

Photo by Jan Sturmann.

Fernando Botero (left), in conversation with Robert Hass.

BOTERO AT BERKELEY

A Conversation With the Artist

On January 29, 2007, the Center for Latin American Studies opened the Abu Ghraib exhibit with a rare public conversation with Fernando Botero about his life and art. Robert Haas, a UC Berkeley professor of English who was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995–97, spoke with Mr. Botero about issues ranging from the process of painting to his life as a young man in Colombia; from artistic influences on his work to how the Abu Ghraib paintings and drawings came to be; from light and shadow on the canvas to moral issues in the world.

Robert Hass: So, maybe we start at the beginning and ask how these paintings came to be?

Fernando Botero: The whole world was shocked by the revelation that the Americans were torturing Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib Prison. I read about it in the famous New Yorker article by Seymour Hersh. I was surprised, hurt and angry, like everybody. The more I read, the more I was motivated, angry and upset.

A few months later I was on a plane going back to Paris, and I read about this tragedy again. I took out paper and

pencil and started doing some drawings. When I got to my study in Paris I kept drawing and painting. It became like an obsession. For 14 months, I was only working on this, thinking about this. At last I felt empty. I didn't have anything more to say. For some reason I was at peace with myself.

But for months I felt this desire to say something because I thought it was an enormous violation of human rights. As I said before, the United States has been a model of compassion and human rights. That this could happen in a prison administered by the Americans was a shock. It caused great damage to this country. This morning I spoke with a journalist from Argentina, and she told me that only 6 percent of Argentines now approve of America. It was 70 percent three or four years ago.

I am surprised that more artists haven't done something about torture because it is a big issue that won't go away. It has to be remembered. I wanted to create a testimony to what happened. Of course I know I'm not going to change anything because I don't have that power, but at least I can give a testimony of what happened. I couldn't stay silent.

RH: I saw the paintings yesterday, and I thought about the American writer Flannery O'Connor talking about the American South in the years before the Civil Rights Movement. When people asked about her art she said, "For the hard of hearing you shout; for the almost blind you draw large and startling pictures." I think you can tell from the audience here and from the thousand people lined up outside who didn't get in how much you've spoken for those people against the kind of moral numbness that has set in.

FB: I tried to speak as clearly and loudly as I could. My approach to art allowed me to say things in a very direct way. I imagine that there are conceptual and abstract artists in America who cannot express themselves or be understood but who are also full of rage.

RH: You went to Mexico as a young man and saw the muralist painters and that tradition of painting about and for ordinary people. What effect did that have on you?

FB: I was born in Medellín, Colombia. It was a provincial town; there were no museums, no galleries, nothing like that. The first art I saw was the Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros paintings that somehow came to Colombia. Then, of course, I went to Mexico to see everything.

What is important about the Mexican movement was that they made the reality of the country the subject of their art. Before that, it was not considered a worthy artistic subject. Art had to be about the aristocracy or some souvenirs from Paris. And then the Mexicans painted the poor people and the Indians and created this tremendous movement. That was an important influence when I started.

Later I went to Italy and saw the great masters that actually inspired the Mexicans, because the Mexican movement was inspired by Giotto, by Masaccio, by Piero della Francesca and Uccello. The language was imported from Europe, but they cared about Mexican reality, and that was a tremendous thing. Part of my formation was this influence, this direct way of speaking that I think is important.

Well, there were so many other things. I am the kind of artist who isn't afraid to be influenced. I have had many, many influences that enriched my experience. My mind was full of images that would become transformed, later.

RH: Looking at the paintings last night, I was thinking it couldn't have been easy to live in your mind with those images for 14 months.

FB: Of course it was not the same as when I do pleasant subjects. In art sometimes you have to make a parenthesis in your production to say something special about something that touches you. I am convinced that most art in history has been done on pleasant themes, but several times I have moved out of this line of thinking and done rather unpleasant subject matter.

