

Steve Mumford's
WAR JOURNALS



2003-2013



In 2003, New York-based artist Steve Mumford began a series of visits to occupied Iraq and war zones in Afghanistan. His intention was to capture—in drawings, watercolors, and written journals—his observations of Allied soldiers and the people living and working in the areas he visited. With little more than art supplies and a press pass from artnet.com¹—which allowed access to restricted areas and proximity to troops—Mumford first entered Iraq from Kuwait on April 15, 2003, approximately a week after Baghdad had fallen to American forces. He soon found acceptance among the military as a “combat artist” (he prefers simply “artist,” but this designation had resonance for the military, which has a tradition of engaging artists to document war and its effects). Mumford stayed for five weeks on his first trip and returned often over the next eight years, creating in-depth journals of his travels to such places as Basra, Tikrit, Mosul, Helmand Province, and elsewhere. These writings, sketches, and watercolors show the conflict at eye level, conveying the artist’s observations with clarity and empathy.

Mumford was opposed to the war in Iraq, believing it to be a misguided response to the 9/11 attacks. Yet, from the outset he wanted to be as even-handed as possible in realistically depicting life in a war zone. Combat itself was relatively rare and often fleeting; instead Mumford concentrated on the periods between engagements in which soldiers and civilians strove to cope with continuing disruption and danger. He recorded the stress of occupation, the after effects of battle, and the resiliency of even the most traumatized.

The decision to make drawings and watercolors may seem irrational. In the age of digital photography, why take the time to stand in a public square or alley making a drawing, when the subject does not remain still, and the dramatic moment passes? For Mumford, the answer was that as an artist, he could bring another level of awareness and absorption of the things that he saw.



Fig. 1: A patrol from India Co, 3/6 Marines get a visit from a couple of tough old Afghans, possibly Taliban themselves, 2010

He says that

...if photojournalism captures a decisive moment, making a drawing is more about lingering in a place and editing the scene in a wholly subjective way. It's never comprehensive of the visual facts, which are filtered through one's senses, selected, exaggerated, or left out over the hour or so it takes to make a drawing... .For me, the act of drawing slowed down the war, recording the spaces in between the bombs.²

With their gestural immediacy and often pithy handwritten notes, the drawings extend the idea of the artist being in spontaneous conversation with his surroundings. They invite people—whether clustered around

Mumford as he sketched in Iraq or Afghanistan or viewing the works in galleries back home—to imagine themselves holding the brush, stroking, washing, and reworking the scene into clear definition.

There have been many artists who have documented war, but none in a way so clearly anticipatory of Mumford's efforts than Winslow Homer. During the Civil War, this American Realist painter accompanied Union troops and produced remarkable drawings of life at the front, which appeared as engravings in *Harper's Weekly*. Like Homer, Mumford shows an abiding appreciation for the difficulties facing the military. He saw that the soldiers were not just a force of occupation, but were also emissaries, arbiters of neighborhood and family disputes, and nation builders. He also went to mosques, tea-houses, open-air markets, political demonstrations, even artists' studios, where he drew scenes of civilian life in Iraq. It was not possible for him to document war from the point of view of the insurgents, but Mumford did not demonize them as a propagandist might. One of his captions reads *A patrol from India Co., 3/6. Marines get a visit from a couple of tough old Afghans, possibly Taliban themselves* (2010, fig. 1). It is hard to caricature the enemy when identities and loyalties are submerged.

The scenes Mumford depicted are, by and large, not ones with which most Americans are familiar. We receive abbreviated news stories, or see Associated Press photographs that are disseminated for shock value. This low visibility extends to the casualties of war, who are rarely shown in any media forum, particularly in the case of Americans who died in combat (see fig. 2).³ Among Mumford's most affecting images are those that show wounded civilians and soldiers being treated in the Baghdad Emergency Room or receiving therapy at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The indiscriminacy of war is made painfully clear in images of wounded women and children, soldiers with missing limbs



Fig. 2: Platoon-buddies of a dead soldier mourn their loss outside the Baghdad ER's morgue, waiting for the final farewell: the flight that will take his body to Balad Air Force Base, 2007

learning to use prosthetic devices, and doctors and nurses clustered around a naked figure on an operating table, desperately trying to save a life.

Mumford didn't always know which side pulled the trigger or detonated the device that caused an injury; all he knew were the terrible consequences, and the remarkable humanity

of the people who tried to repair the resulting damage (see fig. 3). In a lecture at the Pritzker Military Library, he discussed the challenge of maintaining objectivity: "It was very moving to witness the pain and difficulties that the American soldiers...go through... I think love is not too strong a word for the atmosphere in these places, love that they [the medical staff] feel for the people they are trying to heal" (see fig. 4).⁴

Mumford knows he cannot tell the whole story of war; his sketches are personal and immediate, not sweeping or analytical.



