



Photo by Jan Scurmanti.

Professor Harley Shaiken shows Fernando Botero around the Berkeley campus.

## BOTERO AT BERKELEY

# Figures in Light and Shadow

By Daniel Coronell

The news was wonderful for both Fernando Botero and the Center for Latin American Studies. For the artist because for the first time a U.S. public institution was exhibiting his series on torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and for the Center because the exhibition was the best possible occasion to invite reflection on human rights and the war in Iraq.

Fernando Botero, the Colombian painter and sculptor, is the most famous living Latin American artist in the world. His masterpieces, full of stout characters interpreting the world's powerful leaders with colorful irony, have been exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Grand Palais in Paris, and the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, to mention just a few. His monumental sculptures have been exhibited on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, Park Avenue in New York, Grand Canal in Venice,

Paseo de los Recoletos in Madrid and in many other cities.

Such an impressive background should have been recommendation enough for any museum in the world to want to exhibit his work. However, Botero's series on the torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison did not receive that response in the United States.

"The truth was that in Europe, this exhibition had enormous repercussions," recalls Fernando Botero. "It was in Rome, and it was exhibited at the National Museum of Athens. However, when the exhibition was offered through an institution in Washington called Arts Service International, I was told they had not received a positive response from museums, and therefore it could not be exhibited."

Botero dedicated 14 months of his life to this subject,

completing the oil paintings and drawings that make up the series. Since he first read about the inhuman abuse against prisoners, he couldn't think about anything else and only stopped painting when he believed he had said everything he wanted to say.

"It was the hypocrisy revealed by Abu Ghraib that shocked me," the artist tells us as he walks around UC Berkeley's Doe Library, "because a country that had presented itself before the whole world as a model of compassion and the biggest defender of human rights ended up torturing people at the same prison where Saddam Hussein tortured his opponents. The shock I felt, as a human being and as an artist, compelled me to leave a testimony against the horror."

Nevertheless, Botero's testimony had only reached the United States through newspaper reviews and a partial exhibition at The Marlborough Gallery in New York.

"That is why Berkeley's invitation is so perfect. I am very proud to be here. First because this is one of the world's greatest universities, with an enormous intellectual reputation linked to civil rights, respect for others' opinions and freedom of speech, where this exhibition of protest fits

in perfectly. And second because it is a response to the line that art has been taking, completely divorced from society's problems. With this invitation, Berkeley is saying, 'Art can be more than mere decoration.'"

Through his work and his statements, Botero has maintained a very critical point of view of the war in Iraq.

"It is an unjustified, unnecessary war, a blot on history. Furthermore, militarily, it is doomed to be a complete failure for the United States. The Iraqis are going to be there forever, and the United States will have to leave, if not in a year's time, in two or in 10. All occupations have to come to an end, and this one has been very costly in terms of lives sacrificed — the lives of young people, the loss of great pieces of universal culture and, of course, also in terms of money. After the troops are withdrawn, the exacerbation of the civil and religious war between Sunnis and Shiites will remain as a sad inheritance. The country is worse off than ever while terrorism is getting stronger and stronger."

The Colombian artist, who has also painted the violence in his country, thinks that art must have a firm commitment to humanity and its future.

"Art has, in a certain way, been indifferent to society's

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Mr. Botero reviews the installation.



Photo by Jan Sturmann.

problems. Such indifference has been the rule. For example, Impressionism did not record the tragedies of the Franco-Prussian War. During the Renaissance, there was nothing. [Art was more socially engaged] during the Napoleonic era when armies took painters with them to portray the battles. But art has not been very committed to the drama and suffering of the weak. There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as the Mexican painting that was an aesthetic challenge and a recognition of social battles. The Italian, Russian and Chinese Marxist paintings are another example. Of course we also have Picasso with ‘Guernica’ and Goya with ‘Los fusilamientos’ (The Shootings), but they are really the exception to the rule.”

Fernando Botero, whose work is classified by some theorists as “Figurative Expressionism,” never avoids a controversy. He has had public confrontations with representatives from other artistic trends who, as he puts it, are only painting for themselves.