You know for instance about the drama in my country. I spent two years working on paintings about the violence and narcotrafficking that was so terrible in Colombia. I donated those paintings to the Colombian National Museum because my country will be peaceful one day, and then people will see these paintings and remember how terrible, how stupid the violence was. The memory of it will not disappear.

In the sixties I did many paintings about dictators and military juntas because that was the reality of Latin America at that moment. Then I did many, many satirical things. And then I always go back to the eternal subjects of painting: the still lifes, the figures, the animals, because — what is art? — art is doing the same things but in a different way.

Art history is the history of people who saw differently. Not better, because in art there is no absolute truth; everything is truthful as long as it is coherent, as long as the artist has a tremendous conviction that touches everything he does. That is what he can give to art history: this vision that is different and coherent.

RH: You started by drawing on the airplane. When did you move from drawing to painting?

FB: Well, almost immediately. I got to Paris, I went to my studio and I immediately started doing drawings that were more elaborate, more constructed. Then after a few weeks, I started to paint in oil. That's the way you do it. You have to do a lot of drawing before you actually think of going into the oil paintings.

RH: How long did you stay near the photographs?

FB: Well, I saw the photographs. They were very interesting as documents to know the atmosphere of the prison. This corridor, this light that was very dramatic — because most of the torture happened during the night. All this was very important. But there was no point in just taking a photograph and making a copy in oil like they did during the hyperrealist movement in America in the sixties. Well, that was an approach; in this case it didn't make any sense.

What I wanted was to visualize the atmosphere described in the articles, to make visible what was invisible. Because the artist doesn't have to be there; he can imagine the scene and



Photos by David R. Leon Lara.

Hundreds wait to see Fernando Botero.

create something that has this power, as if it were actually an immediate vision of the thing. The concentration of energy and emotion that goes into a painting says more than the click of a photo. Of course I am partial to painting, but in art you have to concentrate so much energy that somehow people feel it. There is something truthful, and they feel it; they feel it.

RH: What was your process? How much space was there for revision and reflection?

FB: I have the same problem painting Abu Ghraib as painting a still life because the problem is coloring, composition, drawing — all the things that go into any painting. I start with a sketch that is usually done with great speed because it's like a spark of rage, a spark of anger. From the sketch I pass it to the canvas. I start to paint and to invent the painting. When I start, I know 20–30 percent of what is going to happen.

But then I follow the needs of the art, the needs of the painting, the color. The problem is that I have to create a continuity in the colors, a balance in the composition, that corresponds to my thinking. At the end, when I actually do the painting, it is very similar to every other painting.

Of course, if I am painting a sensual nude, it's another sensation. If I am doing something that is dramatic, then I have to convey this feeling of pain and anguish and humiliation. Then something I was thinking that day somehow gets into the painting, and people feel it.

RH: Last night people were talking about the use of color in the paintings. The red of course holds up the whole tradition of blood in Spanish painting: the Stations of the Cross, Goya's Disasters of War, all the San Sebastians and martyrologies that the paintings call up. It felt like you had to have been aware of the echoes you were making once you started this process.

FB: Well, yes. I have been a painter for a long time, 58 years. You get a lot of information, in museums, in books, everywhere. You have this Christian tradition of martyrs and Christ and everything, full of blood, full of death. All this is in the back of your mind, and then you recognize that this was very present at the moment you were painting. But you don't realize it until you're done. When you are painting, you don't

realize it. Of course the color red was important because as I said, it is the same problem as in any other kind of painting: you have to take care of the color as much as if you were doing a landscape or a still life.

RH: Just in terms of the process: Does the paint have to dry for a while before you can go back with second thoughts?

FB: Well, yes. In painting there are two ways to do it. The Impressionist painters invented what is called direct painting in which you mix the color in the palette, you put it there on the canvas and that's it. Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Braque all used this technique. Most of the art of the 20th century was done like this, direct painting.

