

## Art Against Torture:

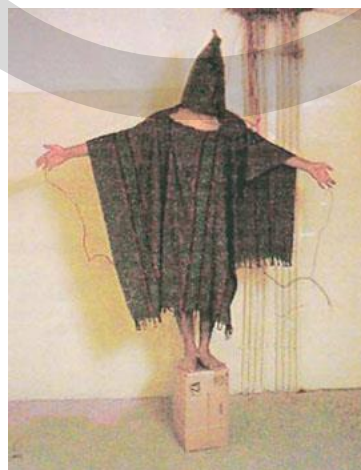
### **Abu Ghraib and Artistic Depictions of Suffering**

“Among all things that can be contemplated under the concavity of the heavens, nothing is seen that arouses the human spirit more, that ravishes the sense more, that horrifies more, that provokes more terror or admiration to a greater extent among creatures than the monsters, prodigies, and abominations through which we see the works of nature inverted, mutilated, and truncated.”

- Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires prodigiuses*, 1561 (Bataille 2013).

Today, Abu Ghraib is remembered more or less as a darkness within a darkness – a house of horrors that was a nodal point seeming to encompass all that was wrong, and all that could go wrong, with the Iraq War. Located about twenty miles outside of Baghdad, Abu Ghraib had long been “one of the world’s most notorious prisons, with torture, weekly executions, and vile living conditions” (Hersh 2004), under regime of Saddam Hussein. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States military took over control of the facility for detention purposes and as a forward operating base (FOB) where it held suspected criminals, insurgents, and other persons of interest awaiting trial. At the height of its use in March 2004, the United States held 7,490 detainees at the facility (Inspector General [Army] 2004: 23-24).

The news program *60 Minutes* ran a story in April 2004 on reports of detainee abuse by U.S. soldiers, which included a selection of photographs taken of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib by their jailors. These images, though only a small portion of the thousands of photographs that were taken, “are among the most searing and disturbing to have appeared since the commencement... of the US war against Iraq” and have since been reproduced in every news form, and seen and heard of by anyone with access to the news (Eisenman 2007: 7). Between 2003 and 2004, American military police “treated fellow human beings with contempt and cruelty, stripping them naked, binding them, sexually abusing them, beating their bodies with fists and sticks, menacing and attacking them with dogs, killing tem” (*ibid.*) in what was unambiguously a series of grave human rights violations under international law.



*Figure 1*

While the legal response to the incidents at Abu Ghraib has been disappointing, with only a smattering of prosecutions and convictions despite five major investigations by US government bodies, the circulated images of the abuse have entered firmly into the cultural

canon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That they have come to stand for U.S. political hypocrisy is perhaps unsurprising, but crucially the image of the victim – and particularly the perverted Christ-like figure of Ali Shallal al-Qaisi (Fig. 1) – has come to stand for the Iraqi in many ways, and from many viewpoints. As Stephen Eisenman writes,

“Though not all images are works of art, all artworks are images, and because of the special character of the Abu Ghraib photographs – their representation of torture and suffering in a time of war – they belong to a very large and culturally prestigious set” (2007: 9).

This cultural “set” that comes out of this peculiar context encompasses the centuries-long asymmetrical political relationship between the Orient and the Occident, and all the cultural categories that are coded by the embedded assumptions of privilege, paternal obligation, and modernity. Accusations of Orientalism, per Said, have become a trope in the social sciences but are brought into stark relief by a cursory examination of the artistic response to Abu Ghraib – both in its content, and in its geography. This study takes three “representations” of torture at Abu Ghraib as a reference for tracing the ripple effect of a major human rights violation through the violent cultural geography that is the global scrutiny of Iraq and the Iraq war – filtered through the media – that has so defined this early part of the new century.

This study seeks to present a cross-section of artistic representations of the horrors at Abu Ghraib to make a number of assertions. The first concerns both the nature of torture and suffering as a locus for thinking and speaking politically. The second is about the pursuant power of artistic media as a tool for understanding, negotiating, and communicating the experience of suffering at Abu Ghraib and its injustices and power relationships. Third, this cross-section demonstrates the clash of worldviews that is peculiar to the Iraqi context, and the Iraq War itself – especially through the response in Iraqi art to Abu Ghraib. Finally, I wish to draw out some of the dynamics in play in Iraqi culture as a response to these atrocities, with particular attention to the generational gap and how Iraqis cope with this event – either through art or, tellingly, through a lack of it.

