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The Art of War: A Look Back at 10 Important Works That Took on the Conflict in Iraq



Courtesy the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York
Steve Mumford's "The Accused," 2005, oil on linen

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by Ben Davis

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It began with “shock and awe,” but ended in a cloud of moral ambiguity, doubt, and recrimination. President Obama announced yesterday that he was officially declaring the end of the United States’s nine-year-long engagement in Iraq. The war, which cost thousands of American and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, has defined a generation, and left behind scars that won’t go away — not overnight, probably not ever.

Before the economic nightmare of 2008 pushed it from the center of consciousness, debate about the Iraq War pretty much defined political discourse, and naturally became a reference point for art. In some cases, the strong emotions triggered by the war pushed contemporary artists to their strongest work. Mark Wallinger's 2007 [Tate commission "State Britain,"](#) a meticulous recreation of an antiwar encampment in front of the British Houses of Parliament, found a way to take the language of appropriation and fill it with topical outrage, while [Omer Fast's "The Casting"](#) (2007) took the hoary avant-garde film trope about the ambiguity of narration and applied it to a very concrete situation — the confusion that led to the accidental killing of Iraqi civilians after a roadside bombing.

It is important to note that Iraqi artists, despite being hard-pressed amid the post-war chaos in their country, have not been silent, drawing on [their rich artistic tradition](#) to make works that responded to the conflict all around them. Iraqi painter Hana Malallah — one of the country's most significant contemporary artists, and [an exile since 2006](#) — produced moving abstract paintings, their seemingly burned surfaces evoking the tragedy of the war, while Qasim Sabti [created a series of painted collages](#) made from torn books salvaged from the looted libraries of Baghdad after the invasion.

These are far from the only examples of the Iraq War's reverberations in art. Here, we offer a few of what seem to us to be the most notable examples.

To see 10 works of art about the Iraq War, with our commentary, click on [the slide show](#).

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