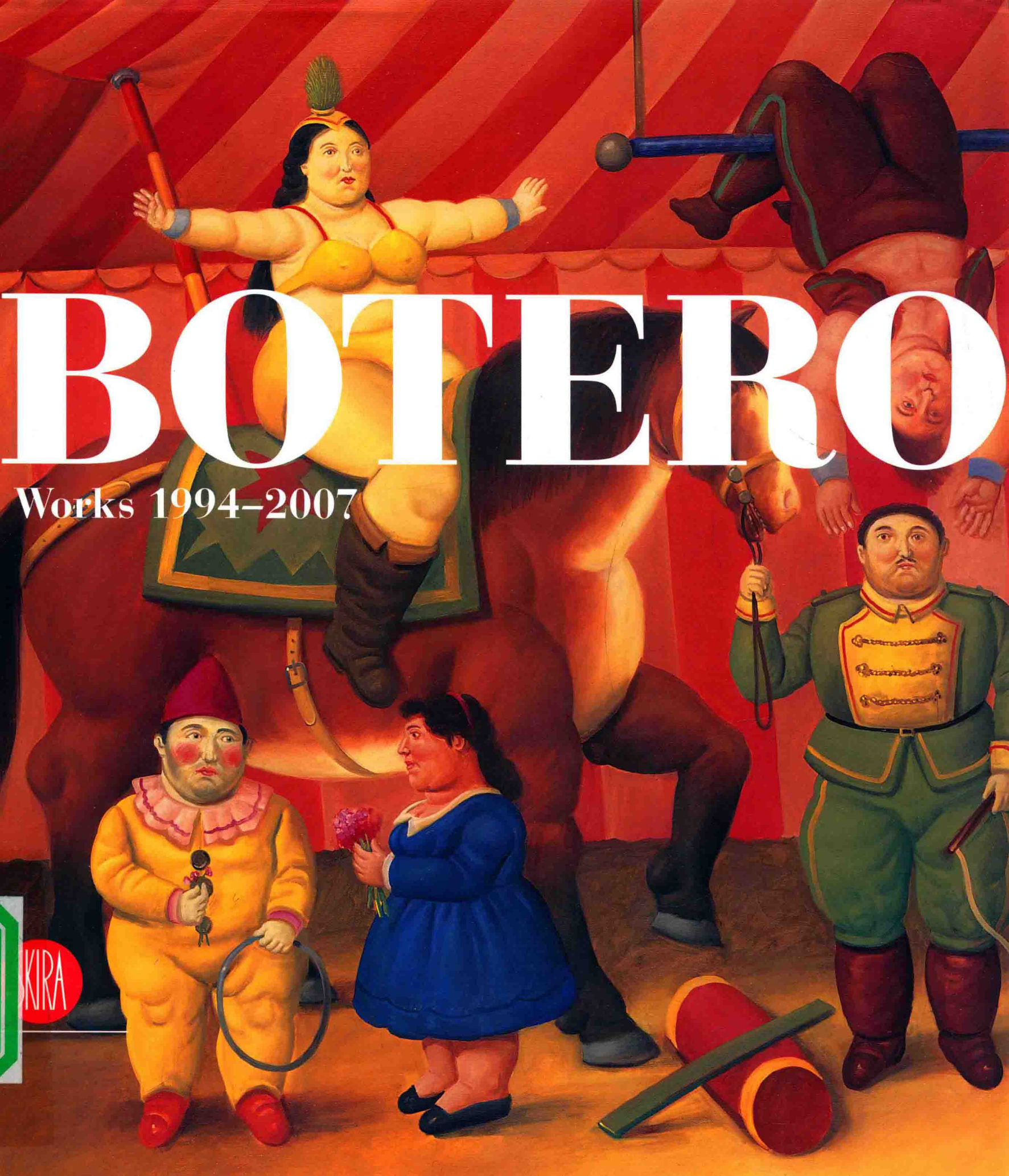


# BOTERO

Works 1994–2007



# Botero

Works 1994–2007

SKIRA

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**Botero**

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## Botero

Erica Jong

*"An artist is attracted to certain kinds of form without knowing why. You adopt a position intuitively; only later do you attempt to rationalize or even justify it."*

Fernando Botero

Botero – a name with two O's. Was it his name that inspired the female O's of his oeuvre? For Botero is the world's greatest worshipper of women. Where Michelangelo worshipped the beautiful boy – like Donatello and Verrocchio – this Colombian artist worships the ripe woman. Though he is often compared to Picasso, his sculptures of women also remind me of the late Niki de Saint Phalle's fabulous *Nanas*. But in Botero we sense nostalgia to go back to Eden and rewrite the story. His is an art of plenitude, an art of excess. At times he has been criticized for his epicurean tastes, his sense that the horn of plenty is flowing into his lap. This new show should put such criticisms to rest.

