



BEYOND PHOTOGRAPHY

Can art ever capture the horrors of war?

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BETWEEN APRIL 2003 AND OCTOBER 2004, the American artist Steve Mumford made four trips to Baghdad. Over the course of ten months in the company of the US Army's Third Infantry and First Armored Divisions, the National Guard's Third Battalion and several others he created an extensive series of watercolours and pen-and-ink sketches in the hope of capturing a side of the war that he believed news images could not. I first came across the results in New York's Postmasters Gallery. The invasion was barely half a year old, and the Saturday afternoon crowd who'd come to see the one-man show seemed more hushed, more reverential than usual.

Like everyone else, no doubt, I was curious to find out how my understanding of events that I had already seen so many news images of might alter or increase if I saw them depicted in another medium. And although the documentary style of the two dozen or so pictures on view clearly owed much to photojournalism, people were lingering over them in a way they would not have had they been looking at photographs in a newspaper or a magazine. It was as if, after months of relentless news coverage, here at last was a chance to take stock of the war in a more considered way.



Steve Mumford, *Assad Hussein, Hotel Street Guard, Baghdad, June 2004* (2004), ink and watercolour on paper, 29 x 37 cm

Mumford claims that the hour or so it takes to make one of his sketchbook-size pictures is what sets them apart from the medium they to some extent ape. And perhaps our tendency to pay painting that extra bit of attention is down to the fact that unlike a photograph, which we all know is the product of an instant, paintings, created over a span of time, have beginnings, middles and ends. At any rate the patience I and the other gallery-goers repaid him could hardly have been down to the work. Faced with all the horror of a contentious conflict, Mumford responded by producing pictures of GIs crouched in their Humvees or distributing sweets to Iraqi children or questioning civilians, each one executed in a flat, bloodless way. His aim might have been to conjure up a cool, evenhanded account of history. Instead his impassive watercolours only succeed in taking the sting out of a grim reality.

If three years on few people are hailing Mumford as a great war artist, it remains a mystery why, when we have been inundated with imagery of the conflict in Iraq, his questionable efforts have received the attention they have. He may be the only artworld-sanctioned painter to have made it out there, but given the limitations of his approach it seems the answer to this conundrum might lie less in his work and more



Steve Mumford, *Sgt Jack Hennessy's Memorial Service, FOB Independence, Baghdad, October 2004* (2004), ink and watercolour on paper, 29 x 37 cm



Steve Mumford, *Kids' Soccer League, Baghdad, June 2004* (2004), ink and watercolour on paper, 29 x 37 cm

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in something inherent to that rival medium, photography, and what it can and cannot say about war.

War photography began 150 years ago in the Crimea when Roger Fenton, sometime photographer to the British royal family, travelled to the peninsula to produce a document of the allied campaign. Reports in *The Times* suggested that official incompetence had resulted in unnecessary deaths and terrible suffering among the British troops. But instead of corroborating either these accounts or the horrors that, according to his letters home, he himself witnessed, Fenton concocted a sanitised version of events.

In part this could be put down to his social position. His first diary entry records settling down to a bottle of champagne and a box of cigars on the hills where the officers were camped as a battle raged below. Fenton belonged to a class for whom war was a spectacle and art its celebration. And his portraits of off-duty officers or his anodyne behind-the-lines camp scenes that constitute the majority of his Crimea output simply followed in a long tradition of depicting conflict as an orderly, valiant affair.

Still, historians have criticised him for his failure to enter into the suffering that was all around. But perhaps these pictures that announced the inception of war photography intuited something about the limits of the genre. Fenton's most affecting Crimea image is *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855). Empty save for a few dozen cannonballs strewn across the scree, this view of the aftermath of the battle commemorated by Alfred, Lord Tennyson in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854) contains none of the corpses that, from the American

Civil War onwards, would come to be the hallmark of so much war photography. Yet somehow this quiet, bleak picture evokes the tragedy of conflict in a way that more overtly traumatic images cannot.

Today we take it as given that, overloaded with images of suffering, we can no longer be easily moved by them. But Fenton's early sideways glance at death might provide a clue to a much more fundamental obstacle that has always prevented us from fully grasping what the most harrowing of photographs portray.

If, either as the propaganda tool of power or as a witness for the defence, all war art aspires to a sort of empiricism, then the advent of photography upped the stakes. When we look at a photograph we instinctively – and no doubt naively – believe that it neither tampers with reality nor conceals anything, at least within the constraints of a given point of view. Yet while such a document promises to show us 'everything', its brute facticity may also, in some instances, prevent us from actually registering what the picture contains.

A photograph of a corpse confronts us with an untreated image of death. And in front of this ultimate trauma we are left with nothing to say. We may respond with disgust or denial or just hardened indifference. We may try to sublimate what we see by anointing it as art. But in the end death, as the impossible limit that lies outside all experience, blocks every meaning. Unimaginable and incomprehensible, it can never be assimilated into human consciousness.

When you think of the great war photographs, those which have imprinted themselves on our collective memory, they do not show death head-on. Take Huynh Cong Ut's picture of a girl running from



Steve Mumford, *Platoon Sgt Ricky Clait Knocked Out from Grenade Concussion, Baquba, June 2004* (2004), ink and watercolour on paper, 29 x 37 cm. All Steve Mumford works courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York

a napalming in Vietnam (1972), where it is her nakedness, her absolute vulnerability, that cuts to the quick. Or Eddie Adams's photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner (1968), which stays with us precisely because what we see is not death as such, but instead the terrified, contorted features of a man anticipating his imminent end. Even Robert Capa's iconic *Falling Soldier* (1936) is not an image of someone dead, but captures, rather, a man on the cusp of dying. His legs may be buckled and his arms flung backwards. But in that instant he is still upright and belongs to us, the living.

If, like the sun, death cannot be viewed straight on, then perhaps the most we can attempt is to look at its reflection. Reaction shots that show the shock and disbelief of stunned bystanders or of grieving relatives when confronted with sudden, violent killing, afford us such an indirect glance. Don McCullin's *Grief-stricken woman and son after discovery of murdered husband...* (1964) is one such picture. To look at it is to find ourselves implicated not just in the particular story it describes, but in the wider, universal response to trauma too.

Paintings and drawings of war also come at death at one remove: however unwavering the artist, however directly he or she

is prepared to look trauma in the eye, the content of a handmade image must always be tempered by the artist's style, which is the non-photographic work of art's own immanent reaction shot. The shock, the grief, the disbelief, the outrage that are written on McCullin's Cypriot woman's face, aren't they each to be found in that matchless response to war, *Guernica* (1937)?

While it may be invidious to hold any work of art up next to Picasso's masterpiece, Steve Mumford's Iraq pictures – a new batch of which was up at Postmasters last autumn – look singularly inapt when compared to *Guernica*, or indeed with any number of other artists' responses to conflict. His deadpan style precludes the possibility of properly engaging with the suffering that everyone knows this recent campaign has inflicted. Instead all it delivers is the complacent viewpoint of an invader. As the war continues, so will we continue turning to other media in the belief that they will show us what photography cannot. And although our quest to comprehend the ultimate consequence of man's hostility towards man will never be fulfilled, a different artist may yet come along and remind us that the fundamental reality of war remains a trauma too agonising to behold. •