## Art Against Torture

In describing the difficulties inherent to the legal recognition of torture, the anthropologist Tobias Kelly writes:

‘Talk about torture has [...] historically been a way of talking about the nature of the democratic nation-state and the nature and limits of its obligations to citizens and noncitizens alike. [...] Indeed, it might be argued that for some of its supporters, the fact that they are willing to condone torture becomes an index of their patriotism [...]. By talking about torture you can also talk indirectly about who counts as a legitimate citizen, how far rights should be granted, and to what extent state officials should be accountable for their actions’ (2011: 336).

*Talking* about torture, Kelly argues, locates a particular kind of cultural politics in that it discusses the proper relationship between the individual and the state at the extreme of that relationship’s possible asymmetry – the complete denial of the integrity and indivisibility of the subject of human rights (i.e. the *human* being, “human” thus-understood). The question that follows from this function of communication is; what purpose does art about torture serve?

Suffering is often thought of as a private experience. Indeed, it is impossible to access the subjectivity of the sufferer – perfect empathy is not possible. Thus, per Elaine Scarry, torture and suffering work by destroying the ability of a body to communicate (1988) – in other words, “the pain of torture can produce silence, as victims turn in on themselves” (Kelly 2012: 12). According to Veena Das, who is central to Kelly’s approach to torture, the statement “I am in pain” is not descriptive and self-referential but is rather indicative of a social relationship and is thus political. Cries of pain don’t serve to turn the subject inward on itself, but rather constitute the voicing of a complaint that thus seeks a response (1997). Suffering, in this way, is a fundamentally social experience. The suffering taking place inside the walls of Abu Ghraib was aggressively silenced by the power structures that permitted its existence – and much of what took place remains silent to this day.

Art, however, fills the gaps that exist in the documentary recognition of torture by filtering the communicative impulse of pain through targeted representation. Art seeks an audience in the same way pain does, the difference being that the ephemeral spectacles of pain that took place within the walls of Abu Ghraib have lost their own communicative power. Art, however, lingers and it transports emotive content through aesthetic representation in a way that other communicatory media – legal language, for example – cannot. Further still, different art politicizes suffering in different ways and the cross section of sources of representation I am presenting reflects this prismatic character.

In the first instance, I put forward that jailors are making art about torture to fetishise and reaffirm a sort of power relationship, using Foucault’s notion of the security apparatus – an argument drawn from Caton and Zacka (2010). The photographs from Abu Ghraib are art forms, not merely documentation, and need to be considered thus. In the second, Fernando Botero – an artist that is prominent in the Western world is using his artistic status in the United States to level a particular kind of outrage at the state – that of the misrepresented citizen. Finally, a 2004 exhibition at the Hewan Gallery in Baghdad – a direct and relatively contemporaneous response to Abu Ghraib – tries to speak for the victim in a way that doesn’t rely on his disempowerment, playing with the hypocrisies of life under the U.S. occupation and demonstrating how their own cultural, civilizational, and political citizenship as Iraqis has been fundamentally reformulated by the silent atrocities at Abu Ghraib. In every instance, this is very “angry” and political art.

## Images from Abu Ghraib

It is important to keep in mind that while it was the publishing of a series of photos from Abu Ghraib that focused the public’s attention concretely on the issue itself, the images are representations of real, concrete instances of abuse. They were, put artfully, the sign that spoke for the crime – largely acts of torture committed explicitly for photographs, arranged intentionally by the jailors. As such, it is very possible that the photography informed the nature of the abuse as much as the abuse informed the nature of the photography, and while there is a symbiosis of practices here, for all intents and purposes *these photos are a kind of art*. The photos from Abu Ghraib are not art *against* torture, however, in a political sense. Instead, this is torture as art – something that, as we will see, is disturbingly present in the long Western artistic tradition.

Stephen Eisenman's book, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* deals with the American reaction to the images from Abu Ghraib. His argument, in its essence, is that the composition of the photos opened an avenue for the American public to wilfully dismiss the grave implications of what they saw in the images. He writes:

"[The] pathos formula of beautiful suffering – the introversion of subordination – has re-emerged in a surprising place: the minds, eyes and bodies of men and women serving in the US military in Iraq, engaged in a dirty, idiotic and hopeless imperial war. It has also structured the vision of a considerable portion of the US public, rendering them largely mute [...] I have called this the 'Abu Ghraib effect'" (2007: 111).

This 'pathos formula' – manifest in the highly sexualized depiction of the detainees and in the jubilation of the jailors – is buttressed by three 'pillars' or 'idols' – development, progress and 'Europe' (as a civilizational proposition). Writ short, these are tantamount to the tropes of Orientalism and are brought into sharp relief by the contrasts inherent in the power dynamics being depicted.



