

Photo by Jan Sturmann.

Fernando Botero signs autographs following his public talk on the UC Berkeley campus.

## ART

## Berkeley Bears Witness

by Thomas Laqueur

**O**n September 22, 2009, the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum (BAM) will welcome Fernando Botero's generous gift of 26 paintings and 30 drawings from his Abu Ghraib series to Berkeley and to the museum's permanent collection. Valued in the multiple millions — although Botero has always said they would never be for sale — this is the largest gift in BAM's history and one of the largest in the history of any American university collection.

Botero began work on this series in the summer of 2004 after reading Seymour Hersh's revelatory and disturbing report on torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib in *The New Yorker*. His images are not strictly documentary, not a translation of the infamous and much reproduced snapshots into another media. They are a great artist's effort "to make invisible things visible," to represent and thereby interpret, through a new visual vocabulary, the outrages that had been perpetrated on Iraqi prisoners in American custody. The benign and gently grotesque figures for which Botero is

famous have become dark and malignly grotesque figures of the body humiliated and in pain.

Some of these controversial paintings and works on paper were shown as part of a larger exhibition of the artist's work in Rome in the summer of 2005; some were subsequently exhibited in the new Würth Museum in Künzelsau and at the Pinacoteca in Athens. Exhibitions were planned as well for Milan and Valencia. When, in November 2006, they were finally exhibited in the United States — in the private Marlborough Gallery of Botero's dealer in New York — it became clear that no public museum in this country had the courage to show them.

Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies responded by inviting the Abu Ghraib pictures and Botero himself to campus. The exhibition opened on January 29, 2007, in the catalogue room of Doe Library, a space that had been transformed into an art gallery in record time. Fifteen thousand people saw the works in the course of seven weeks; over 600 people attended a conversation between Botero and

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Poet Laureate Robert Haas and hundreds more came to other related programs organized by the Center. It was the enthusiasm of this welcome that inspired Botero to give his works to Berkeley rather than to their many other suitors in this country and abroad.

That BAM has become their permanent home is important for three related reasons. In the first place, these works are not primarily political art; they are art and of an unusual sort: they depict the suffering of war. Suffering has a long history in Western art, especially in religious art, and Botero's works are deeply informed by this tradition. But depictions of the suffering of war are far rarer: Caillot's of the Thirty Year's War, Goya's of the Napoleonic Wars in Spain; Otto Dix's paintings of the trenches of the Great War and of its mutilated survivors; and Picasso's "Guernica." In each case, this art has become the prism through which the individual suffering that results from collective conflict and political decisions are imagined and remembered. Berkeley will have, for study and contemplation, art that may well come to stand for a defining moment in the history of this country and the Iraq War. And BAM will have an artistic resource through which both formal and historical aspects of the depiction of suffering and questions about the relationship between art and politics can be studied and debated. Whatever else the Abu Ghraib works might be, they are thus an enormous

visual and intellectual resource to the campus and the public at large.

Second, this art is here in large measure because of what Berkeley represents for the history of free speech and critical engagement with the great public issues of the day. This university has a special mandate, given its tradition, to be the home of art that bears witness to a controversy and demands interrogation. Art may be, as Botero says, "a permanent accusation," but more importantly it is a permanent invitation to serious looking, which is in turn an invitation to serious thinking: the business of a university.

And finally, art of this quality and engagement promises to become an important participant in the life of BAM and the university. Although not painted for this site, as was José Clemente Orozco's great "Epic of American Civilization" for Dartmouth's library, the Abu Ghraib works are likely to play a similar role here. They announce that art is important to a liberal education and that seeing is a way of thinking about things beyond the beautiful. They offer us the opportunity to contemplate how a morally serious painter has imagined a dangerous moment in the new century. Well into the future, people will be able to come to campus to confront Abu Ghraib through the vision and craftsmanship of Fernando Botero.

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Fernando Botero inspects the installation of the Abu Ghraib exhibit at the Doe Library prior to its 2007 opening.