We have a Botero in our apartment in New York City. It's a very plump Eve sitting on a chair, holding a snake to her breast. She is offering an apple. My three and a half year old grandson Max asks, "Who's that guy?"

"It's Eve, Max, the first woman in the Bible."

(I don't go into Lillith. That can come later).

"She has a pet snake and she's eating an apple", Max says. "What's the Bible?"

"A book", I say. But I like Max's book better.

Satan has become Eve's pet snake and Adam's temptation has become the apple she's carelessly eating.

I love the way he's rewritten the parable. But who says Botero didn't intend it that way? Eve has rounded haunches and breasts like beach balls. Botero loves breasts. He loves them the way the anonymous sculptors of Khajuraho, India, loved breasts. They carved them round and firm, rising above round bellies and tiny waists. They saw women as always in motion, always swaying, always dancing. Not Botero. His women are rooted monuments, natural forms. They might have grown out of the earth. They are rooted in it like monstrous rocks or stumpy trees. Some of his women have huge feet in ballet slippers and some float above the uneven ground that hoarsely calls to them. Some sit on or crush small men. Some lie next to men like double funerary statues in

churches where queens and kings lie. But wherever they sit or lie, they are made of rounded forms like Michelin tire-men. They are anti-anorexic – women of flying flesh. They are not fat but fecund, not gross but alive. In our size zero fashion world, these women would have nothing to wear. Etro and Armani could not clothe them and that's the way Botero likes it. He likes them clothed only in their flesh.

Before the new *Abu Ghraib* series, Botero's animals were often fat cats who belonged to these fleshy women. There were also fat pigs and wiggly snakes. In *Abu Ghraib*, we see fierce flesh-eating dogs, ravenous Nazi dogs, dogs who can never be pets. These are not dogs I would introduce to my grandson. In fact I could not show him these works. They are too terrifying. He would cry. Before *Abu Ghraib*, Botero's most popular works were perfect for the matrons of Park Avenue who installed them on their expensive street. I was beginning to tire of all the fat cats and solid women – if truth were told. It seemed like an art of opulence and indifference to the sufferings of humanity. Fat, funny, fleshy, sexual and serene, these opulent Boteros came to seem boring. But this new exhibition is a shot of adrenalin. I don't mean this in the newspaper sense of "IF IT BLEEDS, IT LEADS", but rather that the artist has awakened to the 21st century world around him. He's not exploiting the horror but making all of us witnesses to it.

His stunning reaction to the horrors of Abu Ghraib, suggests that Botero's love of life and fecundity has, as its counterpart, a hatred of cruelty and pain. Sometimes an artist must document horrors so that we can be motivated to stop them. In this Botero is like late Goya and the Picasso of *Guernica*. Art, Botero asserts, is "A Permanent Accusation". Without *Guernica* how would we know the Spanish Civil War? Without Goya, how would we know man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures during the Napoleonic wars?

Like these predecessors, Botero seeks to be a witness to the torturers of Abu Ghraib and he has documented every dehumanizing trick, every disgusting act of butchery. He has made nothing up – yet he never copied the photographs the torturers took to celebrate themselves. He has contemplated every misdeed and given its full bloody context. He has witnessed the hypocrisy of the Bush administration in prating of democracy while revoking the Geneva Conventions and condoning,

even inspiring, torture. Botero illustrates the ways in which Bush and his cohorts have surpassed even Saddam Hussein in inhumanity.

The Botero works inspired by Abu Ghraib were initially presented at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, and later in Germany and Greece. In October 2006, they were displayed at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City, their first showing in the United States. The series was then exhibited at The Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California in Berkeley through the end of March 2007.

This newest show at Palazzo Reale in Milan represents the second Italian viewing. To their credit, Italians were first in presenting this Botero.

In the fall of 2007, these works will be seen, at last, in Washington, DC at the University Museum of the Katzen Arts Center in Georgetown.

I look forward to the uproar they will cause.