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*

In Figure 2, two jailors have arranged a tableau of naked bodies, stacked atop each other so as to demonstrate their bottoms collectively to the lens. Behind them, two of the perpetrators wear jubilant grins and send the lens a thumbs up. Similarly, Figure 3 shows a woman inspecting a line of naked, hooded men that have been forced to masturbate. Reiterating the leitmotif of the thumbs up, she smokes a cigarette while pointing with her free hand to the penis of the detainee that is closest to the lens. Finally, Figure 4 depicts prisoners who have been forced to simulate homoerotic acts. The jailors are absent from the frame.

I've selected these three images to show how sexual power informed both the nature of the torture and crucially, the construction of these images. Eisenman's text traces this sexualised depiction of the victim through classical art, connecting it to notions of war booty mobilised by Walter Benjamin, who wrote:

"Whoever before now has walked in victory, marches in the same triumphal procession that carries today's rulers over the prostrate. The booty, as has always been the custom, is also carried in this triumphal procession; it may be called cultural assets. The historical materialist must count these assets with detached observation. For whatever cultural assets he surveys, reveal to him a lineage he cannot ponder without horror" (Benjamin 1969: 296-297 in Eisenman 2007: 44).

While both viewer and composer must treat the images with a kind of detachment to avoid slipping into an ethical problem (which I will describe further), the crucial connection between sexual politics and the 'pathos formula' is that the victim so-disempowered and de-personalised in the image appears to somehow tacitly sanction their own abuse. It does so by depicting torture as a quasi-sexual act – as though it were somehow erotic – and by association "at least potentially pleasurable for the victim" (Eisenman 2007: 44), whose body is represented as "something willingly alienated... (even to the point of death) for the sake of the pleasure and aggrandisement of the oppressor" (*ibid.* 16). The political relationship invoked by this sexualisation, which is reiterated in the first two images by the naked/clothed contrast between victim and oppressor, and the racism-inflected sexualisation of the victim through forced homoeroticism (which has important cultural implications, to be discussed

later), both serve to reify the political relationship being asserted by not only the war, but by the prison, and by the hierarchy within it.



*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*

Figures 5 and 6 are very direct examples of hierarchized power relationships being instituted by these incidents of torture-as-art and art-as-torture. Figure 5 depicts a grimacing, injured Iraqi detainee who lies on his belly between two stretchers, a uniformed American jailor sits cross-legged atop him, wearing a placid expression. The top-down orientation (where pain is being caused by the weight of the soldier) and the contrast in the facial expressions, and again the degree and type of clothing, all reinforce the superiority of the jailor.

The second image, Figure 6, features a smiling fatigue-wearing jailor who props a truncheon – wielded with two hands – against his soldier as he watches a pale, naked detainee cross his legs and fan his arms out defencelessly before him in another (perhaps unintentional) mockery of the Christ-figure (see Fig. 1). The detainee is caked with his own excrement, which he has been forced to smear over himself. The symbolic association between cleanliness and power, filthiness and primitivism is obviously invoked by the use of

excrement, but another key feature of the arrangement of this image is the truncheon, contrasted against the defenceless, surrendering body before it. Allegories of victory, military power, and even a kind of *benevolence* in the restraint of the armed man with the benign smile are all put forward by the composition here. As in all the photos, save Fig. 5, the victim is faceless.

Nullifying the identity of the detainee is a common feature of the photographs taken by U.S. servicemen and women at Abu Ghraib. There is a synergy between the use of this as a technique in the art itself (empowering the face-bearing guards) and as a technique in the wider apparatus that is institutionalised torture and detention for security purposes. Recalling Michel Foucault, Caton and Zacka argue that Abu Ghraib was a ‘nodal point’ in a state institution that had a designed disciplinary function: ‘to sweep up dangerous elements, contain them for interrogation, and either release them back into the population or [transfer them to permanent detention]’ (2010: 206). Foucault applies here in that discipline, contrary to security, ‘isolates a space, [and] determines a segment. Discipline concentrates, focuses, encloses. The first action of discipline is in fact to circumscribe space in which power [...] will function fully and without limit.’ (Foucault 2007: 47, quoted in *ibid.*). While this appears to describe the process of detention, the connected notion of the ‘security apparatus’ applies more fully:

‘The essential function of security is to respond to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds – nullifies it, or limits, checks or regulates it.’ (*ibid.*)

It is the stress of maintaining this security apparatus against its continual expansion, Caton and Zacka argue through Foucault, that makes ‘power’ take on ‘what we call an “improvisatory” and even arbitrary quality’ that is ‘the antithesis’ of the more focused exercise of ‘disciplinary power’ (2010: 207). This space of aleatory power that is an effect of the ‘security apparatus’ in turn explains the twisted forms of abuse that found expression, by virtue of power’s operation through the body and biology.

