

Artists Fernando Botero and Steve Mumford depict the Iraq war: Part 2

New York art world's apology for the Iraq war

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This is the second of a two-part article. The first part on Fernando Botero was posted on June 4, 2005.

Other than Fernando Botero, the only artist to have received significant attention for depicting the war in Iraq is Steve Mumford (American, b. 1960). However, his work is the antithesis of Botero's. Instead of taking a significant aspect of the war—in Botero's case, the abuse of Iraqi prisoner's at Abu Ghraib—and using his imagination to formulate a response, Mumford embedded himself with various US military units as a self-styled "combat-artist." Using press credentials from an internet artzine, he produced a series of sketches, ink drawings and watercolors. These "dispatches" were then posted in installments together with Mumford's narrative, as "Baghdad Journal," between August 2003 and December 2004.

It is dubious whether Mumford could capture aspects of the war by these means that similarly embedded photographers could not, but the shortcomings of his adept, forgettable images are not principally of a technical nature. As an apologist for a brutal imperialist war—one in which more than 1,600 American soldiers and many times more Iraqis have so far been killed, and one that most recent polls show almost 60 percent of Americans believe is not worth the loss of life—Mumford attempts to pass off as art what is little more than propaganda.

Did German painters accompany the Wehrmacht in World War II? Were French sketch artists embedded with the colonial forces in Algeria? Such questions come to mind in relation to Mumford's reprehensible role. He claims to have been inspired by painter Winslow Homer, whose engravings of the American Civil War appeared in *Harper's Weekly* magazine. But works such as Homer's *The Sharpshooter* (1862), *Cavalry Charge* (1862) or *Prisoners from the Front* (1866) communicate the brutality and terror of war as well as its unheroic moments, addressing themes of human

isolation and mortality in what is depicted as a tragic conflict in American history. There is nothing comparable in "Baghdad Journal."

Rather, what comes to the fore in Mumford's works is the war in Iraq seen through the distorted lens of the New York art world—a wealthy and privileged milieu where ignorance and superficial impressionism prevail. What Mumford sees or fails to see in Iraq is no accident, or the result of a misunderstanding. This is an artist who, while claiming to be "neutral," clearly identifies his personal interests with those of the American ruling elite and its geopolitical strategy. Consciously or intuitively, he understands that the US military is defending him, and those like him. Mumford plays at war when it suits him, but shamelessly describes himself calling a timeout during a pitched sniper battle when he has to make a cell phone call home to his wife.

His drawings and watercolors focus on the routine life of the US soldiers—standing guard, going on maneuvers, fixing tanks, sitting around. He also sketched portraits of the American military personnel, mercenary contractors, Iraqi National Guard, and Iraqi civilians that he met, as well as the "local color" of Iraqi streets, and a host of miscellaneous observations. Largely absent, or far in the distance, are moments of actual combat, because it wasn't possible to draw at such times, as he will readily admit. Instead, he would drop his sketchbook, snap a photo and start handing up the ammunition.

Even the pro-war bloggers who welcomed Mumford's work find it lacking. "...I am not dissing the guy, but there is not much in the way of the combat journalism moment—but that may be the real point. Lots of scenes of the normal, which is good, but even 'The AK-47 Round' is an image of soldiers standing and waiting and fairly expressionless".

To present the war in Iraq as a sum total of "normal scenes"

is a lie, if only at the level of the soldiers' everyday experience. A host of routine activities are taking place at any given moment, some of which when skillfully observed may hint at or point to more significant aspects of reality. But having mastered proportion and perspective in his drawing, Mumford demonstrates no ability to draw out the essential in what he sees. He is socially and morally blind to it.

In his war coverage, there is no hint of the suffering and destruction of the war experienced by the Iraqi people—in which, for instance, Fallujah, home to more than 250,000 inhabitants, was largely destroyed by massive firepower in November 2004 in what Mumford refers to as a “spate of violence.” Even in terms, however, of giving an intimate view of the US soldiers’ experience, Mumford’s soldiers have little more character than G.I. Joe dolls or comic books.

The more potent images that do exist are buried in the disproportionate number of mundane details, their significance further obscured by the nonchalant bravado of the subtitles (see “Snipers”).

The most disturbing example is the image of detainees, with hoods over their heads, titled simply “Suspects,” and presented without comment. What was Mumford doing there? If he *had* witnessed torture, would he have objected, or just kept drawing?

Mumford claims to have been convinced by “ordinary Iraqis” to support the occupation, but his personal statements peddle more or less the same fantasy of bringing freedom and democracy to a smiling, flower-throwing people as US military briefings and press releases. A fantasy that is increasingly discredited, as recent poll numbers indicate.

Describing a patrol in Saddamiya, a hostile neighborhood of Baghdad, Mumford says, “These projects are the crucial part of the army’s strategy to turn the tide on the insurgents. But the fighting interrupts this work, turning some neighborhoods into cauldrons of discontent, where the lack of progress on the infrastructure only serves to confirm peoples’ mistrust of the Americans.”

On the other hand, when he encounters other ordinary Iraqis—falafel vendors in the market who, offended by his mocking Moqtada al-Sadr, suggest he is a CIA agent, and only half-jokingly threaten to kidnap him and cut his throat—he simply hurries away.

Undoubtedly, there are layers of the Iraqi population, particularly among the middle class artists and intellectuals with whom Mumford established contact, that welcomed the US occupation and hope for their conditions to improve under the puppet Iraqi government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

Mumford, to his credit, displays the work of certain Iraqi artists in his postings, but he proceeds to ignore the more

troubling pieces. He makes no comment, for example, about the efforts of Qassim Septi and Iman Saq, whose sculptures refer to the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Instead he quotes the tedious opinions of pro-occupation poet Naseer Hasan at length.

The reception of Mumford’s work in the media has been largely enthusiastic; he was featured on the front page of the *New York Times* Arts section, and named NBC Person of the Week in December 2004. The exhibition of the sketches at Mumford’s New York gallery *Postmasters* in November 2004 received more muted reviews in the art periodicals. However, the treatment has generally avoided challenging Mumford’s pro-war stance.

In a further indication of the degraded state of the art world, veteran *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman held Mumford up as a model to the younger generation of artists on display at the MOMA’s PS1 Center of Contemporary Art. Kimmelman wrote of Mumford’s Baghdad pieces, “They announce a mature artist looking closely at what is urgently unfolding around him. Their traditional sobriety stands out in a show that, like the burbling young art world now, seems gladly co-opted and almost too able to please.”

The New York art world, or its most prominent representatives, seems unblemished by any trace of democratic principle or opposition to colonialism, sentiments that would have been taken for granted by at least a portion of this milieu as recently as the Vietnam War era. No one will say what needs to be said: that “Baghdad Journal” is repugnant and that any artist who identifies himself with the Iraq war and occupation deserves to be and will be held in contempt, as an apologist for war crimes.

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