



Abu Ghraib In Paint

'Abu Ghraib 43,' oil on canvas.

FERNANDO BOTERO/PRESTEL

Fernando Botero's Exhibit of Paintings of Abu Ghraib, Based on News Photographs and Press Accounts, Opens at the Marlborough Gallery Here Tonight

By **CHANNING JOSEPH**
Staff Reporter of the Sun

Naked figures writhe in an eerie darkness. Vicious beasts bare their teeth and snarl. The faces of lost souls cry out in unimaginable agony, forced into strange and contorted positions reminiscent of crucifixion.

Such a vision evokes a scene of the apocalypse typical of 15th-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. But no, these paintings by Colombian artist Fernando Botero are depictions of real events. Despite their hellish subject matter, they are all meticulously based on photographs and press accounts of the torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003.

It seems hard to credit, but Mr. Botero says the pictures, which many will undoubtedly view as a scathing indictment of American foreign policy, are not meant to convey a political message.

Although he admits that President Bush "is not my favorite president," Mr. Botero says art has no affect on political

realities, adding that his work is merely a relic to be looked upon by future generations as evidence of events past.

"You just leave a testimony," he said. "It's something that comes from the heart. It's something immortal that moves you to do your work."

Well-known for his playful and folksy style, Mr. Botero has gained international renown for the unmistakably exaggerated roundness of his figures and the sense of innocence and sensuality that his work conveys.

This new traveling exhibit, opening today at the Marlborough Gallery on 57th Street has made its way from Rome; Künzelsau, a town in Germany, and, most recently, Athens, Greece. In it, the artist's trademark style — almost cartoonish in its technique — manages to make his horror-inspiring images even more striking in their irony. What could be playful about vicious dogs tearing flesh from helpless prisoners? What could be innocent about American soldiers probing detainees with broom handles?

"The truth is so powerful, so direct — that you don't have to add anything," Mr. Botero says of his creations, though he is careful to point out it was never his aim to make exact copies of the photographs. "You try to be as honest as possible. You have to be very careful to speak to what happened. I was sticking to what I read in the newspapers. I tried not to add anything that was not in the text."

A self-proclaimed news junkie ("I read the Herald Tribune every day, like *Please see BOTERO, page 14*")



Painted Violence

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a religion,” he says), Mr. Botero says he decided to turn his brush to the topic of Abu Ghraib when, like many people around the globe, he was struck with disbelief at the shocking photographs and news reports that first came to light in 2004 — incredulous that soldiers from America, which he calls a symbol of freedom, could be implicated in such depraved acts.

Consequently, he set himself the task of learning all the terrifying details of the events. “The more I read, the more shocked I was,” he said. “And then, I got this feeling that, as an artist, I can make visible what is invisible. I didn’t invent anything. I did what I read was there.”

Mr. Botero, who spends his winters in Paris, his summers in Italy, and six weeks every year in New York, betrays a hint of pride at his accomplishment. “In Europe, people told me they were more impressed with my paintings than with the photographs,” he said.

In a new book based on the exhibit, “Botero: Abu Ghraib,” the associate managing editor of *Art in America*

magazine, David Ebony, ranks the Abu Ghraib show among some of the best-known visual art depicting images of war.

“Coming from an artist known for images of pleasure during a time of war and terror,” Mr. Ebony writes, “the gruesome and violent scenes he depicts are exceptionally disturbing and moving. He joins a long line of artists who have passionately responded to tumultuous events.”

The iconic power punch of Mr. Botero’s Abu Ghraib paintings is, Mr. Ebony observes, reminiscent of Pablo Picasso’s famous Cubist re-imagining of the Spanish Civil War, “Guernica,” and Francisco de Goya’s early 19th-century etching series “The Disasters of War.” Although the inspiration is obvious, Mr. Botero says any similarity to other painters is totally unintended.

Though the show contains about 50 major paintings and a number of drawings, not one of the works is on sale. “These paintings are going to be donated to a museum in America or Europe.” The reason: “I don’t want to benefit from human suffering.”