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Interview with Steve Mumford

Dushko Petrovich: How did you get the idea to go over there, and how did you arrange to accompany the military?

Steve Mumford: War has interested me since my childhood memories of the Vietnam War, although no one in my family was in the military. In 2002 I started a large painting about the Vietnam War, titled 1970. At the same time I was looking at the work of various combat artists like Remington, as well as some little-known artists who served in Vietnam. When the Iraq invasion started and we began to hear from all the embedded journalists I thought, hey, why not me?

No military units would consider taking me on as an embedded artist at that time, so I thought I'd better just buy a ticket to Kuwait City and see if I could find a way into Iraq. After a few frustrating days I finally hooked up with two French reporters who gave me ride to Baghdad; there I found a battalion from 3rd ID with an enthusiastic commanding officer who gave me free reign with his platoons.

Did you carry a gun?

I never carried a gun, since I'm not comfortable handling firearms. I figured that if someone was going to kidnap me a handgun probably wouldn't be enough to stop them.

What were the early days like?

Those days were lot of fun, actually. The fighting was over for Baghdad and most Iraqis were very friendly when the patrols rode by, giving us the thumbs up, shouting, "Good, Mister, good!" Baghdad didn't look so great, but everyone was getting used to the idea that Saddam was gone, sort of pinching themselves I think.

The soldiers were full of gruesome stories about what they'd seen in the invasion. The problems of having an invasion force act like cops were obvious right away to me, but the smart officers did a good job. I didn't see any real combat that first trip, although many patrols I was on got fired at and returned fire. Then the shooter would rather mysteriously disappear.

Were you friendly with the other reporters?

I didn't hang out with reporters, who I generally found to be arrogant and cliquish. They also lived in the expensive hotels that I couldn't afford.

How did the soldiers respond to you?

The soldiers seemed to like having me around. For one thing they were anxious to share their experiences with an outsider, especially one who might in some way communicate their stories to the larger world. I think a lot of them thought it was pretty cool to have an artist there. Also they saw that I was willing to share any risks that they took, and didn't ask for any special treatment.

What was, for lack of a better term, the social scene like?

A lot of Westerners sort of found their way there in the early days, from anti-war activists to an odd assortment of performance artists, writers and adventure tourists. I remember talking to an English guy who told me he'd gone waterskiing in the Tigris and then been sick for days. After Nick Berg got his head cut off that scene quickly vanished.

When I wasn't embedded I hung out with Iraqi artists and writers, who I met through an Iraqi translator, Esam Pasha, who happened to be an artist. He introduced me to the art scene in Baghdad. Every Monday people would gather at the Hewar gallery outdoor garden and every Friday at the Shebander Teahouse in the old part of town. It was a vibrant scene. I became very close to several Iraqis, including the painter Ahmed al-Safi and the poet Nasir Hassan.



Do the soldiers generally take a political view?

For the most part, the soldiers weren't very political, beyond a gut support of Bush. Very occasionally I encountered a Democrat, most often among National Guard units. Issues like gun control make the Democratic Party very unattractive to soldiers generally.

You are entering the lineage of watercolorists in Arab lands in a very strange way. How do you relate to Delacroix, Matisse, Klee, Maake, et cetera?

Orientalism has never much interested me, although I love the watercolors of Delacroix from Algeria and

Morocco. Perhaps there is something about, say, the date palm and the abiya as signifiers for this war that captivate us like the jungle sampans of Vietnam, and will for a long time. But it was the war per se that interested me, not the fact that it was in an Arab country. Of course, once I got there I exploited all the interesting visual aspects of the place that I could for my drawings, just as the photojournalists do.

What about the war painters: Goya, Sutherland, Dix, Remington, Bomberg, Beckmann?

The war art of artists like Goya and the German Expressionists did not influence me much because of its rather extreme and almost metaphoric character. The Mexican Revolution drawings of Orozco and the Plains Indian conflict paintings of Remington were much more inspiring for their depiction of subtler moments, or perhaps for their subtler depiction of extreme moments. Since I didn't see very much actual fighting, and it's a war without a front line, my overriding sense of it was more of psychological tension than of body parts and terror.

