

Artists Fernando Botero and Steve Mumford depict the Iraq war

Pulling one's head out of the sand

Clare Hurley
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This is the first of a two-part series.

Until recently, Colombia's most famous artist, Fernando Botero (b. 1932), was known for his whimsical depiction of rotund people in an imaginary small-town world based on his childhood memories. The shopkeepers and aristocrats, peasants and military grandees, nuns and nudes all share an exaggerated pudginess that gives them a pleasant comic quality.

This distinctive style was odd enough to seem transgressive, especially when Botero rendered his version of DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* or a crucifixion of Jesus, yet the cheeriness of the street scenes, still lives and odalisques made them broadly popular and widely reproduced.

But instead of retiring after 40 years of artistic success, Botero made a radical break from the subjects that had made his work so popular. His latest series of 50 drawings and paintings depicting the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, of all his large body of work, will probably have the most impact. Botero's choice stands out all more starkly because it has hitherto been rare for any of today's established artists to approach the subject. (Another artist to do so, Steve Mumford, will be discussed in the second part of this article.)

Due to go on display on June 16 at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome as part of a broader exhibition of Botero's paintings, the pictures immediately gained extensive coverage in the international press when a Colombian magazine published photographs of them last month. Appearing a year after the now infamous Abu Ghraib photographs came to light despite the efforts of the Pentagon to suppress them, Botero's images are if anything more disturbing.

The photos rendered the torture of prisoners in Iraq by American soldiers an undeniable fact; Botero's paintings render it an indelible scar on humanity's consciousness. Drawn not from the images which have become iconographic in their own right—the hooded figure with electrical wires attached, the pyramid of nude prisoners, the grinning soldiers pointing at genitals—Botero says he based his paintings instead on reading news accounts in the *New*

Yorker magazine and the European press.

The accounts that even the servile US media has been obliged finally to print are horrific. The descriptions of the torture and murder of prisoners not only in Abu Ghraib, but at Bagram prison in Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, include interrogators “stepping on the neck of one prostrate detainee and kicking another in the genitals,” “a shackled prisoner being forced to roll back and forth on the floor of a cell, kissing the boots of his two interrogators as he went.” And finally in what could have been a page drawn from a Nazi handbook, “another prisoner made to pick plastic bottle caps out of a drum mixed with excrement and water” (*New York Times*, May 20, 2005).

Such sadism and perversity live on in the mind of any feeling person long after the newspaper has been recycled. Making their way through the imagination, these images are transformed in Botero's paintings in such a way that they elicit more from the viewer than the news reports or photos. There is still outrage and disgust, but there is also heightened empathy with the victims, whose puffy fleshiness makes them all the more vulnerable.

Here are the same soft and smooth figures that have always peopled Botero's world but stripped and hooded, strung up in pink underwear, bound and beaten by beefy soldiers, writhing bloodied and naked in a pile. One of the most affecting images is a drawing of a snarling dog setting upon a similarly snarling, or screaming, blindfolded man.

It brings to mind Claude McKay's powerful poem of resistance:

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs
Making their mock at our accursed lot...
[Rather] Like men we'll face the murderous cowardly pack
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back. (1919)*

Botero was an unlikely candidate to become the herald of a new wave of “engagé” artists. Earlier in his career, he says he thought art should be “inoffensive, since it doesn't have the capacity to change anything.” Influenced by the colonial

and Church art that he saw as a child in Colombia, with its smoothly finished surfaces communicating what he felt was an ideal of balance and tranquility, he strove to make pictures that were at best “a spiritual, immaterial respite from the hardships of life.” The exaggerated volume of his figures served to enhance this sense of beatific wellbeing.

But somewhere along the way, Botero fundamentally revised his conception of art. Instead of offering spiritual balm he now wants it to “emblazon the images [of Abu Ghraib] on the consciousness of the world.” Comparisons have been made to Picasso’s *Guernica*, which became emblematic of the slaughter of innocent villagers by Franco’s fascists in the Spanish Civil War. A parallel closer at hand exists in the paintings of Leon Golub, whose victims of torture by American-sponsored mercenaries in Latin America in the 1980s are as lean and mottled as Botero’s are plump and smooth.

Botero’s seemingly abrupt change of orientation attests to the power of reality to seep into the most insulated consciousness and express itself in surprising ways. The artist’s successful and lucrative career corresponded exactly to the period of guerilla warfare that has wracked Colombia for the past four decades. More than 200,000 have been killed in the war between the rebels controlling the rural coca-producing provinces and the Colombian government’s US-backed death squads. Yet this conflict found no expression in Botero’s paintings, presumably because he, like most middle class Colombians, looked the other way.

However, beginning in 1999, Botero began to depict the relentless violence of these “drug wars,” now re-dubbed part of the “war on terror”—the kidnappings, shootouts, massacres and resultant anguish and misery of the largely peasant victims. In 2003, 50 of these paintings and sketches were exhibited at several European museums.

At the Maillol Museum in Paris, the four-month exhibition drew 116,000 visitors. The response is a further indication that if such work is not often shown in museums and galleries, it is not a result of the public’s lack of interest.

In the Colombian paintings, Botero reacts to the barbarity of the conflict without any articulated political point of view. There is no reason to overestimate his political understanding. He could say of the Abu Ghraib torture, for example, “I, like everyone else, was shocked by the barbarity, especially because the United States is supposed to be this model of compassion.” One would think that after seeing American compassion at work in Colombia, he would no longer be shocked!

After opening in Rome, the exhibition of 170 of Botero’s works, including the 50 Abu Ghraib ones, is scheduled to travel to Germany and Greece. Disgracefully, American museums are likely to exclude the Abu Ghraib paintings

when the show arrives in the United States in 2006. The artist has commented, “If any museum wants to show works of torture, well, I would be delighted. [But] the museum that decides to show it would have to be conscious that many people would be repulsed and against it.”

Certainly such an exhibition would provoke an angry response from pro-war forces. When *Capobianco Gallery* in San Francisco exhibited only one picture of the torture at Abu Ghraib by Guy Colwell a year ago, the owner had to close her gallery permanently after she was beaten up and received death threats from right-wing thugs.

If nothing else, the exhibition of these paintings should encourage other artists to take on such explosive subjects, and go farther than Botero in their treatment. And it will give viewers a hitherto unprecedented opportunity to see art that genuinely addresses an issue of contemporary significance head-on.

Fernando Botero’s Abu Ghraib pictures are part of a larger exhibition of 170 works that opens June 16 at the Palazzo Venezia museum in Rome, traveling to the Würth Museum in Künzelsau, Germany in October and the Pinacoteca in Athens, Greece in 2006. Additional museums in Hanover and Baden-Baden have also expressed an interest in exhibiting them.



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