

ART AND TORTURE

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How do we respond to images of torture? What is our responsibility, if any, to engage the modes of spectatorship that such images seem to demand of us? Who are “we” when we look at photographs from Abu Ghraib, from Guantanamo Bay, from Beirut or Basra or the many other contemporary sites of political and military violence? Is it enough to merely register our disgust, while demanding that “everyone” should have to see such images? If such images are presumed to be powerful enough to change public opinion, then how are “our” own (educated, enlightened, liberal) opinions and feelings challenged by the kinds of photographs that came out of Abu Ghraib? What role can art have in mediating such issues, by engaging representational and aesthetic practices to take on the images within the visual realm?

These questions were put to the test in the recent exhibition of Fernando Botero’s “Abu Ghraib” series of paintings and drawings, hosted by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Featuring several large and ambitious works, as well as a noticeable degree of exhibition security, the exhibition highlighted a general concern for the delicacy of the subject matter (and the politics related to it), as well as a broader desire by diverse audiences to directly engage the potent, if often conflicting, thoughts and feelings aroused by the troubling images that have appeared from Abu Ghraib and elsewhere during the ongoing American wars and occupations.

Botero, famous for his corpulent figures and gentle humor, departs here from the neo-baroque to a more rigorously canonical approach to the contemporary. His portraits of prisoners—of bodies in pain and mute suffering—are tenderly depicted with a “masterly” use of paint and light in a clear nod to Renaissance-era painting and its historical legacies in Christian allegorical painting, Latin American portraiture, and German expressionism. The bulk of the paintings in the exhibition feature one or two blindfolded detainees, their arms restrained behind their backs, in evident pain, fear, and disorientation. The figures tend to be shown in mostly classical formation—centered in the canvas, against a fairly empty background depicting the jail cell or infamous open hallways featured in so many of the released Abu Ghraib photographs. While the colors are generally muted, splashes of reds and browns and maroons hint towards the blood and dirt covering the bodies of the prisoners and spread on the concrete floors. These marks of violence are rendered even more forcefully in the drawings accompanying the larger canvasses, where charcoal smudges and sudden slashes of color present themselves as a kind of painterly violence against otherwise more formalist figurations of the prisoners, as if these sketches required a kind of visual debasement in order to reveal the violence depicted therein.

While a few images depict fierce, barking dogs, and at least one shows a prison guard, the bulk of the paintings and drawings focus on the body of the prisoners. Large, fleshy, bloodied and bruised; variously blindfolded or hooded, tied and restrained; these bodies

reveal gruesome evidence of the shameful atrocities we now know to have been committed against the detainees of Abu Ghraib and elsewhere by U.S. forces. While Botero avoids any clear representation of national identity or specific contextual references, it is clear that his paintings stand as an indictment of such violence, as well as an invitation (if not an insistence) for us to *look*—to witness the violence done in “our” name, and perhaps to begin to understand the travesties depicted in a way that only art can provoke. At the same time, Botero’s paintings gesture towards a grander narrative of historical violence, of the dignified suffering of individuals throughout history, as well as that narrative of art history in which the engaged artist responds to such violence with images of witness and protest.

Critics such as Arthur Danto have praised the work, primarily along the lines that such paintings help us to better feel and understand such suffering, to evoke the human sympathy that can result from the empathetic gesture of shared humanity offered us through such images. Others have praised Botero’s use of Western traditions of allegory and Christian iconography to bring the Abu Ghraib images into a longer tradition of image-making, where the suffering of the body becomes a spiritual matter, a universalizing experience of corporeality that goes above and beyond the banality of “everyday” horror that we find depicted in the Abu Ghraib photos. In this reading, painting and other forms of artistic representation can accomplish things that the more banal and vernacular photographs from the prisons cannot—to restore dignity and humanity to the victims, while challenging viewers to confront the very degradation of that humanity at the hands of the torturers. Further, painting allows us the space of contemplative seeing, over and against the instantaneity that vernacular digital photographs proffers, often making it difficult to move beyond the raw facticity of what is framed there to a considered response.