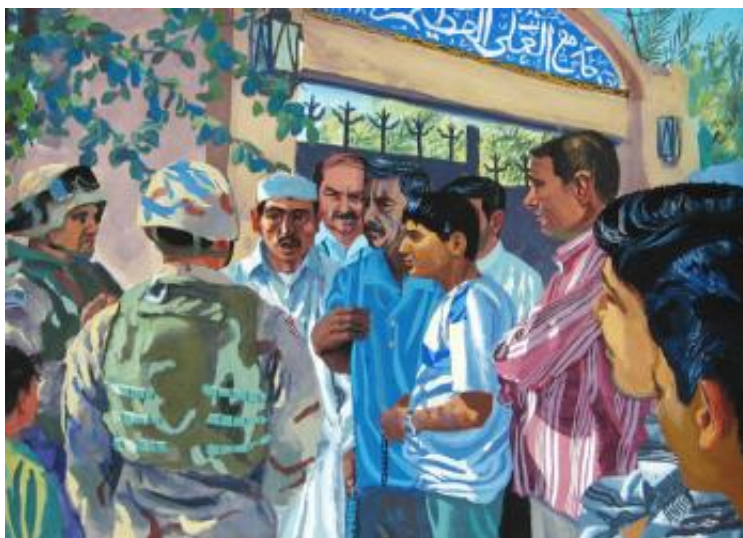
How has your view of painting changed? Will you make larger-scale works when this is all over?

That's what I'm working on now, not based directly on either the drawings or the photos I took, but trying to come up with compositions that express ideas I have about what I experienced. I'm looking at Balthus a lot.

How do you feel about the images we get here in the US? Of Abu Ghraib, for example?

What really dismayed me about Abu Ghraib was that that type of behavior was so different from what I observed. I really felt that most of the officers and soldiers I met were trying to do a good job. Many saw themselves as representing the US to the Iraqis and wanted to leave a good impression. A lot of friendships were formed between Americans and Iraqis who worked together on reconstruction projects and the Neighborhood Advisory Councils. So it was rare that I felt a soldier was acting badly, although of course, it's a war, and emotions run high on all sides, American and Iraqi.

I often get the sense from talking to people who are strongly against the war that they think the abuses of Abu Ghraib are typical, that perhaps many soldiers are operating in a kind of chaos or free-for-all. I think the reason for this is that so few family members of America's intelligentsia are in the military, so they simply have no idea what it's like and quickly fall back on the old Vietnam clichés. The middle and working classes bear the brunt of this war, but they also get the letters, calls, and emails and actually have a much better understanding of what it's like day to day.



What are your general feelings about the war now that you've returned?

Of course I'm ambivalent about the war, and feel that the arrogance of Bush and his team really screwed a lot up, making the going much worse than it had to have been. However, I believe that we have to see it through, since Iraq has really become the prime training ground for Al Qaida now. I'm not sure that Americans realize how Sunni fundamentalism defines the insurgency and how dangerous and profoundly racist it is.

How did you experience that racism?

Well, I began to notice when I was talking to Sunnis who were angry about the invasion, how they described the Shi'ites. I realized that I was hearing the same words again and again: dirty, lazy, stupid, untrustworthy, criminals. These could be educated men working as translators for the army, or shopkeepers, or whoever. As with racism everywhere, there are degrees of it. But a big force in the Iraq insurgency is Wahhabism, the sect of Sunni Islam of Bin Ladin and Zarqawi that is simply religious fascism, and hates Shi'ites even more than infidels for supposedly renouncing the correct faith. Of course, Wahhabis consider Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, homosexuals, et cetera, to be the lowest of the low. It's a sect not just of fanaticism, but of hatred. I consider this form of intolerance to be a profound danger to the West, in fact. America's foreign policy crimes and blunders over the last 30 years may help explain its rise, but it certainly doesn't excuse it or lessen its immediate danger.

However, I also feel that our strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan has to be combined with a much tougher stance with Israel. I don't think we can make headway on the Arab "street" as long as we look the other way when Israel expands its settlements in the West Bank. Israel has been the 800-pound gorilla in the room for far too long now, feeding the small hungry bellies in the hateful madrassas from Pakistan to Syria. While we attack Sunni Arab fascism, we must keep the pressure on Israel to settle with the Palestinians. +



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