



Fernando Botero and Abu Ghraib
University of California
Berkeley, January, 2007

It has been three years since the world saw digital photographs of U.S. soldiers torturing and taunting detainees at Abu Ghraib, the Iraqi prison. Now for the first time, an internationally-known artist has sketched and painted scenes of this suffering based on photographs and written reports of what went on inside the prison.

Fernando Botero, 74, a Columbian-born painter and sculptor now living in Paris, began working on his sketches as response to the anger and outrage he felt as he first read newspaper reports of the torture while on an overseas flight. In 14 months, he produced 47 oil paintings, now on display to March 25 at the Doe Library on the University of California-Berkeley campus, in an exhibit jointly sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies, Boalt Hall Law School, and the Doe Library, and the only public showing in the United States to date.

On January 29, Botero was introduced to a standing-room only crowd of more than 400 at the International House on the Berkeley campus by Harley Shaiken, the Chair of the Center for Latin American Studies, who said “Art is a permanent accusation...that at moments of crisis has an exceptional role.”

Botero was joined on stage by Robert Haas, U.S. poet laureate from 1995-1997, who had been asked to lead the public conversation with Botero. Responding to a question about why he produced these paintings, Botero spoke about his “rage and anger” as he developed his early sketches provoked by what he had seen and read, seeking to “give it testimony and not remain silent.” While his sketches were drawn in anger, he said he painted “with love,” because “for me it was important to give back dignity to these people.”

Haas noted that the paintings have “a religious quality” to them, not only through their stimulation of the “moral imagination about the victims” but in the “echoes of the stations of the cross and the martyrologies.” “These

figures were almost biblical,” he said, “an ‘ecce homo’ of what man is capable of.” Botero responded by saying that as he painted, “all of this,” including Christ and his suffering, “was in the back of my mind.”

Botero’s career began as a young man of 19 when, after a brief period in Paris, he went to Florence and painted copies of the works of the religious subjects of great masters like Giotto, Masaccio, and others. He was particularly moved by Giotto’s “voluminous figures” and indeed, his Abu Ghraib figures share a similar volume in relationship to the small space of the cells in which they are kneeling, hanging, or lying. In one agonized scene a small glowing window can be seen in the background---“was it a small symbol of hope?” “Exactly,” Botero replied, “I wanted to contrast the atmosphere of terror with hope.”

When asked why he chose to paint pictures of these scenes of U.S.-inflicted torture, rather than show the results of terrorist violence, Botero responded by saying he has always had a sympathy with the United States, and appreciated the “ideal of compassion conveyed by America,” but that “this torture was unexpected...this was why...”

Haas spoke of an Egyptian journalist, who, when hearing that the U.S. had tortured detainees, said “a light has been turned off in the world.” Haas then told the crowd, “Maybe these paintings will help turn the light back on.”

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