

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 19, 2006

Fernando Botero & Abu Ghraib

Filed under: [artists](#), [media](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:08 am



Fernando Botero

First, a confession: I sort of like Botero. I know this isn't cool, but I visited Museo Botero when I was in Bogotá a few years ago and was charmed. I'm not saying he's Rembrandt. Nor have I devoted much time or energy to thinking about his peculiar oeuvre. But the work gives me pleasure.

I suppose what people dislike about Botero is the quality of stylized caricature. The work feels a little cartoonish. But this is exactly what is pleasurable. While the work often cites a high-art influence, there is always a low-art undercurrent. You can imagine seeing his images in the pages of the New Yorker or even Mad Magazine.



from MAUS, by Art Spiegelman

But what is wrong with low-art? Sometimes I'd rather look at a cartoon by Art Spiegelman than a painting by Robert Motherwell. This is especially true when things get political. I like Motherwell's "Elegies" as paintings, but they don't make me think along political lines. Philip Guston's Klan and Poor Richard pictures, on the other hand, have a populist directness that suits the subject.

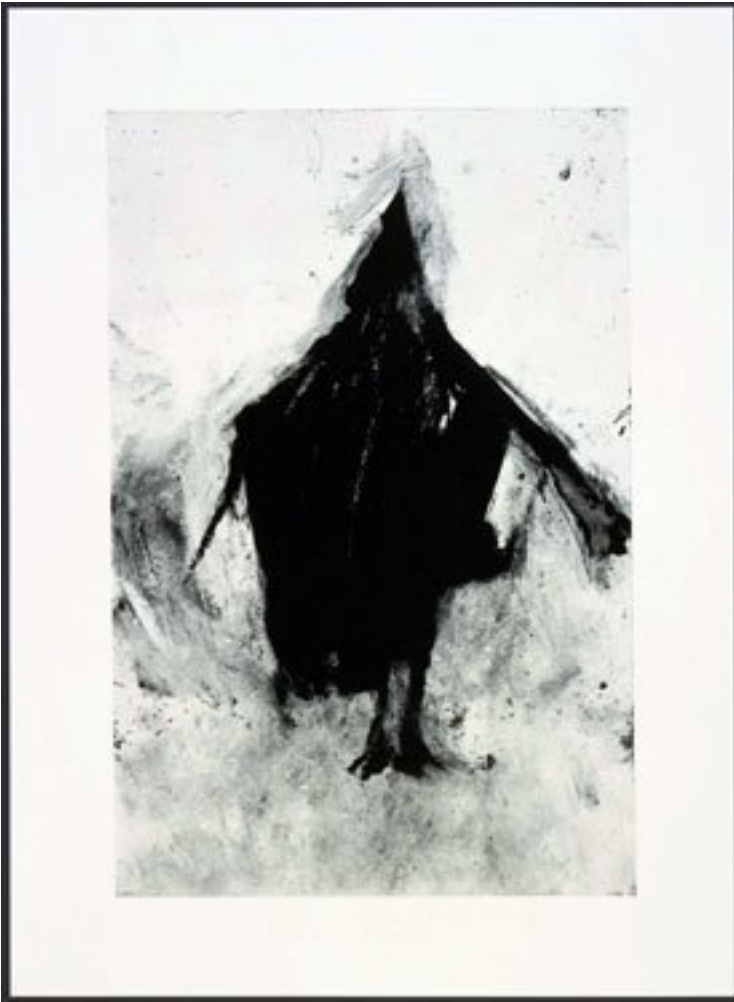


Robert Motherwell, Elegy to the Spanish Republic #34, 1954



Philip Guston, *Edge of Town*, 1969

There have been a number of attempts to translate the horrific images of Abu Ghraib into art. Perhaps the most notable example has been Richard Serra. I'm a [huge fan](#) of Serra, but this political work falls flat. It doesn't carry one ounce of the power of the rest of his work.



Richard Serra, Abu Ghraib, 2004

But Botero is a different matter. His Abu Ghraib images are striking. Part of the reason is that they are just so odd. What are these plump caricatures doing being tortured? Why are these gruesome scenes being handled with such delicate draftsmanship? This weirdness makes the work all the more powerful. Much like Spiegelman's [Maus](#), the peculiar brew of low-art and serious subject matter is chilling. It is as though Norman Rockwell merged with Leon Golub.