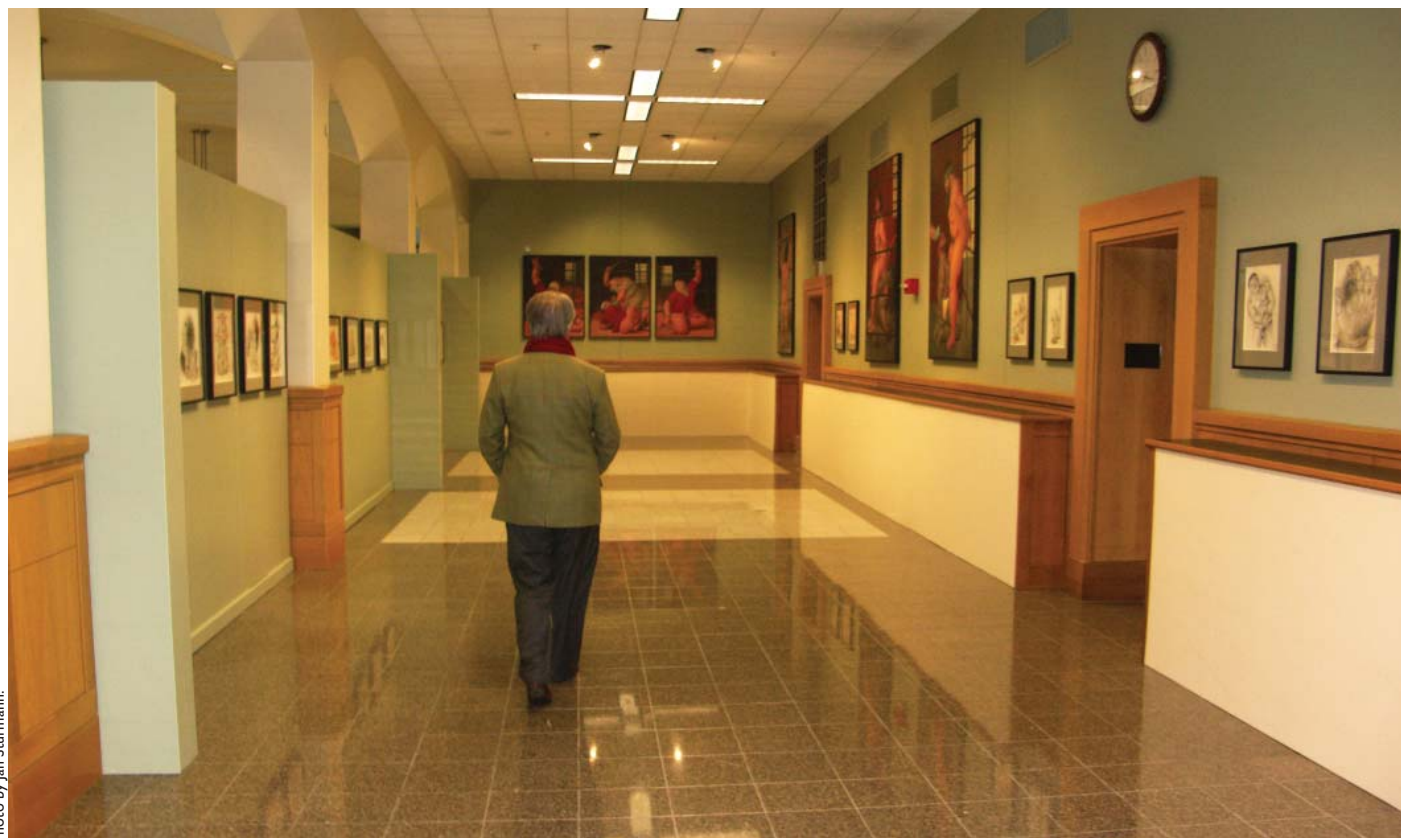


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