



Photo by Peg Skorpinski.

Fernando Botero in conversation with Lawrence Rinder, September 2009.

ART

The Making of a Maestro

Lawrence Rinder Interviews Fernando Botero

On September 23, 2009, the Center for Latin American Studies and the Berkeley Art Museum held a public event to celebrate Fernando Botero's donation of his Abu Ghraib series of paintings and drawings to the University of California, Berkeley. At the event, the internationally acclaimed artist was presented with the Chancellor's Citation for his lifetime of achievement. He then engaged in a public discussion about his life and work with the museum's director, Lawrence Rinder.

Rinder: Your first presentation as an artist was in 1948, when I believe you were only 16 years old. You sold an illustration, if I am not mistaken.

Botero: Well, yes. I started to participate in group shows in my hometown with the older painters of the region. Then I moved to Bogotá and stopped my high school studies and became a professional artist very early. I was 17 or 18 when I started as a professional.

R: This work from 1949, "Crying Woman," was done only a year after you first began to show publicly. Historically, 1948 was the first year of what has become known as "La violencia" — which was a tragic and tremendously important moment in the history of Colombia. We're still seeing the after-effects today. And it's unfortunate that your own career began at the very moment when Colombia began to unravel. I wonder if you could talk about "La violencia," what it was and how it impacted your early years as an artist.

B: It had a great impact because, of course, young people are very sensitive to these manifestations of violence, social injustice, etc. We were very touched by this situation. As you said, violence started in Colombia with the killing of Jorge Gaitán, who was a popular leader who was going to be president. A very reactionary group in Colombia killed him, and then the reaction of the masses was total. They burned half of Bogotá and Medellín. Every young

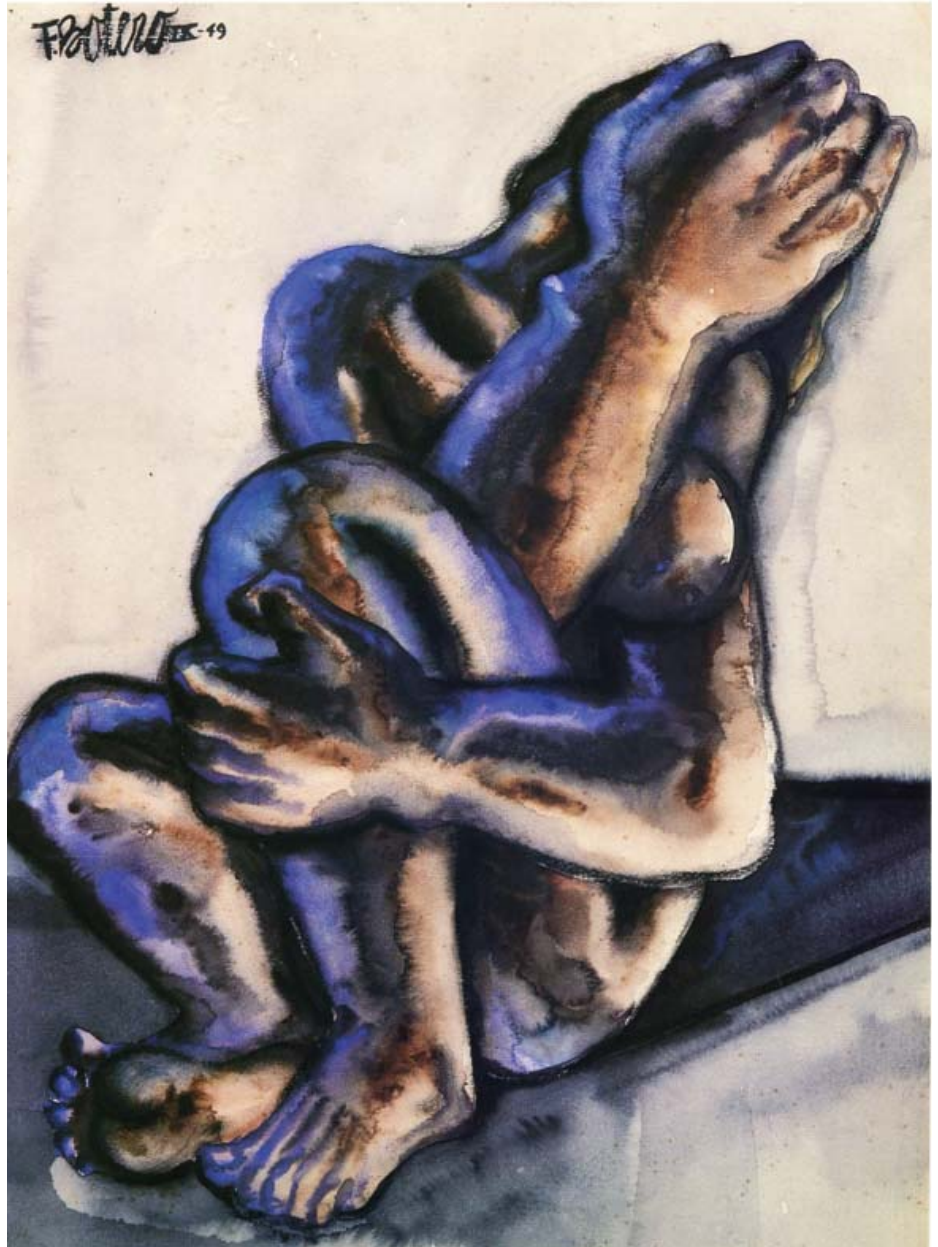
intellectual, student, artist, etc. was very touched by the situation.

