

## COMMENTARY

# Art in a Time of Violence

There were no official remembrances of the Spanish Civil War on the op/ed page of the Los Angeles Times this year. Yet, there was an opinion piece on Guernica, the small town in the Basque region where German planes pioneered the bombing of a civilian population.

We remember Guernica so vividly and with such emotion in large part because of Pablo Picasso's remarkable painting. As Fernando Botero, Latin America's most celebrated living artist, put it, "art is a permanent accusation."

This semester the Center for Latin American Studies organized a display of Botero's "Abu Ghraib" paintings and drawings. The New York Times has referred to the exhibit as "among Mr. Botero's best work" and points out that "it is moving to encounter these large, unnerving images and austere compositions on American soil."

The reviews do not fully prepare the viewer for encountering these paintings in person. They are passionate, intense, involving, sensual and deeply disturbing. Their visual richness leaves us no choice but to confront the demonic acts they portray. As Isabelle Allende wrote in the guestbook on opening night, "Thank you, maestro, for putting a mirror before our eyes."

Isn't Abu Ghraib a bit distant from Latin America? In a highly integrated, globalized world, it is all too close. Botero, a Colombian, has offered the first interpretation by a major artist of a signal event in the Iraq war; the war itself and Abu Ghraib in particular have weighed heavily on Latin American attitudes towards the U.S.; and, finally, two Latin American countries, Chile and Mexico, played a central role on the United Nations Security Council in the lead-up to the war.

The Center organized an extensive semester-long program, reported on in this issue, to engage and discuss

the issues raised by the Abu Ghraib paintings. We were very pleased to welcome Fernando Botero and Sophia Vari, a critically acclaimed artist and the wife of Mr. Botero, to Berkeley to open the exhibit.

We began the program with "A Conversation With the Artist," in which Robert Hass, a poet and Berkeley professor of English, spoke with Fernando Botero about these paintings in the context of his life and art. The second discussion, "Art and Violence," examined the intersection of aesthetic issues and political questions and the third event engaged themes of "Torture, Human Rights and Terrorism."

The exhibit could not have taken place without considerable support. When museums proved unavailable, the art was displayed in the main library of the university. Tom

Leonard, the University Librarian, and Beth Dupuis, the Director of the Doe/Moffitt Library, through their energy and commitment reminded us why great libraries are central to democratic societies. Christopher Edley, the dean of Boalt Hall School of Law, was a vital part of the project, demonstrating once again his belief in civil liberties, openness and engaging the central moral and political issues of the day. As Dean Edley has commented,

the paintings depict what happens when the rule of law is absent.

The Center staff and a multitude of volunteers seemed to do the miraculous. Individuals and foundations contributed generously to make this happen. And, finally, the ideals, spirit and history of UC Berkeley, the place where the Free Speech Movement was born, made this campus a special place for the first showing of these works in a public institution in the United States.

— Harley Shaiken

Class of 1930 Chair, Center for Latin American Studies



Photo by Jan Sturmann.

Sophia Vari, Harley Shaiken and Fernando Botero outside the exhibit.