I would like to suggest, however, an alternate reading of these works, in order to think more broadly about the limits of certain kinds of representational strategies in the face of these and similar contemporary images of violence and torture. By appropriating the Abu Ghraib images into a Western art historical tradition of Christian allegory and representations of sanctified suffering, these works tend to universalize the historical particularities of the contemporary modes of torture and image-making. The suggestion that such narratives and canonical forms of painting are the best avenues for engaging such imagery strips the photographs (as well as the victims) of their much more dynamic, contradictory, and non-Western (and non-Christian) contexts. Perhaps most crucially, by bringing the Abu Ghraib images into the Western art tradition (the very move for which many critics have lauded him), Botero risks provincializing the photographs within a discursive regime that “we” safely understand and are not challenged by. (It also allows viewers to safely engage in the kinds of voyeurism we might otherwise disavow when looking at the photographs, for with Botero we are seduced instead by the horrible beauty of the flesh, the paint, the light.) It should be noted that the artist’s intentions, however laudable and sincere, are ultimately beside the point; while I have little doubt that Botero chose to engage the Abu Ghraib images out of the same kinds of anger and protest that most of world shares with him in response to such images, the work itself ultimately remains within an art historical discourse that does more to salve the well-intentioned

liberal conscience than it does to provoke one to consider one's complicity in the kinds of violence and voyeurism at play in such images. Indeed, the sympathy we are invited to partake of is with the victim of torture and violence. Botero largely leaves the prison guards (here exclusively male, if seen at all) out of the frame, though it is those (American) guards who are a more troublesome "we" to encounter, if not identify with.

Further, the Abu Ghraib photographs themselves seem to partake of a new form of image-making and representational practice. Alongside the increasing wealth of vernacular images from digital cameras, cell phones, and other portable devices that have provided us with counter-narratives in the image wars currently being waged as part of the broader wars on terror, these photographs exemplify the kinds of unscripted image-making that reveal the largely hidden truths of our militaristic culture. I don't mean to suggest that the mere fact of these being "homemade" and unofficial images somehow marks them as formally unique, but rather that in the broader historical context of war and politics in the twenty-first century, the kinds of images that might yet burst the near-total hegemony of spectacle in the global image-world are those images such as the Abu Ghraib photos that simultaneously shock and confuse us. Even as "we" might "know" such torture is occurring—and reports of torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere had been reported for months prior to the release of the photos—there is something in these photos that goes beyond the mere making-visible of the heretofore hinted-at or unknown. Certainly there is truth to the idea that in the contemporary image-world, photographs hold more power than language to change public opinion about wars, and that the primary issue of the Abu Ghraib photographs should therefore be one of censorship vs. dissemination, or the responsibility of Americans to *see* these images, as if only such revelation could shock everyday citizens out of what elites presume is their ignorance to the realities of war. (Thus Rumsfeld's initial response to the photos' public release being to forbid cameras among the guards, as if it were the images that were the crime, not the acts depicted in them.) However, what I wish to propose is that the Abu Ghraib photographs also challenge the educated, liberal Western viewer as well, not merely at the level of conscience or personal response, but in their very travesty of social forms of representation. There simply is no stable taxonomy by which we might begin to categorize and understand these images, no solid aesthetic discourse that would explain them in terms by which we enlightened antiwar citizens and critics could safely domesticate them. We must recall that the cynical response to images of war, violence, and torture—the "this doesn't surprise me" or the "these are (good, important) images of bad things!" responses—are, while understandable and necessary in today's climate, nonetheless also tactics of distancing, that allow us to once again look away, to swiftly categorize the images and move on to the next onslaught of imagery and information from the media spectacle. Unlike Botero's paintings, the Abu Ghraib photos slander the kinds of social forms that we expect from the contemporary regimes of representation—not only by their abhorrent content, but by the forms of vernacular representation themselves. Evidence of torture, self-conscious stylizations, suggestions of pornographic and 'trophy' imagery, the tourist's scrapbook snapshot, the scenes staged specifically *in order to be photographed*—these and other contradictory semiotic practices overwhelm the simple reduction of these images to the documentary or evidentiary.

Ultimately, it will take artists, critics, and everyday image-consumers to construct new idioms of visual criticism by which to engage such images in a manner that attends to the complexities of such travesties while at the same time risking the same kinds of confused and contradictory responses in our own politics and protests, that might move beyond the necessary exclamations of disgust and/or empathy, towards active dismantling of the image-worlds and militaristic policies that give birth to these new forms of torture and image-making.