The production of torture-art within Abu Ghraib reinforced this security apparatus, evidenced by the visual denial of subjectivity by both hooding the victims, as well as by treating their bodies as objects to be stacked and arranged as the guards see fit. The detainees never have any form of agency in the photographs and as such they are:

“...the expression of a malevolent vision in which military victors are not just powerful, but omnipotent, and the conquered are not just subordinate, but abject and even inhuman. The presence of the latter, according to this brutal perspective, gives justification to the former; the supposed bestiality of the victim justifies the crushing violence of the oppressor” (Eisenman 2007: 17).

All of this in mind, the use of art to both reflect upon, and institute, torture by the guards of Abu Ghraib is an art-space with a designed sphere of operation. Circulated outside its intended audience, the intentional dehumanisation, sexualisation, and broad physical and psychological violation of the Iraqis in the photos provoked outrage when they became the subject of media attention. While Eisenman’s use of the pathos formula as a kind of ‘Abu Ghraib effect’ is useful to highlight how the images tied into Western exceptionalism and were in themselves used as a form of functional cultural tool to maintain a regime of torture and abuse, projecting this same motif onto the global audience (and even broadly the American audience) that engaged with these pictures ignores the outrage and controversy

they caused. While both the torture and the art are maintaining the invisibility and the silence of the inmates, this is very much in service of a series of grotesque and systematic international crimes. As such, given the deployment of these images, we must consider more than how depictions of torture (and torture in the interest of depiction) position the artist and the subject, but also how this art form *transforms* the viewer as a political agent. Do these images out of context allow the victim a voice, the capacity to communicate his or her suffering?

### **Fernando Botero: Responding to Torture through Art**

The visual experience of the Abu Ghraib photographs is morally complex, precisely because they make crime an artform – these are crimes committed at least partly for the construction of the images, which the viewer consumes by looking upon them. The ethical dilemmas woven into this kind of visual experience have been examined by Horst Bredekamp (2004) and Frank Möller, operating from the position that the recognition that these images seek an audience “might even transform a viewer into an accomplice of the perpetrators” (2012: 23). Indeed, he argues that even the Western non-viewer of these photographs is somehow implicated by sheer virtue of the symbolic capital of the uniform and of the military, an ostensible extension of the interests of the citizen embedded in a democratically elected state. This creates a feeling of responsibility for the horrors of Abu Ghraib that is triggered acutely by viewing the photos, though then may be explained away by whatever exculpating logic (including the ‘pathos formula’ of Eisenman (2007), and the damnation of the victim through blind patriotism spoken of in Kelly 2011).

In short, this basic act of viewing or watching a crime committed to produce images constitutes a basic moral complicity, and this enrages Western democratic sentiments because citizens feel implicated in both the crimes and the politics of their democratically elected government which permits them. Once again, this is my point of divergence with Eisenman – while indeed the Abu Ghraib images must be situated in a “long [Western] history of images” (2012: 9) and this history creates a permissibility and explains themes and composition, these photos are challenging and deeply disturbing to a Western audience.

Frank Möller writes of an interesting convergence of exhibitions – the showing of *Manet and the Execution of Maximilien* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and *Fernando Botero: Abu Ghraib* at the Marlborough Gallery. Möller cites John Elderfeld in establishing a parallel between the showing of Manet and the (then) ongoing Iraq war: “an exhibition and publication appearing in 2006 are so devoted to works that depict the baleful consequences of a military intervention and regime change” (2006: 23). It is into this general anti-war canon, and demand for art in the American art world that Botero’s collection of paintings appears.

Renowned Columbian artist Fernando Botero, who “must number amongst the most famous painters alive” (Baker 2007), read Seymour Hersh’s ground-breaking New Yorker article ‘Torture at Abu Ghraib’ while on a plain to Paris and was inspired. Speaking to Kenneth Baker of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Botero said of the process:

“The whole world and myself were very shocked that the Americans were torturing prisoners in the same prison as the tyrant they came to remove... The United States presents itself as a defender of human rights and of course as an artist I was very shocked with this and angry. The more I read, the more I was motivated. ... I think Seymour Hersh's article was the first one I read. I was on a plane and I took a

pencil and paper and started drawing. Then I got to my studio and continued with oil paintings. I studied all the material I could. It didn't make sense to copy, I was just trying to visualize what was really happening there" (2007).

