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JUSTIN JONES

Steve Mumford: The Artist Who Went to War

After spending a decade traveling to Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, the artist Steve Mumford produced graphic evocations of conflict and the consequences of war.



In 2001, while the artist Steve Mumford was working on a painting based on the Vietnam War, the United States was preparing to invade Iraq. As an artist interested in war and travel, Mumford wanted to capture the historical events.

Having passed the deadline to be embedded as a journalist, Mumford was forced to make other arrangements. Loaded with his own ammunition of drawing supplies and film, he accompanied two French journalists and flew into Kuwait in April 2003. From there, the group crossed the border into Iraq and entered a war-torn country.

“I figured since I had never been in a war zone,” Mumford told The Daily Beast, “that I would just see how it went, see what my comfort level was and see if I could even draw in that situation.” It turns out he could. The Frist Center for Visual Arts in Nashville, Tennessee, is highlighting a selection of watercolors and sketches from his decade long journey in their newest exhibition Steve Mumford’s War Journals, 2003-2013.

Mumford, 53, hails from Boston where he attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts for his Bachelors before moving to New York City to pursue a Masters in Fine Art from the School of Visual Arts. “When I went to graduate school, I was still experimenting with being an abstract expressionist,” he said. “It took me several years to shake that and realize that I wanted to tell stories with my paintings.”

During his first day in Iraq, Mumford arrived at a hospital outside of Basra where he tried to pass as a photojournalist. Due to the sensitivity of the situation, he quickly questioned if it was appropriate for him to be there and considered returning to the United States. But he felt he had come too far to return so quickly. Realizing his limited options, he reached for his sketchpad. It was in that moment of panic and self-doubt that the artist started drawing and began to fulfill the reason he was there—to draw from life and capture the moment. Yet the difficulty was in capturing the immediacy of a narrative that was chaotically in motion.

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His first trip lasted five weeks and led to numerous returns over the following decade. The drawings that he created shift between gruesome and peaceful, depicting both battle scenes and the casual day-to-day lives of soldiers and civilians.

With urgency, Mumford quickly sketched as many details as possible. Scenes changed, but as people came and went a story would begin to emerge within the drawings. The artist would unknowingly capture a series of events on a single piece of paper that dictated a complete narrative of what had happened.

"It all came down to trying to make visual sense of what was in front of me," Mumford said, "to somehow depict the person lying on the table that was wounded or dying while people were crowded around them trying to save their lives."

Mumford never had a strong political stance of the United States invasion of Iraq. "I had this general sense that Bush was stupid to initiate the war. But it didn't seem obviously connected to 9/11, and that is not why I went." His purpose was not to create protest art or use his personal views as a basis for his works, but as a chance to personally experience the effects war has on individuals.

"The only thing that changed for me was that I was able to better connect to my subject matter," Mumford said of how the experience changed him as an artist. In the beginning, the sketches happened so quickly that he wasn't able to become emotionally involved with the subjects at hand. It was only after they were completed that he realized the true scope of their resonance. "The more I got used to drawing in war zones ... the more [I felt] what was really going on and how to make a connection with [the subject] and the drawing."



Iraq wasn't the only warzone he visited in the decade, and there were numerous moments when the artist feared for his own life. "I was shot at a lot," Mumford revealed. He even captured these instances in sketches of the battles where the life-endangering moments happened. One watercolor from Iraq reveals a sergeant, who had been knocked out by an explosion, lying next to a tank while everyone else is returning fire. A similar sketch from Afghanistan depicts a group of Marines engaged in an advancing firefight as they shoot at the enemy from behind barracks.

In 2013, Mumford's work took him to an even bigger political environment connected to the war in Iraq—Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba. He was enlisted by Harper's maga-

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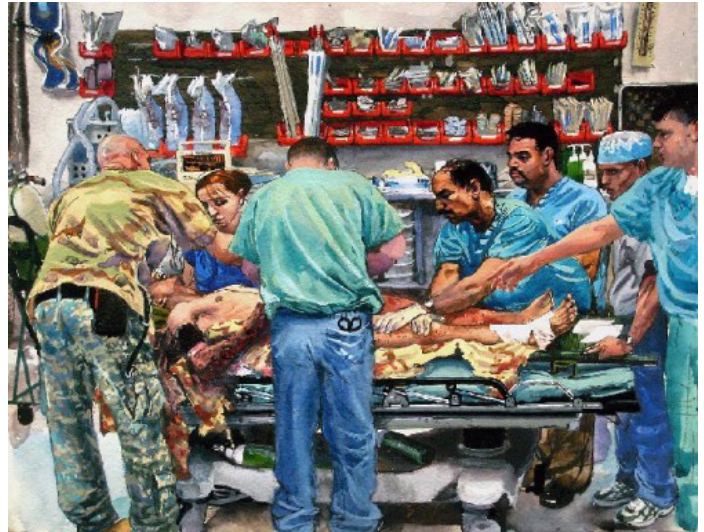
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zine to travel with a reporter to the top-secret war prison to sketch the surroundings and detainees.

"Gitmo was surreal," Mumford described of the base riddled with high security measures. "Everything was regulated and there were tremendous rules everywhere." He was only allowed to sketch areas permitted by security, which for one watercolor consisted of a small, desolate area between two lampposts of a seemingly empty landscape. Everything to the right or left was "classified." Or how, once he arrived, they reneged his right to capture any of the prisoners, which was the whole point of his visit.

Regardless, Mumford was able to turn everything to his advantage artistically. "The whole culture of paranoia made for these various funny drawings," Mumford stated. His landscape sketches are covered with notes marked "classified" and "secret" and only reveal the tip of a building behind a covered fence while other drawings are left with ghostly voids of where detainees should be rendered.



Through it all, Mumford fulfilled a desire to discover what life is like in a war zone, and how those immediately involved are affected. At the exhibition preview on Thursday, a handful of U.S. veterans had the opportunity to view the pictures. The group included veterans from Iraq, as well as World War Two and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. "There is always some universality in war," Mumford said. "I talked to an ex-Marine and he looked pretty emotionally full." Non-veterans attending the exhibition may well feel the same.

