



“The Third of May, 1808” by Francisco Goya, 1814.

BOTERO AT BERKELEY

Art and Violence

By Sarah Moody

What can a painting do that a photograph cannot? History professor Tom Laqueur opened the panel discussion “Art and Violence” with this rich question. The event brought together three professors and a large, animated audience just across the hall from the topic of the day: Fernando Botero’s “Abu Ghraib” series of paintings and drawings which is now on exhibit in UC Berkeley’s Doe Library. Though the series toured widely throughout Europe, it has appeared only once in the United States. The Berkeley exhibit marks the first time it has appeared in a public institution in this country.

To answer his initial question, Laqueur explored what was missing from the exhibit. Presenting the photograph of

Lynn England holding an Iraqi prisoner on a leash — an image he considers the most emblematic of those released to the public — he wondered why was it not among the photos Botero chose to paint. Laqueur proposed that the answer has to do with gender: Botero avoided portraying England because her participation allowed Western viewers to minimize the atrocities. “If a girl committed the paradigmatic abuse at Abu Ghraib, it could not be so bad, [...] because it remains difficult, given our cultural resources, to imagine women as violent. [...] Botero’s anger was directed against this sort of mitigation, this sort of ‘not-seeing.’” Laqueur suggested that the artist selected images associated with a brutal masculinity which allowed him >>

to bring up questions of gender reversal and highlight the sexual humiliation of the prisoners.

While the photographs of American soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners numbed viewers, Laqueur argued, the paintings do the opposite, blocking this indifference by insisting on the suffering of the fleshy figures. The viewer's identification with the paintings stems in part from the figures' dignity, which Botero created through allusions to great works of Western art. Laqueur cited the painter's deep knowledge of European art history and the "fresco-like" smooth application of paint as factors that compel the viewer to keep looking and give the figures "an almost unbearable purity." In contrast with the photographs which, according to Laqueur, repel viewers with their gritty and unapologetic realism, the violence depicted in Botero's series is not messy. Quite the opposite: the careful composition of the paintings inspires the kind of "slow seeing" that can lead to a viewer's ethical engagement with a work of art.

T.J. Clark, a professor of Art History, agreed that Botero is strongly influenced by the Quattrocento and other moments of the Western art tradition, but he disagreed with Laqueur's interpretation of those references. Clark expressed the hope that art in its current, "hypermodern" crisis would "stay true to the sordid meaninglessness of the moments captured on film." To do this, he said, an artist would have to explore Abu Ghraib's fundamental distance from the narratives that have defined Western artistic culture, such as the association of physical suffering with redemption and the sacred. For Clark, the secularism and banality of

the U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib photographs is precisely what makes them so appalling. The paintings, on the other hand, avoid particularizing the subjects and instead attempt to monumentalize and universalize them, morphing them into ciphers in an ill-fitting Christian narrative.

Clark argued that by not depicting the vacancy and senselessness so apparent in the photographs, Botero failed to engage with the fundamental problem they posed. "I'm interested in the torturer with the Toshiba, not the fantasy degenerate doing his dreadful work again, with ropes and thorns and fountains of urine, to the Sunni man of sorrows." The problem with this series, Clark maintained, is that it tries to make Abu Ghraib part of a familiar narrative. "The photographs blocked a universalizing response, and a painting based on the photographs should try to do the same thing." Laqueur and Clark thus seemed to be in agreement on the universalizing effect of the paintings, but they differed sharply on the value of this gesture.

Professor Francine Masiello, of the Spanish and Comparative Literature departments, continued Laqueur's contextualizing work with a new angle, turning not to the great names of the Italian Renaissance but rather to the Latin American tradition. From the pre-Columbian statues of the Olmecs which she posited as a formal precursor to Botero's massive figures, to the work on the theme of violence by fellow Colombian artists Alejandro Obregón and Doris Salcedo, Masiello referenced Latin American art as a manifest influence on this series. Viewers familiar with the calm and joyful scenes typical of much of Botero's

"Guernica" by Pablo Picasso, 1937.

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Hanged men by Andrea del Sarto, 1530, and "Abu Ghraib 37" by Fernando Botero, 2005.

work may be surprised by the "Abu Ghraib" series, but the violence it portrays is part of a long tradition in which art speaks for those who have been silenced. Botero's close connection with that Latin American legacy is especially clear in his works from the 1960s and the late 1990s which focused on violence in Colombia and provide an important point of reference for understanding his "Abu Ghraib."

In Latin American art, representations of suffering revolve around a fundamental question: How does one account for what the official history doesn't record? For Masiello, the symbolism of the blindfold is Botero's answer to this question. By almost obsessively portraying blindfolds, he forces the viewer to see and acknowledge the senseless suffering that occurred at Abu Ghraib. By depicting the brutal, physical pain of his subjects, Botero enters into the tradition of art as a testimony to outrage, in which the oblivion and silence imposed by the torturers is made impossible.

Masiello also noted that space began to figure significantly in Botero's canvases when he turned to violence as his subject matter. He began to paint enclosures that "lock human subjects within limited possibilities of movement." By noting that pain is grounded in a space, Masiello joined Clark in suggesting that violence is always particular and specific. She pressed the point further, proposing that the body is a necessary starting point for interpretation and the senses are a way to political awakening.

The animated question-and-answer session that followed these papers opened up the discussion to varied topics, such as the faculty's relationship to state policies endorsing torture, the work of U.S. artists who take up similar themes and the difficulty artists have historically had in responding to quickly-changing political situations. Two audience members questioned the appropriateness of depicting the suffering of non-Western subjects in an aesthetic so steeped in the traditions of the Christian West. The panelists, however, all resisted the idea that a work of art should reproduce the conditions that inspired the artist. They disagreed instead on the degree to which Botero was successful in artistically reworking the torture photographs of Abu Ghraib.

T.J. Clark is Professor of Art History, Francine Masiello is Professor of Spanish and of Comparative Literature and Tom Laqueur is Professor of History, all at the University of California at Berkeley. On January 31, 2007, they spoke on a panel titled "Art and Violence," in the Morrison Room of Doe Library.

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