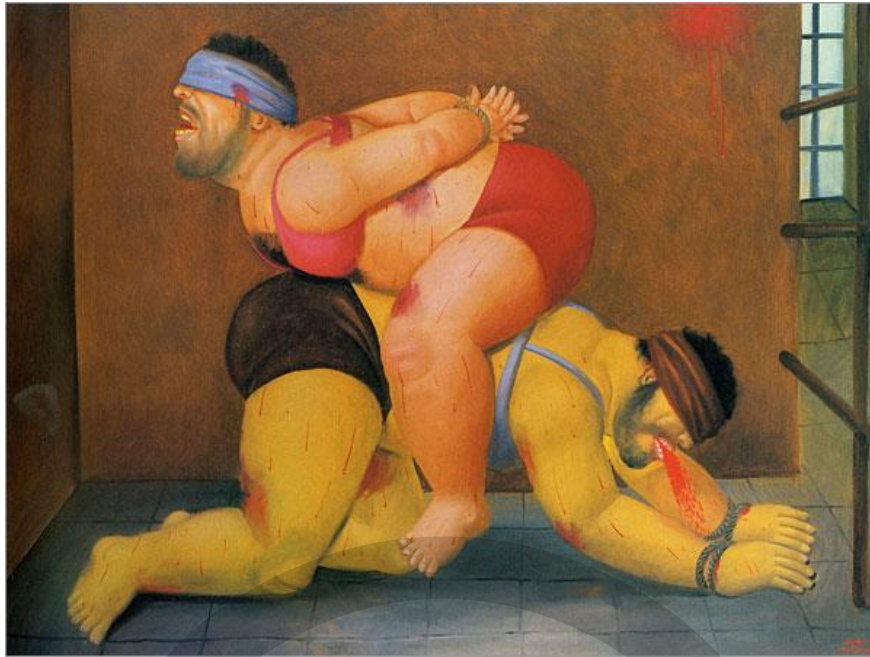
The result was 87 paintings and drawings depicting Botero's imagination of the horrors that took place, an example of what Arthur Danto calls "disturbatory art – art whose point and purpose is to make vivid and objective our most frightening subjective thoughts" (2006) and in this particular case, art designed to confront us with the suffering in a way that is personal. Before Botero's art, Danto continues, "we knew that Abu Ghraib's prisoners were suffering, but we did not feel that suffering as ours" (*ibid.*). In other words, Botero's works – an angry response to the news of torture of Abu Ghraib, and undoubtedly the photographs – address the fundamental problem with torture that Kelly (2011) identifies. This art is a response to the erasure and silencing of suffering by an aggressive Foucauldian "security apparatus," an effort to revive the there-lost social property of pain – its communication.



**Figure 7: Abu Ghraib 16**



**Figure 8: Abu Ghraib 33**



*Figure 9: Abu Ghraib*



*Figure 10: Abu Ghraib*

The focus of Botero's series is squarely upon the victims, their suffering restored chiefly through the highlighting of two things absent or minimal in the photos. The first is the obvious nature of the wounds. Blood, smeared over the bodies in the image as well as in their environment, is almost universally present in Botero's work through bright red smudges. *Abu Ghraib 33* (Figure 8) plays with this feature in the most obvious way, the sketch's absence of colour draws out the blood stain on the back wall and on the head of the fallen prisoner as the focus of the piece. Similarly, the scattered numerousness of the smudges over the typically bloated figures Botero depicts in *Abu Ghraib 16* (Fig. 7) and *50* (Fig. 9) lends a stain of past violence to the image that is unconnected to the movement – or the torture activity – depicted, squarely casting the detainee as a continually and historically abused victim.

