

Botero gets a conscience

The Columbian painter Fernando Botero is known worldwide for his rounded figures and generally pleasant themes. But politics have rarely entered his work until recently, when he started a series of paintings based on the reports of the torture perpetrated by US troops upon Iraqi prisoners. Yesterday the first show of works from this series opened in Rome at the Palazzo Venezia. It will travel to the Würth Museum near Stuttgart and the National Gallery in Athens, among other venues. The artist has a concurrent show of older work at J+P Fine Art in Zurich. Speaking to *The Art Newspaper*, Botero explains the sudden change of themes and the ensuing critical reactions.

I was shocked and furious when I first read about the torture at Abu Ghraib. The more I read about it, the angrier I became. Finally, I was in a plane and I asked the steward to give me some paper and I started doing sketches.

I studied the news photos to get a sense of where the tortures happened, but I didn't actually copy any images. Instead, I visualised the scenes based upon reports in the US press. One should give credit to the US for having the freedom of expression that allows journalists to actually describe these crimes.

For the time being I am completely involved in the Abu Ghraib project—I have painted nothing else for six months. These works have only been revealed to the world by chance, I mentioned my project to a friend who runs a very small magazine in Colombia. Once he published the images, reporters started calling me from all over the world. Museums also called and I have accepted most invitations to exhibit the work because it's very important to me that these paintings be seen by many people.

Even some US museums want to show the Abu Ghraib paintings—and again this is to the great credit of America. And I am very excited to show them there. Yes, I know it's possible there will be some fanatic who might have aggressive reactions. But if you start worrying about things like that, you will never do anything in life. So far, I've done 20 oils and 40 drawings. I could go on for another three or six months, but I know the subject matter is limited. When I'm done, I will not sell these paintings, but instead donate them to museums, because it's not proper to make money from such painful situations.

Some people say, "Why doesn't Botero also paint the people throwing bombs in Baghdad?" But that's different. Torture is a barbaric tactic, like something out of the Middle Ages. So I was shocked to see it coming from the US, which presents itself as a country of compassion and civilisation. I am not naïve; I know what the US government has done in Latin America, but torture, especially with such sadism and perversity, is another matter altogether.

Interview by **Marc Spiegler**

☐ "Fernando Botero: the last 15 years" is now on view at the Palazzo Venezia, via del Plebiscito 118, Rome ☎ +39 06 328 10 (Tues-Sun 10am-7pm, until 25 September).