The painters before Courbais, in the middle of the 19th century, worked in a process that was like building up a painting through coats and coats of paint. They worked like writers: you do something; you leave it; you read it again; you edit the text; you leave it; you correct this and that, and the thing builds slowly through layers of paint and corrections. I like to work like that. I don't work in a direct way. I paint something; I let it sit for two or three weeks; I look to see if something is wrong; I repaint the whole thing and change this and that. I try to do the best I can, and that's the way it is.

It takes a few months to do each painting, but it's not as though I work continuously on it for three months. I work perhaps a week or 10 days total on a painting. But I don't complete it the first time. I have to criticize it. I have to not let anything pass. I redo big parts of the painting, if necessary. I change things. That's the way I work.

RH: So while one painting is set aside you might be working on another and discover something that would clarify what you were doing previously?

FB: Exactly. I work on five, six, seven paintings at the same time because I have to let them sit and dry for a few weeks before I take them on again.

RH: One of the powerful things about the moral imagination of the paintings is that, with one or two exceptions, we don't really see the perpetrators of the violence. It's very much about the victims. In fact most of what we see of the torturers is hands, gloved hands...

FB: And boots. One of the things in the photos that made the biggest impression on me was the fact that the guards

were wearing these green gloves to touch the prisoners; I thought it was a terrible humiliation. It made a tremendous impression on me, this hand in a green glove touching the prisoners. I thought it was more powerful to give all the space to the victim and only leave the hand you see touching the prisoner. If I had to split the space it would be less effective than focusing on the victim and the hand or the boots.

RH: In the American context, the young people who carried out the torture — apparently at the encouragement of the CIA and U.S. military intelligence — were mostly poor white kids from the South: a girl who would do absolutely anything so the boys would like her; working-class guys who got jobs as prison guards, full of anger... They got punished. It was the American news media, as you have remarked, that exposed the violence, and some of the soldiers who carried out the torture were brought to justice. But none of the people who initiated the torture or created the nightmare atmosphere that you rendered have been punished for what they've done.

FB: You're right.

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A convoy in Iraq.



Photo by Trinity Test Site.

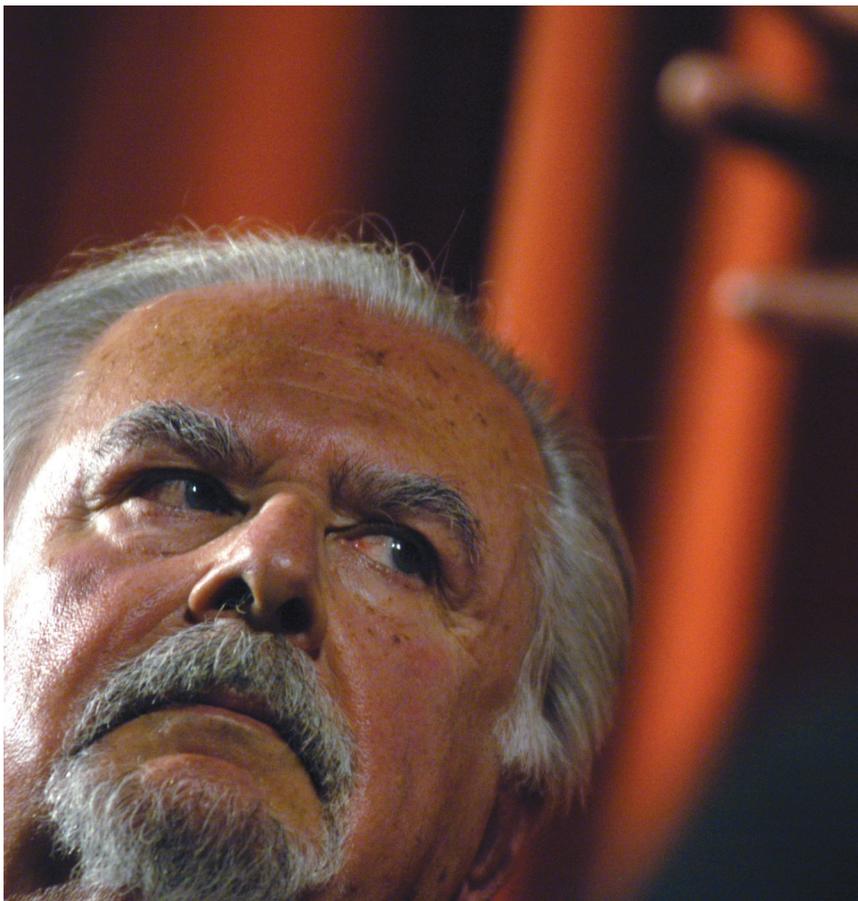


Photo by Jan Summan.