Another reason they are successful is because the medium (traditional drawing and painting) is so far removed from the source material (crude photographs). [Antonin Kratochvil](#) has recently executed a series of staged photographs based on Abu Ghraib. The pictures seem unnecessary. [The original photographs](#) are perhaps the most powerful images of my lifetime. There isn't a need to fabricate more photographs on the subject. But Botero's refined paintings and drawings are so vastly different that I think they have a place.

Judge for yourself by viewing more Botero images [here](#). Look at work on Abu Ghraib by other artists [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).

10 Comments

1. These are awesome references. It seems very much like Botero, Serra and Kratochvil are using similar concepts as the New Image painters like Guston. A desire for innocence as a result of losing it. I agree that Kratochvil is not as successful. What I think is interesting is that he was/is a war photographer creating this work.

Comment by [Steve Miller](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [1:03 am](#)

2. High Art, Low Art, don't get me stArted. I like David Shrigley.

And I also like these Botero images, thanks for bringing them to my attention.

Comment by [Dan Sumption](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [6:03 am](#)

3. As much as I agree with you on the quality of Botero's paintings, I am still wondering what the paintings add to those photos, and there's really only one thing: The photos will never be exhibited in art galleries, whereas the paintings will (even though Botero has had a lot of trouble finding a place in the US). But other than that?

It seems kind of obvious to me that we haven't learned anything from the Abu Ghraib photos – Congress just agreed to suspend habeas corpus, and the President can now legally have people tortured (well, it's more tricky, it's [supposedly] illegal to torture, but there's no way anyone who tortures because the President told him to can be persecuted). So maybe we need to look at the photos again? Will those paintings, hidden away in a small Manhattan gallery, change anything? What do they add to the debate, that is really only happening in somewhat obscure journals like New York Review of Books?

We will have to realize that what these paintings ultimately are clashing with, in what one could almost call a non-debate, is depictions of torture such as those in "24", that infamous torture-show on Fox, where torture is shown to be something good and necessary. That's where vast numbers of people get their idea from what torture is – and I have the suspicion that looking at Botero's paintings will not make them change their minds.

Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [7:23 am](#)

4. I agree that something like '24' is a million times more powerful in shaping general political opinion. Botero's paintings, like virtually all political art, is not likely to change many minds. At least not in the short term. But I think these paintings will stand the test of time. People will be looking at them fifty years from now and considering this period of American history. At that point Jack Bauer should be long gone.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [7:40 am](#)

5. Hi,
Botero is showing a large serie dedicated to Colombian contemporary violence, now here in Buenos Aires (Argentina). He was criticized for decades precisely for being unpollitical, so these new paintings seems very suspicious to me. I was at the show and they look very forced images, the caricature style doesn't help the theme at all, they look very very empty in real content, just an obvious approach as to say "hey, I care..."
I like his other work, but this pollitical-pretending is fake to me, even exploitative.

Comment by [Flaneur](#) — October 19, 2006 @ [12:27 pm](#)

6. Hi Alec...the Botero reminds me of Robert Crumb figures, actually. What I like about them is that they arent high mannerism which always tends to ring false to me. Agree about the Motherwell it makes me think of theory not political action... but the same could be said of Picasso's korean war painting- something about it being too literal, too much like Guernica but falls very short.

Regarding Kratochvil...I'm generally a big fan of his work but this particular story wonder why we need the simulacra when the actual image should have been enough. But maybe it wasnt...

Comment by Song Chong — October 19, 2006 @ [3:26 pm](#)

7. Although I have the highest respect for Kratochvil's documentary (and other) work, can't for the life of me understand this "homage" to Abu Ghraib. If I didn't know better I'd think it pretentious, but the man is obviously sincere (particularly considering his history). Other words such as misguided, or just plain silly come to mind- it really is befuddling (there's a word).

I like Botero's work in general, and some of these related images. And I can't help but think of Joe Sacco's comic style reportage from the Balkans when it comes to mixing "low brow art" with real life suffering.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — October 20, 2006 @ [1:11 am](#)

8. Why are so few artists speaking through their art to campaign in such a key election? Bush has controlled the visual of his invasion of Iraq. Perhaps the story is better told with the visuals.

Comment by aem — October 31, 2006 @ [2:52 am](#)

9. Golub's interrogation paintings - the simultaneous fun, boredom, cruelty, and mugging - still resonate more with Abu Gahrub than any work I've seen created in response to the events.

Comment by [Eric Z.](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [10:37 am](#)

10. do you know where can i download his paintings from.... i am making a film on violence

Comment by priyanka desai — December 4, 2006 @ [3:02 am](#)