

Whereas Mumford's historical precedents, such as Winslow Homer's exacting Civil War engravings produced for Harper's magazine, shocked through their expression of sheer terror; Mumford's work issues a buffer to the emotional excess surrounding this war:

Mumford's paintings are challenging precisely because of their neutral stance. The fact that politics are excised from his work plants that burden squarely on the viewer: A war supporter may characterize him as a disinterested partner guilty of withholding needed support, even as the other end demonizes him as an apologist profiting from war crimes. Yet if we step back we might come to terms with the necessity of engaged neutrality. Far from apathy, his work establishes a controlled and searing reflection of the extremities of conviction held toward the war. Mumford's pictures of the Iraq war are difficult not as a system of belief to fight against, but as a ballast of our own belief. His work allows many Iraqis to coexist, in peace and in conflict. Viewers of his work can share the same picture, even if their rage sends them in opposite directions. And here is the value of his work — without sharing some common ground, we may get nowhere.

— Hesse McGraw, Curator, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts

Notes

1. Mumford, Steve. "Baghdad Journal: Two tales of a city." *Artnet*. 13 Dec 2004. <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/baghdadjournal.asp> (accessed September 9, 2008).
2. "Art Beat: Steve Mumford." Narr. Christian Falk. *Chicago Tonight*. PBS. WTTW-TV, Chicago. 7 May 2007. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKaXspY7C38> (accessed September 9, 2008).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *From correspondence with the artist, September 18, 2008.*

All images by Steve Mumford, ink and gouache on paper and courtesy of the artist.



Khark, Baghdad with free medical clinic with Iraqi army security April 14, 2007

Sunni women and children gather as 1st Cavalry Division sets up a free medical clinic in Khark, a poor Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad, near Haifa Street, with joint security by Iraqi army troops. April 14, 2007

STEVE MUMFORD RÉSUMÉ

EDUCATION

1994 School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, MFA
1987 School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008 "Steve Mumford: War Diaries" Kansas City Artists Coalition Mallin Gallery, Kansas City, MO
2007 "Steve Mumford," ACA Gallery of Savannah College of Art & Design, Atlanta, GA
2006 "Steve Mumford: Baghdad and Beyond," Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, MA
2005 "Drawing from Life," Meadows Museum, Dallas, TX
2004–2005 Art Gallery, University of Akron, OH, travels to: Cranbrook Art Museum, Cranbrook, MI, & The Moore Space, Miami, FL
2003 "Steve Mumford in Iraq: Drawing from Life" Postmasters Gallery, New York

AWARDS & FELLOWSHIPS

2007 Lighton International Artists Exchange Program Grant
1999 ART/OMI Summer Residency, Omi, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Brooke Army Medical Center," drawings portfolio by Steve Mumford, Harpers Magazine, July 2006
Alina Tugend, "The Art of War," Los Angeles Times, September 25, 2005
Holland Cotter, "40 Years Later, America is Studying the War Once More," The New York Times, September 11, 2005
"Steve Mumford Paints the War in Iraq," Artist Portfolio, Harpers Magazine, March 2005

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on the cover: Medical helicopters came in throughout the day and night with Iraqi and U.S. casualties. When they got word of approaching helos, the medics waited at the landing pad with a vehicle designed to carry up to three stretchers. 28th Combat Support Hospital, Baghdad ER, March 27, 2007



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