

An Abu Ghraib 'Guernica'

Artist Fernando Botero wanted a "permanent witness" to the abuse.

By Shasta Darlington

Reuters

ROME - The abuse of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison so enraged Fernando Botero, it drove Latin America's best-known living artist to create what he hopes will be a "permanent witness to a great crime."

Botero, 73, said the anger took him by surprise when he was on an airplane, reading an article about the "horrors" perpetrated by U.S. soldiers against detainees in Iraq.

"I asked the stewardess to give me a piece of paper and I started to draw right there. That was the beginning of this whole series," said the Colombian artist known for his gentle, voluptuous portraits.

"The rage I felt at that moment made me take a decision," he told Reuters in a telephone interview from his sculpture studio in Pietrasanta, Italy.

Botero is best known for his peaceful scenes of small-town life, with comically corpulent priests, politicians and aristocrats. His portraits and sculptures appear in museums around the world.

But since October, he has produced 60 works, including 20 paintings, of muscle-bound men strung up by their heels in dark prison cells, attacked by dogs, and piled in heaps on the floor.

"The first thing I had to do was get it out of my heart, but art has this capacity to keep on accusing and I hope that will be the impact in the long term," Botero said.

"The day the newspapers stop writing about it and people stop talking about it, this art could serve as a permanent witness to a great crime that was committed."

Picasso's *Guernica*, which depicts the German bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, is the classic example, he said. "Obviously, the outcome will depend on the quality I achieve in my work."

Some of the Abu Ghraib series will be on public display for the first time at a retrospective of Botero's work opening in Rome on Thursday. They are slated to appear in Stuttgart, Germany, and Athens next, and could go on to Washington.

The series, which the slim, bearded artist says he has not finished, represents the first time he has tackled an international, political theme.

"I had to get it out of me. That torture doesn't belong to our times - it belongs to the Middle Ages - and much less from a country like the United States. It's unacceptable," Botero said.

The works are also his darkest and most sinister to date, dominated by gray and brown with splashes of ochre and magenta.

"You can't use baby blue to show the claustrophobia of jail."

The paintings, interpretations of the abuse rather than depictions of specific events, feature hooded prisoners being tied up, beaten and urinated on. They are hulking and muscular.

"I wanted to accentuate the masculine aspect of these prisoners. They are men humiliated."

....art reveals to us what history tries to hide,,,,,
(Carlos Fuentes)



Botero









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