



BOTERO: ABU GHRAIB and the Economics of Censorship

by Jack Rasmussen

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Introduction

Censorship comes in many shapes and disguises. Although political and religiously motivated censorship gets most of the public's attention, this article focuses on the less recognizable economic pressures behind censorship as it is commonly practiced today. I will use one example from Washington, DC's recent history to illustrate how economic pressures have worked to suppress challenging programming. I will then discuss my experience of presenting *Botero: Abu Ghraib* at the American University Museum within the operation of these economic forces.

Recent History

It has been almost twenty years since the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., infamously cancelled its scheduled exhibition of *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. The sexually-explicit homoerotic photographs by Mapplethorpe were pulled by the museum's Director, Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall, when it looked like the Corcoran's federal funding would be in jeopardy if the show went forward. Senator Jesse Helms had learned of the traveling show and its Washington venue and used it as a club against the National Endowment for the Arts. The Corcoran board and staff were caught in the middle and folded like a cheap umbrella.

The relatively small alternative space Washington Project for the Arts exhibited *The Perfect Moment* instead, while angry art world protests forced the resignation of Dr. Orr-Cahall within six months. The exhibition was a big, if temporary, success for the WPA, garnering large crowds, big admissions fees, and national attention for the small not-for-profit.

From the point of view of her institution's finances and her own professional advancement, one can make the case that Dr. Orr-Cahall's decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe show was prudent. Her timing, the resulting publicity, and the political climate were just all very bad. Very soon after Dr. Orr-Cahall's resignation, she was welcomed back into the museum world as the new Director of the Norton Museum in West Palm Beach, Florida. And just two years ago she was appointed by President George W. Bush to the National Museum and Library Services Board, overseeing an important source of federal funding for museums. The irony is appreciable.

Meanwhile, the Washington Project for the Arts was losing all of its federal funding, and the support of Washington's largely conservative philanthropic community, due in large part to the bad taste left by the Mapplethorpe show. At the very least, the WPA's universe of potential donors was reduced by the episode, and was forced to close its doors for lack of funds in 1995. The WPA took a principled stand against censorship and for freedom of expression, but paid a very high price. The organization and its name were resurrected, ironically again, as a program of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (WPA/c) several years ago. Beginning this year it is operating independently from the Corcoran, but it has yet to regain its place as the pre-eminent presenter of contemporary art in Washington.

Twenty years after the Corcoran debacle, the practice of self-censorship by arts institutions is rarely played out in the public spotlight. Instead, controversial shows are vetted by the staff and discussed with board members in private. But the decision to move forward with



Fernando Botero, **Abu Ghraib 67**, 2005. 43.00 x 35.00 cm, oil on canvas.
© Fernando Botero, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY.



Fernando Botero, **Abu Ghraib 66**, 2005. 32 x 33 cm, oil on canvas.
© Fernando Botero, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY.

“difficult” programming is still constrained by the same consideration: what will the economic consequences be for the institution? Museums ignore these consequences at their peril. From the rather narrow standpoint of an institution’s financial security, Dr. Orr-Cahall’s decision to censor was justified. There is a strong administrative imperative to protect one’s economic viability. Most of these decisions to censor are made far from the public eye, and no one is the wiser.

Botero: Abu Ghraib

Fully cognizant of Washington’s art and arts institution history, I set out to bring Fernando Botero’s controversial Abu Ghraib work to the American University Museum. My efforts could have died a quiet death several times before **Botero: Abu Ghraib** was actually hung on our walls in Washington.

Like most Americans, I was devastated by Seymour Hirsch’s 2004 articles in *The New Yorker* detailing the abuse of prisoners by American personnel in Abu Ghraib prison (Hirsch, May 10, 2004; Hirsch, May 24, 2004). Even more shocking than the descriptions of abuse in the article were the photographs, taken as “souvenirs” by participants in the abuse, that also appeared

in the magazine. We complained to our elected representatives, who questioned and investigated, and four years later we are still trying to find out the who, what, and why of this national disaster.

Fernando Botero also read Hirsch’s article and became obsessed with the photographs. He then began making sketches of the subject on a flight from New York to Paris, and continued to paint and draw through his anger and disappointment over Abu Ghraib for more than a year. Almost 100 works of art were produced in this short period of time, some of which were then exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City. Botero refused to sell any of the works.

Botero was born in the very Catholic country of Colombia. An early prize in painting enabled him to travel to Italy to study the great masters of the Renaissance, particularly Giotto, from whom he learned his characteristically “volumetric” approach to his subject matter. Using all the tools of the Renaissance masters, Botero is able to make his figures appear convincingly in our space. This is pleasant when his subjects are gentle sarcasms, but not so nice when torture and abuse are portrayed in our face. Botero also learned the iconography

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Botero achieved his first great success in Washington, DC, in an exhibition organized by what is now known as The Art Museum of the Americas of the Organization of American



Fernando Botero, **Abu Ghraib 54**, 2005. 37 x 30cm, oil on canvas. © Fernando Botero, courtesy American University Museum, Washington, D.C.

States, and later received his first retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 1979. Today, works by Botero can be found in almost every major museum collection in the world. His work is overwhelmingly popular and a huge commercial success. Botero divides his time between New York, Paris, and Pietrasanta, Italy. He says he loves America and what it stands for, and this made the reality of Abu Ghraib all the more unacceptable.