Fernando Botero takes a question from Robert Hass.

in my head and turned to the woman standing next to me to say all this stuff and saw a tear going down her cheek. I realized that I'd been defending myself against seeing what was actually there by running all this intellectual art history through my head. Were you able to keep a distance while you were painting?

FB: Well, as I said there is this spark, there is a spark of anger that creates the sketch. It is something that takes seconds, usually less than half a minute, and it is there.

Then the act of painting, even if it's a dramatic subject, the act is sensual; it's something that you do with love. Of course, as I said before, it's not the same as painting a beautiful landscape or a still life of beautiful fruit. To paint human suffering is different; the experience is different.

The act of painting is a wonderful thing because it is like an ecstasy. I always tell people that painting is like going to the movies. You don't exist; it's the movie that exists, you are there. One thing that is also interesting is that I can stand for seven or eight hours a day painting and I don't feel tired. If I go to a

cocktail party, after half an hour I'm dead. It is very strange. I don't know why.

Picasso said when you paint you don't get tired because you leave your body outside. It is like a little ecstasy. You don't exist. What exists is the painting. You don't exist, you don't suffer, you don't get tired and you are concentrated, just like when you go to the movies but more so.

RH: That's wonderful. Last night my wife was looking at one particular painting, and I went up to see what she was looking at. She pointed at the back of one of those small, claustrophobic canvases, at the glowing window at the end of the corridor. I realized that it was a small symbol of hope.

FB: Yes, exactly. I wanted to put in a contrast to the dark colors, dark bars and dark blood. In every painting there is a little window in white to create a contrast between the light outside the hall and the terrible, claustrophobic atmosphere inside.

RH: Kenneth Baker wrote a wonderful piece in today's Chronicle. One of the things he said was that because this was a work of imagination and not documentary, the figures in the paintings immediately became mythic

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RH: The fact that for the most part you leave out the torturers — we see the hands and we see the boots — leaves the dogs do the symbolic work, I thought.

FB: This is very important. They actually attack the prisoner; they are not just threatening him because in the photos you clearly see blood on the prisoner's legs.

But back to what you were saying: These were young people. There wasn't a clear definition of what was allowed and, in a very ignorant and inhuman way, they did things that had no explanation.

RH: I was looking at one small painting — a profile of ferocious dog. The dog's skin is almost green, and the mouth is red, very terrifying. I found myself thinking about German expressionism, George Grosz, your paintings of the dictators in the 1960s, how they seem connected, how art critics have connected your work of that period to German paintings of the 1920s. I was running this number

and generalized. Rather than being these Arab kids from the streets of Baghdad, the figures felt like they belonged to a kind of *Ecce Homo* tradition.

And, I don't know if this is also my looking with art history in my head to defend myself, but it also felt like these figures were almost biblical.

FB: I was very impressed by the nobility of some of the people in the photos. Many were old people with beards who looked like prophets, people who grew beards because of their religious convictions, people who had tremendous dignity. And suddenly they were in the hands of teenagers who had no knowledge of their religion, who had no respect. They called the prisoners rag heads. They had no respect for these old people. That's why in some of the paintings I try to make them look like prophets, to show that these people in their poverty had a tremendous dignity and were treated in a terrible way by ignorants, by soldiers who had no knowledge of anything that wasn't American. For me it was important to try to give them back their dignity.

RH: I remember reading that with your first prize money you went to Spain and set yourself up at the Prado earning money as a copyist. You must have been copying these great biblical works.

