

Santiago Opening Remarks

Dear Friends,

Unfortunately, I cannot be present at the opening of my Abu Ghraib exhibit at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile. Due to several commitments this year, in which I am turning 80, it was not possible for me to attend this very important event. The day prior to the opening of the exhibit in Santiago, I am inaugurating a sculpture exhibit in Assisi, and the following week, I am inaugurating another exposition, the largest of my life, at the Fine Arts Palace Museum in Mexico City. Thus, due to reasons beyond my control, I cannot be there with you this time.

However, I am glad to know that two great friends of mine are there on my behalf: scholars Harley Shaiken and Beatriz Manz, both professors at the University of California, Berkeley. What is more, I can say that to a great extent, I owe to them the wide publicity this collection has received in the United States. Harley and Beatriz knew about this series of

paintings and drawings because it had already been exhibited at some European museums, but they also knew that it had been rejected by several American museums, which is why they decided to contact me and suggested presenting it at Berkeley. Delighted, I accepted, of course, and in that moment, they made the miracle happen. In only seven weeks, they were able to arrange the exhibit in the university's facilities. The exhibit caused a significant impact and met with great interest, both on the part of the faculty as well as the students, because they all shared the same indignation that this atrocious news, that of the tortures in the Abu Ghraib prison, 32 kilometers away from Iraq's capital city, had generated everywhere.

In reality, the main reason for my anger, and that of the civilized world, was that this outrageous event was not limited to an isolated case of a perverse and corrupt vigilante group, committing atrocious crimes unknown to their superiors, but something much more complex. Everything seemed to indicate that the world power that presented itself as the guardian of dignity and human rights had orchestrated a system of abuses from the highest echelons of power. Even though American troops had invaded the country under the pretext of freeing the nation from Saddam Hussein's tyranny, they had ended up torturing the Iraqi people in the same prison where Hussein had tortured his fellow citizens. Without a shadow of a doubt, it was precisely this hypocrisy and double standard that led me to paint these pieces. The basis for my information was Seymour Hersh's article, which I read in *The New Yorker*, as well as other European publications, and these readings gave me the energy, which stemmed from anger, to work on these paintings later.

Finally, thanks to my friendship with Harley and Beatriz, and due to the fact that the University of California, Berkeley, was the first place where I could exhibit this series in the United States, I decided to donate the collection to this institution's prestigious museum. That is where these paintings are now and where they will be forever, and I am glad they have been left in good hands.

Thank you very much,
Fernando Botero

Fernando Botero in the Abu Ghraib exhibit at UC Berkeley, 2007.
(Photo by Jan Sturmann.)