From the point of view of painting, of course, at that time we had very little information about international art. What we got mostly were reports of Mexican art. I was very interested in Diego Rivera and especially Orozco, as you see in “Crying Woman.” At the same time, there is an interesting element in this watercolor from 1949: there was already a special interest in volume that you can see in the arm of the “Crying Woman.” My watercolors of that time were always very volumetric, and I just cannot explain why. Really it was unusual. When I was a student in Florence a couple of years later, I was able to rationalize the importance of volume and understand that in these watercolors there was already a tendency inside me. That’s why I was so enthusiastic about Quattrocento art [the art of 15th century Italy].

R: You went to Europe in 1952. I imagine part of the reason was to see the great works of art but also to get out of the declining political and social situation in Colombia.

B: It was mostly because I wanted to see the Great Masters, the museums, etc. I didn’t know much about the Great Masters because there was so little information. I knew there was somebody called Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Velázquez, but there was very little information. So when I got to Europe, I discovered their fantastic work and that art was much more important than I had ever thought, more complex and extraordinary.

My original plan was to go to Paris, as every young artist aspires to do. Then I changed my plans and went to Italy. That is why my work is very involved with Italian art,



“Crying Woman,” watercolor on paper, 59 x 44 cm, 1949.

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especially the Quattrocento: Uccello, Piero della Francesca, etc. As a matter of fact, I realized when I went to Florence that Mexican art was actually inspired by and derivative of the Quattrocento. It was better to see the source of this art. From then on, I was not looking at Mexican art; I was looking at Quattrocento.

R: And then in '56 you actually did go to Mexico City. Did you meet any of the muralists at that time?

B: I met Diego Rivera once but in a group of about ten people. He was there; I was there.

R: And the influence had already occurred in your youth.

B: Well, no. I was very influenced by Mexican art in the beginning because that was the only thing you saw. Then once I went to Europe, I saw the difference — I saw the Great Masters that inspired the Mexican work. Then I was much less impressed.

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“Still Life With Mandolin,” oil on canvas, 67 x 121 cm, 1957.

I think the Mexican artists were very important because they reflected the political problems of their time. The reality of the country was revolutionary, and beyond style or technique, they were confronting the very human problems in Mexico.

R: I want to go back to the point you made about volume. You said earlier that volume was an issue even at the very beginning in the 1949 watercolor. I wonder if you could talk about this picture, “Still Life With Mandolin.” I think it was a bit of an epiphany for you.

B: A very early work, yes. By then I saw the importance of volume in paintings. I was reading a lot of Bernard Berenson who gave tremendous importance to volume. As a matter of fact, he created a scale of importance based on the ability to produce what he called “tactile values.” As I said before, in my early work there was an element of volume. Then, all my work became more and more involved with volume but in a way that was very derivative of the Italian volume.

One day, I was painting a mandolin, and the moment I was going to make the hole in the instrument, I did it very small. There

was something there that I identified with immediately. I saw that it became much more important, much more radical. The contrast between the small detail and the generous outline makes the form become much more important and aggressive and sensual and so many things. People recognize my work very easily because they see this exaltation, this extravagant or exaggerated volume.

Volume was very important through the centuries after the time of Giotto up to the Impressionists. Volume was expressed more or less in every painting. After the Impressionists, and in the 20th century, art became much more dimensionally flat, and volume was forgotten. For me, part of the magic of a painting is the fact that on this flat surface you have the illusion of space and volume. It really is part of the mystery of painting. Without volume, an element of mystery and sensuality is missing. That is why I am critical of much of this art that was extremely decorative. I wanted my work to reincorporate this element that was somehow forgotten or dismissed in the 20th century.