FB: I won the Colombian painting prize when I was 18. It was very important for me. My family was very poor. With the money, I went to Europe to complete my education as an artist. I knew that if I didn't learn the techniques, I couldn't express myself. Before you say a word you have to learn the language, and that's what I tried to do. I went to the Prado. I was a copyist there. And fortunately people passing by bought these copies.

RH: And from Spain you went to...

FB: I went to Paris for a few months, and then I lived in Florence for two and a half years. In those days, the dream was to go to Paris and become Picasso — that's what everybody wanted. And then one night I saw a book open in a bookstore; it was open to the reproduction of the *Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon* by Piero della Francesca, I saw that reproduction, and I thought it was the most beautiful thing

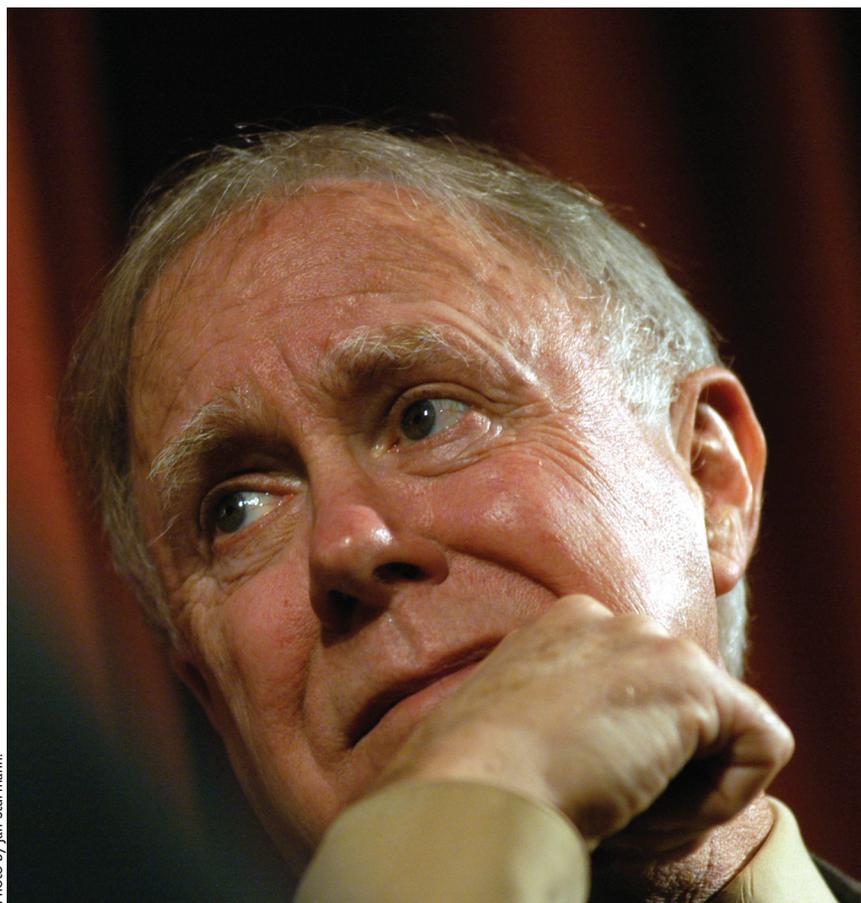


Photo by Jan Sturmann.

Robert Hass listens intently.

I ever saw and that it was impossible to do something more beautiful. The next day I bought the book and realized that Florence was where I wanted to be. That's how I changed my way of thinking: I wanted to learn about the Old Masters. And that's why I went to Florence, and then of course I was very taken by Florentine art and...

RH: How old were you?

FB: I was 19.

RH: So you consciously went from direct to indirect painting by going from Paris...

FB: No, at that time I was doing direct painting because that's what I did in Colombia. Of course, when I started reading about technique I realized there was another way to do it.

RH: And from Florence...

FB: From Florence I went to Colombia, and then I lived in New York for 13 years beginning in 1960. Then I moved to Paris in 1973, and I have been living there ever since.