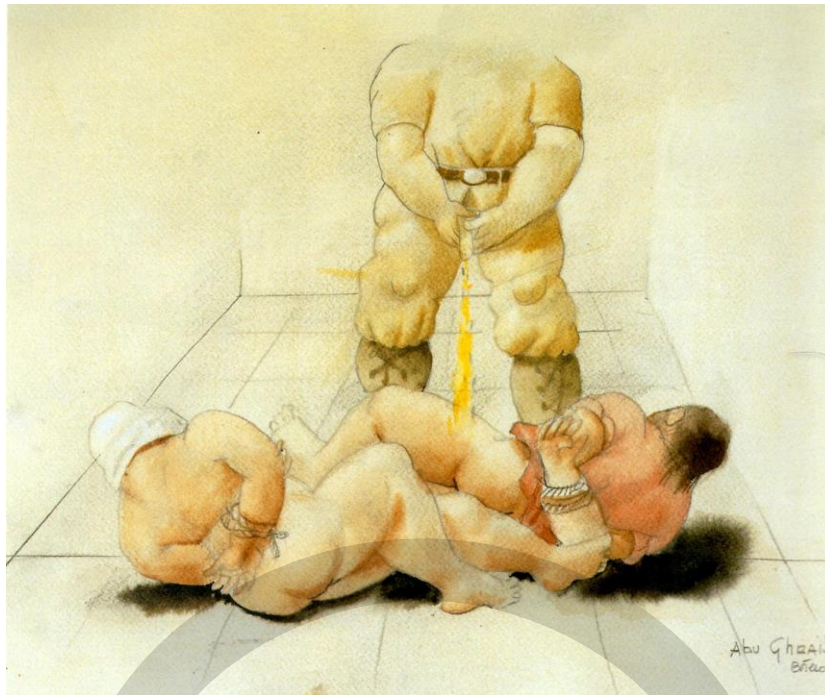
The second technique is the way Botero has played with the *hooding* that made so many of the photos from Abu Ghraib famous, depersonalising the victims in the extreme (both as images and, as an actual torture methodology, psychologically), so famous (especially Fig.1). Instead of hoods, Botero has granted the victims faces that are obscured only with blindfolds (Figs. 9, 10) and in many cases shows the full face (Figs. 8, 10). The sketch *Abu Ghraib 16* (Fig. 7) is particularly interesting, depicting the full hood though pulled across the face of the suffering prisoner to reveal his facial expression in the contours of the fabric. Botero's faces are either frozen in suffering or terror (Fig. 9) or silent, passive, and death-like (Figs. 8, 10). This granting of a kind of identity, in concert with the highly visible depictions of pain, establishes "a visceral sense of identification with the victims" (Danto 2006) that was lacking in the original photos, designed as they were to depict the body as object and the victim as without personhood.

However, while Botero's artworks attempt to resurrect the humanity of the victim, the real objective of the art is to convey the artist's own sense of horror at the perpetrators. It is accusatory art that challenges the viewer, and I would argue that the personhood of the victim is second to the complicity of the viewer – something that Botero highlights through his depiction (or lack thereof) of the jailors in the images.

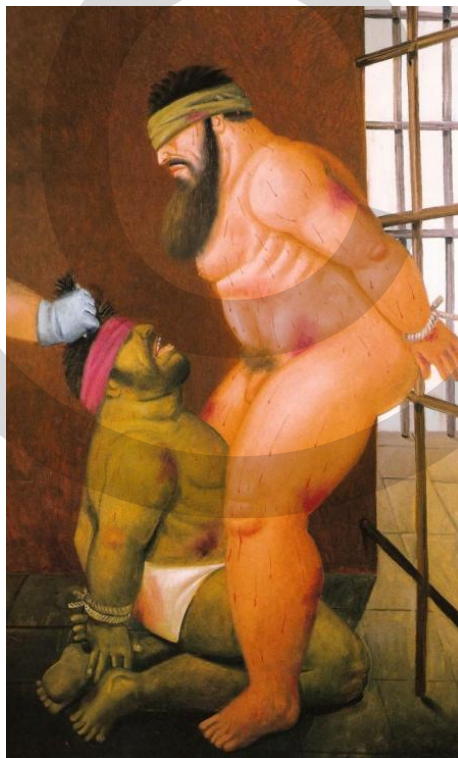


**Figure 11:** *Abu Ghraib 4*

**Figure 12:** *Abu Ghraib 13*



**Figure 13: Abu Ghraib 10**



**Figure 14: Abu Ghraib 57**

Botero has flipped the logic of the Abu Ghraib photographs, in that it is the jailors who are shadowy and depersonalised. Jailors are often depicted without heads or faces as in Abu Ghraib 4 (Fig. 11) and Abu Ghraib 10 (Fig. 13), their power over the action in the images or their uniforms the identifiers of their status. This depersonalisation creates cold figures in the artwork, on the one hand, and on the other it associates them with two possible inserted

identities. The first is that of the US military (even the United States, or the West) itself, which assigns responsibility not only to the power structures that permitted the atrocities at Abu Ghraib but the whole military enterprise in Iraq. In short, depersonalisation makes torture at Abu Ghraib metonymical for the Iraq War.

The second is the possible imported identity of the viewer. Removing or obscuring the perpetrators allows the viewer to further implicate himself or herself in the image. This is particularly evident with the disembodied hand of the off-frame jailor in *Abu Ghraib 57*, forcing a homoerotic act on clearly distressed prisoners, which has an immanence that urges the viewer to search off-frame to stop the act, or for the figure to blame.

