

## ART

# The Art of Fernando Botero

By Sarah Moody

“**M**useums are afraid to show works that reveal the truth.” So claimed Professor Peter Selz in a lecture inspired by the exhibition of Colombian artist Fernando Botero’s “Abu Ghraib” series organized by the Center for Latin American Studies last spring. The University of California, Berkeley was the first public institution in the United States to show the powerful series. The approximately 100 drawings and oil paintings resulted from Botero’s shock and rage at what had happened at that Iraqi prison. As part of a series of talks related to the exhibit, Selz examined Botero’s development as an artist in relation to topics of violence and considered the importance of the paintings today.

Professor Selz began with a discussion of Botero’s artistic development. After winning second prize in the *Salón de Artistas Colombianos* in 1952, Botero used his winnings to travel to Europe to study the Old Masters. He began in Spain, copying the work of El Greco, Velázquez and Goya. In Florence, he studied the location of generously-proportioned, verisimilar bodies in real spaces, focusing especially on the work of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca and the sensuality of Rubens. Botero then visited the Sistine ceiling in Rome before traveling to Mexico and turning to the famous muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, whose paintings of strong, powerful human figures were important to Botero’s own approach.

Though he often recreated his predecessors’ paintings, Botero did



© Fernando Botero. Image courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York.

“Pear” by Fernando Botero, 1976.

not always approach the originals reverentially. According to Selz, Botero considered the *Mona Lisa* more a part of pop culture than a work of art, as can be seen in “*Mona Lisa, Age 12*,” painted in 1959. In the Colombian painter’s rendition of the famous work, he gives the subject a mischievous,

almost deranged expression in place of the original’s calm smile. Botero’s compulsion to quote became a recurring theme throughout his career; to cite only a few examples, he took on the oft-portrayed figure of Christ in “*Ecce Homo*” of 1967, painted an obese pear in 1976 in response to René

Magritte's "The Listening Room" and reinvented Titian's "The Rape of Europa" in 1995, placing the subjects in a space that resembles a bullring. The clear note that sounded across these echoes of others' work, giving them coherence, was Botero's constant interest in rounded, solid, voluminous form.

and violence. His painting "Massacre in Columbia of 1999" interprets a historical event and forefronts the individual pain and horror of violent death in a color scheme dominated by his customary bright pastels. Another painting from the same series, "The Earthquake," portrays the crumbling of colonial architecture into rubble, in a



Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.

"The Listening Room" by René Magritte, 1952.

By the turn of the millennium, Botero was known worldwide for his visual vocabulary based on sensual human shapes. Focusing on what Botero calls "poetic transformation," Selz explained that the painter is interested in "the truth and in the authenticity of the painting as a painting, which is very different from verisimilitude." He often works with universal themes, interpreted through particular, individual subject matter, such as a city street in Latin America in "The Street" of 2000. Botero "delights in the human form and paints with great sensuality."

In 1999 Botero began to focus on political themes and to depict violence in his paintings, seeing a moral necessity, according to Selz, in leaving testimony to the madness of war

world thrown off balance and ravaged by the unexpected. It is similar to "Massacre" with its cheerful palette in discord with the somber subject matter. Botero's images of pain, which hadn't previously been a frequent topic of his work, draw on a history of depictions of violence that includes Goya's "Disasters of War" paintings, the works of German artists such as Otto Dix during the interwar period and Picasso's "Guernica."

Selz next turned to more contemporary artists' treatment of violence, noting that in the last year the amount of art being produced on themes of violence has grown enormously. Photographic reenactments of the Abu Ghraib pictures by Clinton Fein, a South Africa-native and





“Mother and Child” by Fernando Botero, 2004.

© Fernando Botero. Image courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York.

Italy’s Renaissance. This extensive familiarity with artistic tradition is evident in the “Abu Ghraib” series, in which crucifixion is a strong theme, alongside noteworthy formal elements stemming from the Renaissance, such as the triptych, a careful use of perspective and the strong, structuring device of prison bars as a background.

Despite overwhelmingly positive reviews during the series’ first exhibition in the United States, at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, no American museums initially accepted the offer to host the exhibit. Selz attributed this reluctance to the corporate funding of many museums, which creates apprehension toward controversial topics. This past summer Botero decided to donate the series, which was never intended for sale, to UC Berkeley, in part to ensure its continued availability to the public. While the series is currently traveling, if all goes well, it should return to a permanent home by the Bay.

resident of San Francisco, approach the same subject with alternative media. Leon Golub painted interrogation scenes strikingly similar to Botero’s “Abu Ghraib” paintings, except for the former’s inclusion of interrogators, which Botero’s paintings generally excise. Another American painter who has recently tackled the issue of torture is William Wiley, known for his disruptive, confrontational sense of humor that, for Selz, “simultaneously represents and converts reality.” With his strong sense of deconstruction and incoherence, Wiley’s work follows the modernist attitude that, “in order to present reality, we must change the mode of presentation.” Botero participates in this modernist approach only in that his work disrupts viewers’ expectations, but it in fact partakes more directly of older artistic traditions, such as those of

Professor Emeritus Peter Selz, of the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley, was a sculpture and painting curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and later the founding director of the Berkeley Art Museum. Professor Selz spoke for CLAS on October 15, 2007.

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