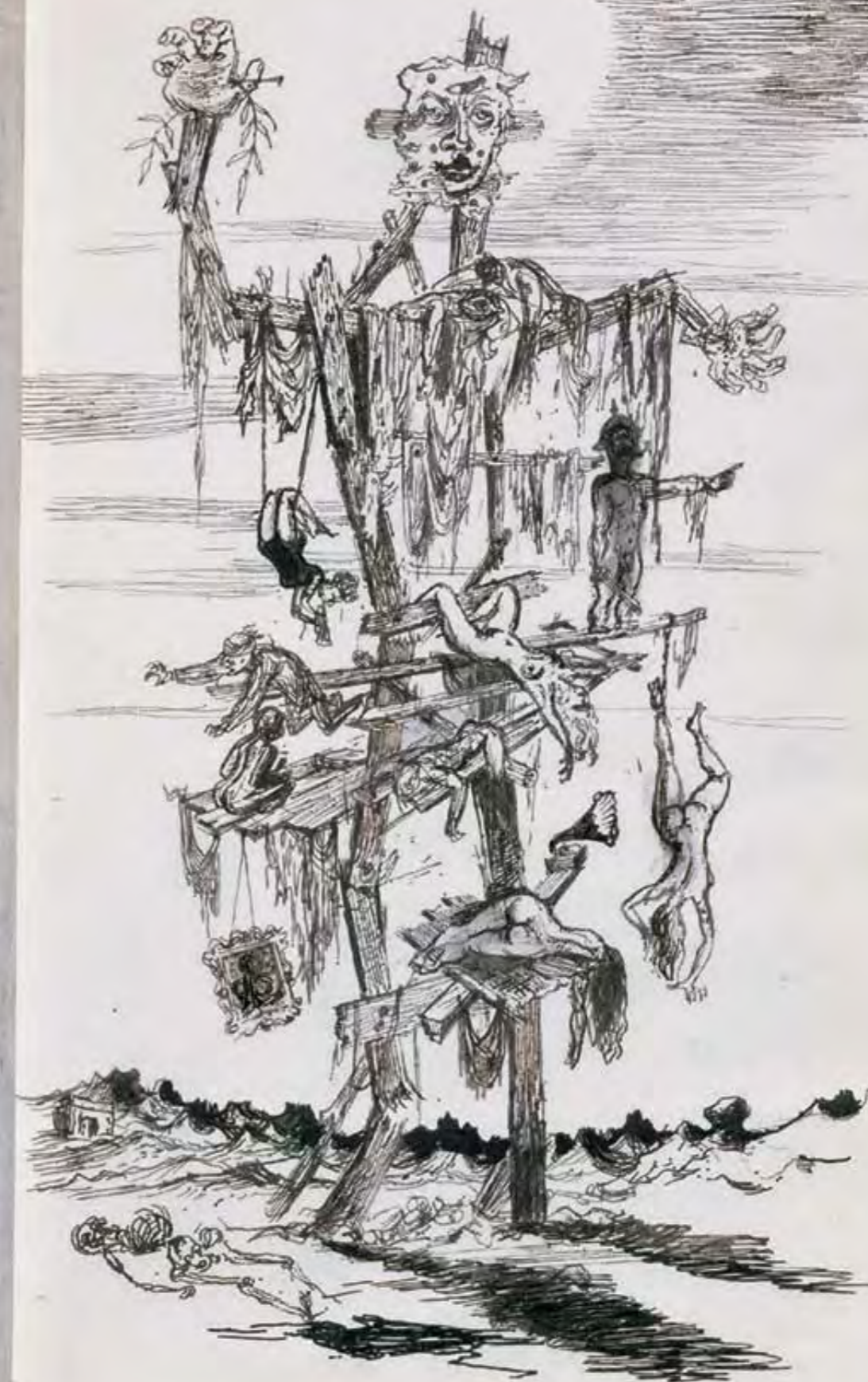


More than 60 years before the current presence of British troops in Iraq, the artist James Boswell (1906–1971) was posted to the country during the Second World War. As a member of the Communist Party and co-founder of the left-wing Artists International Association, he was already known for his satirical anti-establishment drawings. However, he was profoundly affected by his desert experience, which he recorded in words and drawings in his sketchbooks – seen here together for the first time

**“WHEN YOU PAINT
A PICTURE YOU
ARE AFRAID OF GIVING
IT YOUR LIFE –
THE LIFE WHERE
YOU ARE
DREAMING REALITIES”**

A page from
James Boswell's
Iraq sketchbook
(1943–1944)





“Here in the Euphrates valley we work and play. We do all the things that soldiers have always done – drink, gossip, gamble, fight, sleep as much as we can and carry on a guerrilla war against the ennui that descends on an idle army... fifty miles out here is as good as fifty years... Stalingrad has begun to strike back. To the west the Eighth have begun their drive from Alamein. But here there is quiet and news is scarce and sometimes when the rains cut us off for days, our world shrinks to a tiny island... No steady stream of casualties fills our hospital to remind us that we are part of the war. For us there is only the tedious everyday struggle against malaria, dysentery and boredom. The dust floats evocative of human suffering and vanity in the impersonal glare of a savage sun and we are caught in a web of circumstance that stretches into past and future in an infinite series of repeated patterns.”

“In dreams, walking, suddenly in the night & in daylight moments of evocation that say what to paint. The lorry lights along the palings, the shadows and cords of the hammocks at night in the belly of the ship, the faces in the hurricane lamplight & the blue crude letters in the ration boxes. And the worn wooden floors of truck and railway wagons – all that is worn & used until it has grown a patina of humanity like the dining tables scrubbed yellow in the sun or the mallets & spades & the tents whose texture ensnares soldiers’ dreams. The comforting look of a petrol tin grey with soap & the bridal colour of the nets. And a hundred things. So to eliminate the incidental. To extract the dream reality, to evoke the unreality of the soldier’s life. In the world that lives in dreams are the pictures that say what we love & how we feel. False worlds, we create to hide our past from us. Reality glows through only that true world of dream & love & terror.

“What do you fear most – Dying – But it is not a question of dying, it is a matter of living & what you fear most in living because that leads to death and when you paint a picture you are afraid of giving it your life – the life where you are dreaming realities because that is where you are dying everyday – and time is very short – in the end there are no risks – only decisions.”

“Woolworths & Drury Lane are forgotten forever in the sense of the colossal weight and nobility of this expanse of barren impersonal sand... Man is lost among the uncountable grains of sand and here above all if he had no God would he find it necessary to invent one. And here above all would belief be unassailable... In the comfort and comradeship of cities the stark framework of which man has built his world can be concealed in the social sense of communication. These comfortable rationalisations have no validity in the desert world.”

Photograph of
James Boswell
(c.1942)



A selection of James Boswell's sketches and paintings will be on display at Tate Britain in June. His personal correspondence, sketchbooks and letters can viewed by appointment in the Tate archive – www.tate.org.uk/research/researchservices. More material is held at the British Museum and Imperial War Museum. James Boswell: Unofficial War Artist is published by The Muswell Press later this year. There will be a further exhibition at the Square One Gallery, London, in September.