To summarise, Botero's series on Abu Ghraib has been hailed for its ability to un-silence the suffering of the detainees, and to confront its audience with the horror of what occurred. It compels the viewer to speak up so that he or she may "maintain his integrity when, brought face to face with suffering, he is called upon to act in a situation in which direct action is difficult or impossible" (Boltanski 1999: 20) and this indeed is what Botero has done in response to the news of the atrocity, feeling the burden of his cultural capital in the United States and seeing his admiration for its democratic values perverted.

But a question has not been asked of the artworks, namely; are they still not simple reproductions of events where Iraqis were put in stress positions by Americans and tortured? Further, they use the *victim* in the image to promote a moral response targeted at an obscured perpetrator, and thus attempt to incite a kind of Western self-loathing. I would suggest that Iraqis themselves would look upon this art with horror – particularly given Botero's characteristic "blimpy figures that verge on the ludicrous" (Danto 2006). Botero succeeds in connecting the viewer to the suffering of the victim, adding the necessary nuance to make art that is far more 'human' than the photography project of the jailors. However, he does nothing to empower the victim or give him closure or redress. This is an anti-Western project that still manages to ignore the agency of the victim, and in so doing simply reiterates that Abu Ghraib itself is part of an Eisenmanian "cultural set" that includes postcolonial self-loathing, itself merely a vehicle for reproducing the white man's burden-esque sense of Western responsibility, and thus in a roundabout way simply a further example of the 'pathos formula' and a reinforcement of self/other division.

### The Hewar Gallery Exhibition

For Iraqis, the atrocities of Abu Ghraib are horrific because they trigger a whole series of *cultural* objections. The methods employed were not simply born of a cold military utility, but were an all-out assault on Islamic culture. Eisenman writes:

"Stripping men of their clothes, dressing them in women's underwear, forcing them to masturbate and then photographing them, were abuses specifically designed by US intelligence officials to grossly offend Muslim sensibilities. In Iraq as elsewhere in the Islamic world, the spaces of the home, the precincts of the body and the recesses of the mind are considered private and inviolate, especially to strangers or others who do not observe the rules of *halal* or religious purity... Thus the frequent nakedness of the detainees at Abu Ghraib, their forced proximity to other naked inmates and to guards – particularly female guards – was an engineered assault on Islamic culture and religion as well as an insult to individual Muslim men and women. To then also photograph the prisoners in this context was profoundly alienating, isolating and shaming. Both these forms of abuse: the intended

eradication of whole communities through collective reprisal and the shaming of individuals and families are instances of the demonizing of the civilian population...” (2007: 29-30)

Thus, for the Iraqi, Abu Ghraib is not representative of the betrayal of Western ideals, nor something that should inspire feelings of self-loathing or responsibility. Instead, Abu Ghraib is a violent assault on everything it means to be Iraqi by a foreign power. The response is the reverse of that felt in the West.

When Qasim Alsabti, the owner of Baghdad’s Hewan Gallery, heard of the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, it was before news of them had been widely circulated in the Western media. A letter from a female detainee was circulating in Baghdad, “begging the resistance to bomb Abu Ghraib and bring the walls down on their heads so that their suffering would end” (Alsabti in Blanford 2004). Five months before the news reached the West, Alsabti had created a life-sized statue of a woman wrapped in a white shroud, stained over the crotch by a slash of blood to symbolise the systematic rape of women at Abu Ghraib (Fig. 15). He gathered the work of 25 artists – paintings, sculptures, installations, etc – as a protest exhibition to the horrors of Abu Ghraib in June of 2004. They represented a duty “as artists to feel what our countrymen are feeling and suffering” (Alsabti in Blanford 2004).



**Figure 17:** Sculpture by Qassim Al-Sebti

The familiar image of the hooded detainee is the centrepiece of many of the works, and it features in two of the works that I’ve selected (Figs. 16, 17). However, the depiction of the hooded detainee by Iraqi artists doesn’t recall the human figure’s shame and suffering in the visceral manner of Botero, indeed offsetting such expression with use of irony and letting the symbol of the hooded man stand for, without necessarily depicting, the horrors of Abu Ghraib. Abdel-Karim Khalil, an Iraqi sculptor with over 20 years of experience, created three such figurines for the exhibition. One such sculpture, depicted both in the gallery and against a black field in Figure 15, nicely encapsulates the major themes in the exhibition’s artistic response.