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Photo by Jan Sturmann

Mr. Botero signs posters after the event.

RH: So you arrived in New York at the height of Abstract Expressionism.

FB: Exactly. It was a very difficult moment because there was a kind of dictatorship of abstract art. If you were not an Abstract Expressionist you were nothing, you were like a leper. You couldn't get a gallery, nothing. It was very difficult to stay there.

I started becoming successful when a German museum director invited me to do an exhibition in Germany. After that, many of the world's most important galleries, like Marlborough and Hanover Gallery in London approached me. But you know, for 10 years in New York I couldn't get a gallery. It was very hard to sell a painting. It was a very difficult time.

RH: People date from about 1962 the emergence of your characteristic style: these large, I've heard critics call them volumetric, figures. No art critic says big and fat.

FB: I was very attracted to the volumetric painters of

Florence because they were very sensual. I saw an exaltation of life in these paintings. Florentine artists reinvented the idea of space and volume in art. It's something we take for granted now, but in the 13th century paintings were flat. Now we have the ability to create this illusion of space and volume. It was a tremendous discovery, made by Giotto in the 13th century.

I was very touched by the power of these paintings, the sensuality, and started to move in that direction. I was very interested in volume. But it was a few years later that I really began to develop my style. What happened was very simple. I was drawing a mandolin with a very generous outline like I learned from the Italians. Then in the moment of making the hole in the mandolin, I made it very small. Suddenly, this mandolin became huge, monumental because of the contrast between the small detail and the generous outline. I saw that something happened there. I immediately started trying to visualize other subjects. It took a long time — 10, 15 years — before I developed a more or less coherent vision of what I wanted to do, but at the beginning it was that little sketch inspired by my love of Italian art.

RH: Fascinating. When you began the Abu Ghraib paintings, did it interrupt another project? Were you working on something else that you set aside when you began this work?

FB: No, I was coming back from a trip. I got home and started the drawings immediately. I was very motivated, very motivated, because I had been reading a lot about it. I read two or three papers a day; I was very informed about what was going on.

RH: Some people have expressed surprise that you did this political...

FB: I didn't tell anyone what I was doing. I was working, working, and one day I meet a friend of mine from Colombia who has a small magazine there. He asked me what I was doing. I told him I was doing these paintings. "Why don't you give me some photos?" he asked. "I want to publish them in the magazine."

And so I gave him some photos. It's amazing, you know. I gave him the photos, the magazine came out and the next day there was Associated Press, France Press, all these agencies photographing my studio and wanting to know what I was doing. It was seen all over the world.

People were so critical about Abu Ghraib that there was a desire to do something. Every time there was an opportunity to make a denunciation they immediately took the opportunity. And that's what happened with these paintings: suddenly they were all over the place.

RH: I'm sure that rightwing and neoconservative backers of the Iraq War and the War on Terrorism will say about your paintings what they have said about other objections to the war: Why were you not as outraged, why were you not driven to the studio by acts of terrorism in the same way that you were by these acts of torture under the auspices of the U.S. government? What would you say?

FB: Torture has always existed. You expect torture in Africa

or Latin America or Asia. But America represents human rights, democracy, freedom of speech, compassion — all of the things that I admire. It was a shock because it was unexpected. Of course I could have done it about torture in Africa. I did paint the drama in my country. But this thing was completely unexpected.

The sympathy people felt for the United States fell all over the world because of this. This policy and prisons like Guantánamo and the fact that these people cannot get a normal trial have done great damage to the reputation of this country. It is seen very badly all over the world and in America of course.

RH: I have that same sensation. An Egyptian writer told a journalist friend of mine that when the United States started torturing people it was as if a light had been turned off in the whole world. I thought about that last night and thought about the howl of pain and outrage in your paintings and thought that maybe they will help to turn the light back on.

A webcast of the conversation is available on our Web site at <http://clas.berkeley.edu>.

Patrons wait outside the exhibit on opening night.



Photo by Jan Sturmann.