

BOTERO AT BERKELEY

Bringing Botero to Berkeley

By Jean Spencer

Although Fernando Botero's "Abu Ghraib" series of paintings and drawings was shown to critical acclaim and strong public interest in museums across Europe, no U.S. museum had agreed to display the works by fall 2006. The exhibit was shown for one month at The Marlboro Gallery in New York, which often features Botero's art, and received a glowing review in the *New York Times*. Harley Shaiken, Chair of the Center for Latin American Studies, saw the review and decided to issue a long-shot invitation to Mr. Botero to bring his art to the University of California, Berkeley.

On November 28, 2006, Mr. Botero responded. He said that the university would be an ideal place to display his work, and he would fly out to open the exhibit on January 26, 2007. That's when the real work began.

While the Center for Latin American Studies exhibits art on site every semester, the staff had never attempted anything on this scale before. The first problem was to come up with an exhibition room that had 130 meters of wall space. All the usual suspects declined: the university's museums said they were booked through 2009. One increasingly improbable site after another was discussed and dismissed. Finally, Beth Dupuis, Director of the Doe Library, agreed to explore the idea of transforming a student computer center and general library thoroughfare into an exhibition hall.

Ms. Dupuis and University Librarian Tom Leonard became strong advocates for the exhibit, lending their assistance and enthusiasm to the makeover of the space. Atthowe Fine Arts generously donated a substantial



Botero sculptures on display in Florence, Italy.

portion of the time needed to effect the transformation and deployed their considerable artistry and skill to mount the exhibit.

In the meantime, there was a whole new world to master: insuring, shipping, installing and protecting world-class art valued in the millions of dollars. Simultaneously, the Center dedicated itself to maximizing the academic impact of the exhibit by organizing the conversation with the artist and a semester-long program focusing on the issues raised by the art.

At one point during the two-month period between Mr. Botero's first phone call and the day he stepped off the plane in Northern California, the artist noted wryly that he "wasn't used to this level of improvisation."

Despite the odds, the Center's small permanent staff and an army of volunteers managed to pull together the exhibit in time for the opening.

Fifteen thousand people viewed "Abu Ghraib" during its seven week run, and the exhibit inspired articles in newspapers throughout the world, from the *International Herald Tribune* to *Gazeta*, among the most important newspapers in Poland. The *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Sacramento Bee* both ran major features as did *Clarín*, a key newspaper in Argentina, and *La Semana*, an important magazine in Colombia.

Berkeley also opened the door for other displays of these works in the United States. American University in Washington, D.C. is scheduled for a fall 2007 showing, and a number of other universities and museums are seeking time on the calendar.

All in all, not too bad as improvisations go.

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