**Figure 16:** *A Man From Abu Ghraib*, Abdel-Karim Khalil

He deconstructs the original photographs by using both white marble and a style reminiscent of classical sculpture, to implicate the figure in the Western “cultural set.” As NAME remarks, the “marble figure of a man, classically sculpted, at first reminds you of Michelangelo’s David; it is only later that you realize he has a marble sack on his head” (Abdul-Ahad 2004). Indeed, despite the hood, the human figure is heavily aestheticised and is chaste, the overlaying of the arms over his lap coming across as a gesture of modesty. In a small way, Khalil reclaims a measure of the abused man’s dignity by not portraying him in positions of extreme stress nor echoing any of the grotesque subversions of Islamic culture that were perpetrated. Instead, we have a serene figure made of marble, standing for the bedrock of classical ideals that prop up notions of ‘democracy’ and free society. The irony consists in association, rather than the high-pornographic portrayal of suffering. The victim – the real victims of Abu Ghraib – voice their suffering here by exposing western hypocrisy. The inscription, in Arabic, on the base encapsulates this by reading: “We are living in an American democracy” (Carrabine 2012: 216).



**Figure 16:** Sculpture by Iman Shaq

The bust depicted in Figure 16 is by Alsebti's wife, Iman Shaq, and wears an Iraqi sporting top, a hood, and a large dial upon which are collaged cut-outs from the photographs of Abu Ghraib. In the centre, the placing of the man caked in excrement (Fig. 6) resembles Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* as well as the Christ-figure in an obvious pastiche of what is sacred to Western culture. At Hewan Gallery, the Iraqi artists weren't imparting a visceral connection with suffering, or a reaffirmation of the horror of torture itself. Instead, they play with the hypocrisy embodied in the extreme by Abu Ghraib through the quasi-idealisation of the subject, the victim. This avoids the metonymical reinforcement of victimhood with Iraqis, signalling that Abu Ghraib is not only a source of deep shame for Iraqis, but that Iraqis *do not consider it* as a desirable element of their national character.

A final peculiarity of the Iraqi artistic response to Abu Ghraib, that stands in sharp contrast to the that of the West, is actually the lack of art. While high-profile anti-Iraq War art exhibitions lit up the galleries of New York city, only the older generation of established artists – like Khalil – in Iraq felt strongly enough to respond artistically in Qasim Alsabti's exhibition. Steve Mumford's *Baghdad Journal* blog, he notes that "many younger artists who I know didn't feel strong about the abuses, and didn't participate in the show" (2004). This is not to say that the cultural assault of Abu Ghraib did not affect them, per se, merely it struck a different chord among a generation searching to remake Iraqi identity rather than relive atrocities. Equating this with victimhood and suffering, I suggest, is simply not desirable for the Iraqi post-war artistic "scene".

This is not to say there is no demand, however. Nothing illustrates the sadomasochistic, self-loathing and imperialist cultural baggage of the West better than the demand for Iraqi art, especially violent Iraqi art. This same impulse exists in the violent images of Botero. From this exhibition, *A Man from Abu Ghraib* has done very well, having featured in the 'Iraqi artists in exile' exhibition at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston (Carrabine 2012: 216). Yet still, *Iraqi* art concerning Abu Ghraib directly – and especially violently – is rare.

## Conclusion

Monsters, as the epigraph of this essay suggests, hold the macabre fascination of those who look upon them. But this is an oddly Western phenomenon. Ultimately, the lack of Iraqi art about Abu Ghraib – and the heavily ironic, non-violent nature of what exists – stands in contrast to a Western fascination with depictions of torture, even if those depictions intend to express outrage or make salient political points about political responsibility and citizenship – as Botero's series does. But this difference maps onto the relationship between Iraq and the West writ large, where the Western fascination with misdeeds and its own barbarous influence over the people of Iraq evidences a kind of oppressor-fetish, which is masterfully picked out by Eisenman. This should not be taken to mean that this particular subversive attribute of torture-art – an "Abu Ghraib effect" – stands to excuse the violations themselves. Merely that fascination with violations and with suffering, and the artistic effort to communicate this suffering in certain ways, bypasses the Iraqi cultural effort to take agency in remaking their own image *against* that Western influence.

Agency is what is important in the Iraqi art represented by the Heward Gallery exhibition, even if that agency is a decision to erase Abu Ghraib from Iraq's cultural past. What is clear, however, is that the West will not let such incidents go. And perhaps even in an act of self-loathing, and any attempts at granting some kind of reparation or voice to the people of Iraq, dredging up such darkness from the past may simply help to sustain the cultural disequilibrium that permitted such evil in the first place. What is clear, however, is that across these opposing geographies – art's communicative power helps us talk about torture.

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