R: So you began applying volume to figures in quite a pronounced way, as in this piece called “Dead Bishops”

from 1958, a really remarkable work that actually anticipates one of the works upstairs, in the Abu Ghraib collection.

B: Yes, exactly. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of this painting.

R: In the 1958 painting you can see that we are talking about the rotund outline with the small detail. It’s clear. There is another element to this painting, a quality to the palette and also to the brush stroke, which really only existed in your work for about three or four years, right at this point from 1958 to ’61 or ’62. The palette is almost fauve: bright colors, more expressionistic in a way. I think this was a period when you were also living in New York, and I wonder whether there was an influence at all from the Abstract Expressionists, or what was the context of this work?

B: I saw the Abstract Expressionist paintings and was very seduced by them. It was a very seductive movement because of the freedom, the generosity, the sensuality of the application of color, the brush stroke. I started painting with a brush stroke that was apparent.

The art of the Quattrocento always has a very fine surface, and, historically, most art has very smooth surfaces. There were very few artists — like Frans Hals, like Goya in his Black Paintings — who left the brush stroke very evident. But the Abstract Expressionist paintings were so interesting that for some years I was doing this. But then, in a way, I found that it was a contradiction. I was trying to bring some calm to my work. I admire the calm of Piero della Francesca very much. I admire the calm in Egyptian and Greek art. Calm gives a sense of eternity to the form; this exaltation, this fever of the

continued on page 28 >>



Right:
 “Dead Bishops,” oil on canvas,
 190 x 218 cm, 1958.



Left:
 “Dead Bishops,” oil on canvas,
 175 x 190 cm, 1965.

FOLLOWING PAGE:
 “Abu Ghraib 89,” 171 x 111 cm,
 oil on canvas, 2006.

(All images © Fernando Botero, courtesy
 Marlborough Gallery, New York.)





brush stroke, was a contradiction. That is why, at a certain moment, I stopped.

R: So, for example, this version from 1965 — it's the same painting but done in the style of Piero della Francesca. So why a pile of dead bishops?

B: I really don't know my reason exactly. But the reason I painted people from the church is because, in the Renaissance, people went around with the most fantastic colors. They painted that way because the models were then full of color. In our time, most people wear grey or black or white, and the people of the church and the *toreros* are the only ones who use extravagant colors. For me, it was a pretext to use color.

R: It's like a still life of fruit, but instead it's dead bishops.

B: Why were they in a pile? I really don't know. I cannot explain that.

R: And what about these folks? This is called "Official Portrait of the Military Junta" from 1971. I think that this clearly is not just about a grouping of color. This is really a social, a political satire. The composition here very closely resembles the Goya painting "The Family of Charles IV." So tell me about this. Is this a particular family? What was going on socially and politically at this time?

B: Well, this was the time of the Somozas, the Trujillos and so many military juntas in Latin America. And of course everybody who was intelligent was against this ridiculous thing. It was very easy to make satires when you heard the stories of generals who were five years old and the kinds of things that they did in the Dominican Republic and Guatemala and places like that. Most of Latin America suffered this kind of military dictatorship. And I did a series of paintings that were satires of these people. Of course, Goya's "The Family of Charles IV" was a good example. I did a presentation of the Latin American family that was like "The Family of Charles IV."

R: And so, in this case, the volumizing of the figures seems to be clearly a satirical element. Would you say that, in this case, that formal quality plays the role of satire?

B: Well, the thing is that this volume, for some reason, inspired people to think that it was funny. When you see somebody who is very slim, you don't think it's funny. But you think that somebody who is fat is funny.

Actually, I was not trying to do satire. I was trying to satirize the costumes and the fact that there were these little generals. I did a presentation that was satirical, but it was done with the same spirit that I do still life. All my life, I have been painting still life because the act of painting is caressing, is trying to communicate sensuality and peace through the form. Even if I do a painting on a subject that is repulsive, in a way I have to treat it with the same love that I treat a fruit. That is the contradiction, but that's the way it is.

R: What was the response to this work in Latin America? Did you have any difficulty among the ruling classes? They must have sensed that all was not well, or did they not even notice? Did they commission pieces like this?

B: Actually, I did not meet any of these dictators. I was living in Europe and New York. But the painting became extremely popular. People were reproducing it in many places. That was the positive thing. Actually, that was what I wanted, that the satire be planted in the mind of the people so they would see how ridiculous these dictators were.

