

The Nation

review | posted November 9, 2006 (November 27, 2006 issue)

The Body in Pain

Arthur C. Danto

Colombian artist Fernando Botero is famous for his depictions of blimpy figures that verge on the ludicrous. New Yorkers may recall the outdoor display of Botero's bronze figures, many of them nude, in the central islands of Park Avenue in 1993. Their bodily proportions insured that their nakedness aroused little in the way of public indignation. They were about as sexy as the Macy's balloons, and their seemingly inflated blandness lent them the cheerful and benign look one associates with upscale folk art. The sculptures were a shade less ingratiating, a shade more dangerous than one of Walt Disney's creations, but in no way serious enough to call for critical scrutiny. Though transparently modern, Botero's style is admired mainly by those outside the art world. Inside the art world, critic Rosalind Krauss spoke for many of us when she dismissed Botero as "pathetic."

When it was announced not long ago that Botero had made a series of paintings and drawings inspired by the notorious photographs showing Iraqi captives, naked, degraded, tortured and humiliated by American soldiers at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, it was easy to feel skeptical--wouldn't Botero's signature style humorize and cheapen this horror? And it was hard to imagine that paintings by anyone could convey the horrors of Abu Ghraib as well as--much less better than--the photographs themselves. These ghastly images of violence and humiliation, circulated on the Internet, on television and in newspapers throughout the world, were hardly in need of artistic amplification. And if any artist was to re-enact this theater of cruelty, Botero did not seem cut out for the job.

As it turns out, his images of torture, now on view at the Marlborough Gallery in midtown Manhattan and compiled in the book *Botero Abu Ghraib*, are masterpieces of what I have called *disturbatory art*--art whose point and purpose is to make vivid and objective our most frightening subjective thoughts. Botero's astonishing works make us realize this: We knew that Abu Ghraib's prisoners were suffering, but we did not feel that suffering as ours. When the photographs were released, the moral indignation of the West was focused on the grinning soldiers, for whom this appalling spectacle was a form of entertainment. But the photographs did not bring us closer to the agonies of the victims.

Botero's images, by contrast, establish a visceral sense of identification with the victims, whose suffering we are compelled to internalize and make vicariously our own. As Botero once remarked: "A painter can do things a photographer can't do, because a painter can make the invisible visible." What is invisible is the felt anguish of humiliation, and of pain. Photographs can only show what is visible; what Susan Sontag memorably called the "pain of others" lies outside their reach. But it can be conveyed in painting, as Botero's Abu Ghraib series reminds us, for the limits of photography are not the limits of art. The mystery of painting, almost forgotten since the Counter-Reformation, lies in its power to generate a kind of illusion that has less to do with pictorial perception than it does with feeling.

The Catholic Church understood this well when, in the final session of the 1563 Council of Trent, it decided to use visual art as a weapon in its battle with the Reformation. One of the pillars of the Reformation's agenda was its iconoclasm--its opposition to the use of religious imagery, over which the church enjoyed a virtual monopoly. The Reformation feared that images themselves would be worshiped, which was idolatry. The Catholic response was to harness the power of images in the service of faith. Artists were instructed to create images of clarity, simplicity, intelligibility and realism that would serve as an emotional stimulus to piety. As the great art historian Rudolph Wittkower observed:

Many of the stories of Christ and the saints deal with martyrdom, brutality, and horror and in contrast to Renaissance idealization, an unveiled display of truth was now deemed essential; even Christ must be shown "afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale, and unsightly," if the subject requires it. It is these "correct" images that are meant to appeal to the emotions of the faithful and support or even transcend the spoken word.

It took more than twenty years for artists to devise a style that executed these directives, and there can be little doubt that the art of the Baroque was successful in its mission. The art achieved extraordinary precision in the depiction of suffering and hence in the arousal of sympathetic identification. It is often noted that we live in an image-rich culture, and so we do. But most of the images we see are photographs, and their effect can be dulling, if not desensitizing. To elicit the kinds of feelings at which the Counter-Reformation aimed, photographs now often need to be enhanced. Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is not realistic in the sense in which photography is realistic: It is enhanced and amplified, showing Jesus "afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale and unsightly," in a manner that would have pleased the Council of Trent. Sontag was right: Photography must be augmented--with text, she proposed--if we are to feel the pain it shows. A picture may be worth a thousand words, as the cliché goes, but a photograph does not speak for itself. At the least it requires the skilled augmentations of Photoshop--at which point, of course, visual truth is sacrificed on the altar of feeling.

The Abu Ghraib photographs are essentially snapshots, larky postcards of soldiers enjoying their power, as their implied message--"Having a wonderful time.... Wish you were here"--attests. The nude, bound bodies of the prisoners are heaped up like the bodies of tigers in Victorian photographs of smiling viceroys displaying the day's hunt. There must be a quantitative impulse in the expression of gloating--think of the strings of fish held up in snapshots taken after fishing trips, yellowing on the walls of seafood stores. In another artistic response to Abu Ghraib, British painter Gerald Laing lifted the backdrop of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* but replaced the two farmers with the American MPs Lynndie England and Charles Graner, signaling thumbs-up with their blue-rubber-gloved hands above a pile of bare-bottomed bodies. The Americans are in bright poster colors, while the bodies are gray and evidently cut from a newspaper photograph, reproduced with the dots of a coarse Benday screen. It is witty and a bit sickening, but it does not call up the feelings of a Baroque evocation of martyrdom.

Or, for that matter, of Botero's Abu Ghraib series, which draws on his knowledge of the graphic, even lurid paintings of Christ's martyrdom by Latin American Baroque artists, in which Jesus bleeds from the crown of thorns, or from the wounds left by lance points in his ravaged chest. Abu Ghraib, in Botero's rendering, also evokes Baroque prisons, like those one sees in the paintings titled Roman Charity, where a visiting daughter breastfeeds her chained father in the gloomy light of his cell. Although the prisoners are painted in his signature style, his much-maligned mannerism intensifies our engagement with the pictures. This is partly because the prisoners' heavy flesh--broken and bleeding from beatings--looks all the more vulnerable to the pain inflicted. While their faces are largely covered with hoods, blindfolds and women's underpants, their mouths are twisted into expressions of pain or agony. Their arms and sometimes their legs are bound with thick rope, and sometimes a figure is suspended by his leg, or tethered by all four limbs to the criss-cross of bars that form a cell wall. Everyone is nude, except when wearing female underwear, which the Americans evidently considered the supreme form of humiliation. In some paintings, a prisoner is sprayed with urine by a guard who lies outside the frame. Broomsticks protrude from bleeding anuses; hooded men lie in their feces. Several of the paintings feature savage dogs that look like demons in medieval scenes of hell.

None of these works are for sale--Botero has said he has no interest in profiting from them. He has offered them as a collection to a number of American museums, but none have been willing to accept them, I dare say for the same reason that the Marlborough Gallery, when I visited the show, had someone searching bags and backpacks--not a common sight in commercial galleries.

Botero rather ingenuously suggested that, just as few would remember Guernica were it not for Picasso's painting, Abu Ghraib might be forgotten if he did not make this series. But Abu Ghraib was a world event, rather than an incidental horror of war like Guernica. Yet unlike Picasso's painting, a Cubist work that can serve a purely decorative function if one is unaware of its meaning, Botero's Abu Ghraib series immerses us in the experience of suffering. The pain of others has seldom felt so close, or so shaming to its perpetrators.

Colombia Report Editor's Note: To view some of Botero's paintings of Abu Ghraib please return to the Colombia Report homepage, click on Links, and then click on Fernando Botero.