I first learned of Botero's Abu Ghraib work in an October 14, 2006, article in *The*

Washington Post by Philip Kennicott (2006). Kennicott had seen the exhibition of 45 of the pieces at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City. I was excited by the power of the images he reproduced and struck by his statement that Botero had tried unsuccessfully to find a museum in the United States to exhibit this body of work.

After reading Kennicott's article, I immediately tried to contact Marlborough Gallery about hosting the exhibition at the American University Museum. My calls and emails were never returned. I assumed Marlborough, one of the pre-eminent commercial galleries in the world, would have little interest in traveling a show that could not result in sales. It was not until I attended a conference in Miami of the Association of College and University Museums that I met somebody who knew somebody else who could connect me directly to Fernando Botero.

Botero visited the American University Museum and approved of our facility. He decided to let us take the exhibition in April, 2007, following a smaller showing of about half the works in the Doe Library of the University of California, Berkeley, sponsored by its Center for Latin-American Studies. I was able to juggle my schedule and find room for the show in April and May. Now I just had to find out if the American University was ready and willing to deal with the controversy that would be coming our way. While there is no formal or informal requirement that I seek approval for my curatorial decisions, I feel it is my responsibility to alert the university to potential controversies.

As I shared images from the show with the appropriate administrators, I could understand

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the second and third thoughts I knew they must be having. There was first the implied criticism of the Bush administration and its complicity in the acts depicted. There was the potential for the show to be viewed as anti-American, or at least anti-Republican. American University is no stranger to political controversy, but the appearance of partisanship is not the look that most academic institutions are after.

More problematic were the depictions of naked Arab men being abused and humiliated in various shockingly graphic ways. There was clearly the potential for these incendiary images to be interpreted as advocacy rather than condemnation. In addition, the resonance of some of the images with depictions of Christian martyrdom that occur throughout the history of Western Art created a further potential for misunderstanding. The conflation of Arab men with Christian martyrs could conjure up anything from the Crusades to the implication of Jewish actors as persecutors.

Like most attempts at self-censorship, however, we could not really predict what members of the public would find truly disturbing or offensive. The public reception of **Botero: Abu Ghraib** was overwhelmingly positive, and the thousands of visitors who came were prepared to take it very seriously. One visitor likened his experience of the exhibition to “visiting a crime scene.”

In contrast, on a different floor of the museum where we were simultaneously presenting **Claiming Space: Some American Feminist Originators**, an exhibition of Feminist Art from the 1970s, we received numerous complaints about artworks by Yolanda M. Lopez portraying herself, her mother, and her

grandmother as the Virgin of Guadalupe. We were prepared to handle political objections to **Botero: Abu Ghraib**, and thought we could defend the sometimes graphic sexual content of some of the Feminist imagery, but we were totally unprepared to defend ourselves against accusations that we were exhibiting sacrilegious art. We managed to open a dialogue with the Catholic community over the Lopez pieces and the challenge to paternalistic institutions that the Feminist Art Movement represented. Though I don't believe we changed any minds, the controversy did blow over.



Fernando Botero, **Abu Ghraib 72**, 2005. 37 x 30cm, oil on canvas. © Fernando Botero, courtesy American University Museum, Washington, D.C.

From the institutional point of view, art is deeply subversive.

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Financial Consequences

University museums are doubly insulated from the inevitable political pressures that will surround controversial programming: there is “Freedom of Speech” in America and “Academic Freedom” on campus. At the same time, because university museums are almost always under-funded by their host institutions, they are particularly susceptible to economic pressure. If you cannot find individual donors to underwrite this kind of challenging programming, you can pretty much forget about corporate and foundation support as well.

The American University decided it could take the heat for *Botero: Abu Ghraib* if it could tie the exhibition more closely to the curricula of its different schools. It proposed we take the show in November instead of April, 2007. This would give us time to develop interdisciplinary programming with the School of International Service, Washington College of Law, and the College of Arts and Sciences around the themes of human rights, torture, and war.

Though Botero offered us the show without a fee, the consequences of delaying the exhibition eventually added huge costs for packing and shipping (to and from Botero’s storage facility in Switzerland), installation (professional crews were hired for extended periods of time because of the compressed exhibition schedule and the extremely high insurance values of the work), and additional security. While the university

picked up some of the extra transportation costs, and I was able to convince one brave donor to help with the project, *Botero: Abu Ghraib* left the museum with a rather large deficit. We cut programming, scaled back our publications, endured a period of financial micro-management, and limped into the next fiscal year.

The university received unprecedented international publicity because of *Botero: Abu Ghraib*, most of it good. Not surprisingly, though, there was almost no serious critical attention in the local press. Media outlets around the world, including major newspapers in Spain and Mexico, The Netherlands, and in all the Arab nations, found the event newsworthy. Unfortunately, all *The Washington Post* could do was print a nice story by novelist Erica Jong (2007), who had only seen the abbreviated show in its New York venue.

Contemporary art, almost by definition, offers a challenge to the status quo. From the institutional point of view, art is deeply subversive. The lesson I learned from the experience of presenting *Botero: Abu Ghraib* was that if we are to present art that is relevant and worthwhile, there will be accompanying costs...not only for the staff involved, but also for the institution. These costs must be calculated against the rewards of doing the right thing. I like to think the University and I would do it again. ☀