“The purpose of art is to give pleasure, and it should be clear. It shouldn’t be necessary to have a professor by your side to explain why the painting is important. If one looks at the work of Velázquez, Rubens, Piero della Francesca — it

is an extraordinary exaltation of man. It does not put him down but rather exalts him. Today, however, art is made to humiliate man because it is saying, ‘You don’t understand; you are an ignorant fool. Here is something I am trying to say and you don’t understand it.’ The truth is that there is nothing to understand. I believe that it was by pretending the opposite that this divorce between man and art began.”

It also isn’t easy to understand that art, as Botero puts it, should “give pleasure” while at the same time recording human miseries. In other words, how can an artistic series like Botero’s “Abu Ghraib” give pleasure?

“The thing is that art has an aesthetic component that gives pleasure. Like at the theater, at the theater for example you have drama and dramatic music that also gives pleasure. Likewise, there are painters throughout the history of art who did exclusively dramatic art. Grunewald, the great German painter, painted the crucifixions, which are perhaps the most heartrending scenes in the history of art. But there is such aesthetic beauty that you feel pleasure. Art has many elements. One of these elements is the subject. When you see a Venus by Titian, there is pleasure from the subject matter and an aesthetic pleasure. In other works the subject is dramatic but at the same time there is an aesthetic pleasure. You resist the subject, or you tolerate it, because of the aesthetic content of the painting, even if the motif is painful.”

During his four-day visit to the university, a camera crew from the BBC followed Fernando Botero everywhere. They have accompanied him across three continents and nine countries to make a documentary about his life, which had its first showing on April 19, the painter’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The producers have witnessed his work in Pietrasanta, Italy, a beautiful Tuscan town built on a marble mountain where the artist spends part of the year. They have seen him in San Pablito de la Sierra, Mexico, looking for his favorite drawing material, *papel amate* (fig-bark papyrus), made from fig tree bark and blackberry pulp by the last few people acquainted with ancient Mayan secrets. They accompanied him to a bullfight in Medellín, Colombia, where spectators gave Botero a long, moving ovation that the bullfighters would have liked for themselves. However, on few occasions did they see him as happy as he was during his visit to Berkeley.

“I never went to a true university. Art

Botero’s statue of a cat in Barcelona, Spain, underscores his international popular appeal.



Photo by Anna Alstina.



Photo by David R. León Lara.

Isabel Allende greets Mr. Botero as Willie Gordon and Prof. Beatriz Manz look on.

schools are different: painting and painting all the time to polish your technique; looking and looking to find your style. My father died when I was a child. At the age of 17, I was expelled from the high school affiliated with the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellín. My mom, as punishment, decided that from then on I would have to pay for my own studies. I enrolled in a boarding school in Marinilla, a small town near Medellín. To pay for it, I went to the *El Colombiano* newspaper and told them: 'I am a painter.' Imagine the audacity. I asked them to let me illustrate the cultural supplement. I used to go down to Medellín every Saturday by bus to get the articles and poems and would spend all day Sunday illustrating them. I would then catch the last bus and go back to Marinilla. With the money I got from these drawings, I paid for boarding school, which included food and accommodation. It didn't cost very much, but it was a lot for my means."

The days of hardship are long past for Botero. His works of art are valued in the millions of dollars. Last year, Christie's sold his 1979 painting "Los músicos" for \$2.03 million, the highest price ever paid for a work by a living Latin American artist.

Perhaps to prevent his work from becoming accessible only to the elite, Fernando Botero has donated dozens of artworks to his country's museums. In addition, in 1999, he gave Colombia his private art collection of 80 paintings, including work by Monet, Chagall, Dali, Renoir, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, Giacometti, Henry Moore and Miró, among others. The Botero donation, as it is called in artistic circles, is valued at more than \$250 million, a gesture of generosity about which Botero prefers not to comment:

"I have been very pleased by the warm reception of the people visiting the museum. I have been told it is the most frequently visited museum in Colombia."

Given all of this, there is something singularly heroic about Fernando Botero's attitude.

At the age of 75, with a secure place in the history of art, enjoying a well-deserved and immense fortune and sitting at the table of European aristocracy, Botero is capable of risking his prestige and comfort to rise before the horror and paint his colossal protest.

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