Fig. 3: 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. The doctors at the ER regularly came to visit and comfort the boy; I felt it was also therapy for themselves, 2007



Fig. 4: Capt. Calvin Allen, 16 Engineers, 1st Armored Division, receives therapy to his wounded hand at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 2006

Yet channeling Winslow Homer in another way, he creates paintings that provide a more reflective view of the conflict. His monumental painting *Empire* (2010, fig. 5) echoes the tone of one of Homer's masterpieces, *Prisoners from the Front* (1866, fig. 6), which shows a Union general interrogating three Confederate prisoners of war. The captives include a cocky young officer—whose posture is the very picture of defiance—and two ragtag rebels, one old and weather beaten and the other a rawboned youth. Together, they allude to a spectrum of motivations for fighting; the officer, whom one imagines as a slaveholding Southern



Fig. 5: *Empire*, 2010



Fig. 6: Winslow Homer. *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866

aristocrat, may have fought to protect his perverse ideology; the others, perhaps, enlisted simply to defend their families or ancestral lands against the northern invaders.

Empire similarly shows prisoners with their guards, but with no clue as to the

motivation of either—they are all simply players enacting small parts in a sweeping narrative. The painting shows blindfolded prisoners being

loaded onto a plane for transport from Iraq, possibly to Guantánamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, where people accused of being enemy combatants have been held since 2002. With remarkable virtuosity, Mumford evokes the high realism and moral clarity of a propagandistic history painting. Yet the moral remains unclear. The painting's highly charged title reminds us of the continuing story of Western imperialists exploiting the Middle East and its oil reserves; but it also hearkens back to the Middle Ages, when the militant expansionism of competing Christian and Islamic empires set the stage for more than a millennium of distrust, misunderstanding, and conflict on both sides.

A haunting epilogue appears in Mumford's recent images of the prisoner detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, or "Gitmo." Commissioned by *Harper's Magazine* (the same periodical that sponsored Winslow Homer 150 years earlier), he took two trips, in February and May of 2013, to illustrate an article on a military tribunal's preliminary hearing for Abd al Nashiri, who is accused of masterminding the attack on the USS *Cole* (see *Harper's Magazine*, October, 2013).⁵ While at Guantánamo, Mumford explored other areas of the facility, including the now-abandoned Camp X-Ray, one of the sites where prisoners had been subjected to infamous "enhanced interrogation techniques" such as waterboarding.⁶ Although Mumford initially had permission to depict the prisoners, once there he learned that this was forbidden; he was also barred from representing sensitive areas of the camp. He describes the irony: "I drew everything associated with the prisoners but the prisoners themselves.... The subject of my Gitmo drawings is the very thing never pictured. And then the subject becomes the reason why they aren't there" (see fig. 7).⁷

Mumford's earlier drawings are straightforward impressions of a place in turmoil, inviting empathy for the lives of those affected by war. Widening his scope, paintings such as *Empire* show the fraught navigation of cultural differences, depicting universal stories of power, vulnerability, and the clash of ideologies. His views of Guantánamo ostensibly return to the documentary nature of the earlier sketches, although they show only what



Fig. 7: 2/4/13, Pretrial hearing for Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, 2013

was not censored. Our imaginations may fill the redactions with only fragmentary knowledge of a system that argues the necessity of secrecy for maintaining security. For the most part, the images reveal only that there is a veil that prevents public awareness of such issues as prisoner treatment, the possibility of lifetime incarceration for people who may be innocent, and the complexities of negotiating both U.S. and international law. Depicting the veil may be the first tentative step toward lifting it, if this is what we, as a nation, truly want.

Mark Scala, chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Notes

1. A leading online art periodical. See <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/baghdadjournal.asp>
2. Steve Mumford, *Baghdad Journal: An Artist in Occupied Iraq*, Drawn and Quarterly Books, Montreal, 2005, 21.
3. The U.S. government and much of the press have discouraged images of American dead on the grounds of privacy, security, or human dignity. Many critics contend that officials are concerned that such images may inspire antiwar sentiments. See Michael Kamber and Tim Arango, "4,000 Deaths and a Handful of Images," *New York Times*, July 26, 2008.
4. Steve Mumford, "Baghdad Journal" (lecture, Pritzker Military Museum and Library Library, Chicago, IL, April 24, 2007): http://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/pritzker-military-presents/steve-mumford-baghdad-journal/
5. See Lawrence Douglas, "A Kangaroo in Obama's Court," *Harper's Magazine*, October 2013, 35–47, for more on al Nashiri.
6. For years, the use of torture was denied by U.S. officials, who instead claimed to have employed humane "enhanced interrogation techniques" on prisoners. Susan Crawford, the convening authority for the Guantánamo military commissions, admitted that 9/11 suspect Mohammed al Qahtani had indeed been tortured. Other testimony and evidence confirms that this was not an isolated incident. Al Nashiri argues that his confession to the bombing of the USS Cole was coerced under torture, and should be inadmissible in court. See Carol D. Leonnig, "The Stories of Torture Sounded Made Up. They Weren't," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2009.
7. Postmasters Gallery, Archive, *Steve Mumford: The Snow Leopard*, <http://www.postmastersart.com/>

Illustrations

All works by Steve Mumford appear courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York and are copyright Steve Mumford unless otherwise noted. Figure 5: Collection of Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, 21C Museum Hotel. © Steve Mumford. Figure 6: Winslow Homer. *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 24 x 38 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922 (22.207). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

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