R: So the Abu Ghraib series is not at all new in your work, in that it takes on the subject of state violence. This is actually something that you have been representing for decades. This untitled piece here from 1978 is one example, but one of many. You've been speaking about the role of art to create a feeling of calm and that every painting is finally a still life, but can you speak for a moment about the relationship between, maybe not art, but an artist's practice and state violence? How do you think art should respond? How have you responded?

B: You cannot be indifferent to situations that are so repulsive. At that time, the police were treating people very badly. There were these two paintings that reflected the situation. Later on, I reflected the violence in my country, in Colombia. I did a series of paintings that were very dramatic...

R: ...of the drug war...

B: ...of the massacres, the parades of coffins. You would see these parades of 50 or 60 coffins coming down the main streets of these towns. I saw this on television, and I did paintings. As a matter of fact, I donated that series to the National Museum in Colombia.

Every time that I'm impressed or shocked by something, it comes out in my work. I was shocked by the torture in Iraq at the time of the Bush administration. It



“The Official Portrait of the Military Junta,” oil on canvas, 173 x 218 cm, 1971.

was something the whole world was against. Everybody that was involved with art, because of the sensibility of the artist, was more shocked. That is why I developed like a rage. And one day I started to visualize what was going on in that prison, and then I began painting. I kept working and working. It became an obsession until I said what I had to say. And somehow it was like a therapy, because the more I painted, the more calm there was in my heart. When I finished doing the series, I felt peace, somehow. It was a therapy really. But I knew that I had to do something because it was such a shocking thing. And I did.

R: I wanted to ask you about Christianity because this is a theme that was discussed quite a bit in the conversations that took place on the occasion of your last visit. Professor Tom Laqueur called the Passion of Christ, “the paradigmatic instance of suffering in the Western tradition,” and he suggested that this theme was a very strong undercurrent in your work.

As a sort of counterpoint to that, T.J. Clark, who is also on the faculty here, said that your work might have been stronger if it had stayed, “true to the sordid meaninglessness of the moments captured on film.” He wished that you had explored 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.

So two different points of view: one seeing the connection to Christianity as empowering the work and giving its message added volume, if you will, and another saying that the allusion to the narrative of Christianity and the connection between suffering and sacredness is not really true to what happened, that there was little sacred in Abu Ghraib. Can you talk about that?

B: People have often found a connection between religious art, Christianity, the Passion of Christ and the work I do. The truth is that in Latin America, religious art shows a very

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bloody presentation of Christ. It was the kind of the thing you saw in every church. Where there are no museums, no traditions, no galleries, the art you see when you are a child and an adolescent is at church.

At the same time, in Latin America the subject of art has traditionally been religious. Ninety percent of the work was religious. Then, in the 20th century, there was an absence of religion in paintings, in art. In a way, it was like what happened with volume; volume was an element that disappeared. Religion disappeared as a subject matter in 20th-century art. It had been extremely important for centuries. Then, since there was this tradition in Latin America, I liked to do more of this subject matter, even though I'm not a religious person. But I saw the beauty of these religious paintings by the old masters of Latin America. And I like the idea of doing something that is forbidden somehow, to give importance to a subject matter that is taboo in modern art. The conception of most art critics is that this subject matter is taboo. I like the idea of doing things that everyone thinks you shouldn't do. Why not?

There is a great tradition of religious art in art history. And, for me, art history is extremely important. I am always thinking of the panoramic view of art. If something was important then, why is it not now? Why can't you do

it now? In a way, art history gives you the authorization to sell certain things. Why — if it was great art — why is it not now?

When I did the Abu Ghraib paintings, all of this background came out. It is normal. But somehow a lot was read into it with the Abu Ghraib series. It's not that I was trying to do Christ. It is what happened. And it came as an afterthought. It's not that I did it on purpose.

(Audience question): Why the relative silence from American artists on this particular subject during this time?

B: I think the only logical explanation why the Americans — who I'm sure were personally shocked and disgusted with the situation — didn't do anything, is because American art is mostly abstract and conceptual. Perhaps some people did do something that made a reference to this torture, but it was not clear. Doing a direct, clear presentation would be a violation of the philosophy of the conceptual artist. There are very few well-known figurative artists in America, and they didn't do anything. But most art today in America is abstract and conceptual, and it is very difficult to say something like this if you're an abstract painter. That is the only logical explanation why it was not done. But it is incredible at the same time.

UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau presents Fernando Botero with the Chancellor's Citation.



Photo by Peg Skorpinski.