Botero has declared that he does not plan to sell the works because he doesn't want to profit from human suffering. Instead, he intends to donate them to museums. As with the Holocaust chronicles of Primo Levi and the anti-war paintings of

Picasso, these images will form a permanent record of the Iraq war and the blatant lies that supposedly justified it. As United States Brigadier General Janis Karpinski has said, "We must face the realities of what the occupation of Iraq has done to US military personnel, prisoners and all Iraqis. Torture and abuse was authorized by the highest levels of our government, in clear violation of the Geneva Conventions and human rights... Those who knew, directed it, endorsed it and supported it, stepped casually into the role of torturers and abusers, replacing the former Iraqi dictator himself, Saddam Hussein".

The truth is that we must tear down this prison and its evil twin at Guantánamo, before we can start the work of mourning and memorialisation. It is much too soon to atone. The torturers are still running the show. They have almost two years left to do even more damage to America and the world. I fear their power and I fear their hypocrisy even more. I would not be surprised if Bush and his neocon henchmen found an excuse to bomb Iran and start a nuclear war. Desperate men start wars. Sane men and women make peace.

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*Après Velázquez*  
1959, oil on canvas



*Mona Lisa at the Age of Thirteen*  
1959, oil on canvas

his world aimed at capturing the public's attention. His painting in fact starts from far away with an ambition to render the multiplicity of things, events, within the sphere of a single image. And, even more, that image, rich and complex because structured on a number of levels, carries within it all the history, memory, weight and flavour of his native land: "in all my painting may be found a world that I met during my youth. It is a sort of nostalgia and I have made it the central subject of my work. I lived in New York for fifteen years and for many in Europe, but this has not changed anything in my frame of mind, in my nature and in my spirit as a Latin American. The relationship with my country is total".

The characters, the chronicles of everyday life, the moods reveal the influence of great Pre-Columbian art, of popular craftsmanship, of the Creole contribution to the colonial language of Christian iconography.

The large opulent vases, the formal essentiality of the terracotta items, the refined elegance of the jewellery from the height of splendour of Latin American civilisations, all have been profoundly assimilated and internalised by Botero, who has established an authentic continuity that is wholly identifiable with his culture of origin. Yet at the same time he has long meditated on the heritage of Spanish domination, on the Baroque painting introduced and widespread in churches and palaces, and on its progressive appropriation by autochthonous artists through a kind of deformation of both language and content, which according to Botero represents the very essence of Latin American art.

In this sense, as Vittorio Sgarbi has been able to remark, Botero manages not to betray his origins, his customs and traditions, and to combine the life and behaviour of local characters with an unconventional image of form. His research becomes the synthesis of the great Spanish painting, particularly Velázquez, and of the fantastic imagination of an ancient civilisation.

His irrepressible relationship with his land, testified to by fertility and formal purity, does not make Botero an ethnic, folkloric artist, but rather constitutes the obligatory condition for a passage, a meditation, the attainment of the awareness of being able to create and give life to an independent and authentic art that is an integral part of the Latin American temperament.

This is an art faithful to its own roots but at the same time nourished by knowledge, by interaction with other sensibilities and other languages, fascinated by the encounter with works of the 14th and 15th centuries, with Giotto and Masaccio and above all with the frescos of Piero della Francesca, which reveal to Botero "the essence of Classicism on account of the organisation of space, the serenity of form and the harmony of colours, transmitting a great sense of tranquillity".

And these confirm to him –also thanks to the illuminating discovery of Berenson's *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* – the importance of reproducing the tactile values, strengthening his conviction of the need to underline volume in the subjects of his works.

European culture has transmitted curiosity to him, the stimuli of an intellectual restlessness; it has indicated to him the right path of true art that is always an interpretation of reality through the intelligence and sensibility that lead to stylistic awareness.

Botero has thrown everything into the crucible of artistic creation to the point of leaving the superfluous, the waste, deposited on the bottom, to extract the essence of things, their decanted purity. Having activated a spiritual affinity with the greatest interpreters of poetics of whom he is so fond, from Goya to Courbet, from Manet to Renoir, from Bonnard to Matisse, Botero has embellished his language by extending its expressive horizons; he has moved towards that perfect synthesis of rule and passion that, through a more original and intense definition of his poetic world, have rendered his work absolutely unmistakable.

His tone is that of an independent narrator, of a teller of fables with a libertarian accent whose force resides in the calm and erudition of his knowledge, in wisdom tempered by a smile and by sweet irony.

Yet this does not mean that his work can be encapsulated *sic et simpliciter* in a stylistic code and be reduced to an elegant formula, since Botero, conscious of what he has found within himself, shows that he knows how to handle his art masterfully in its every slightest sensory and conceptual nuance.

Beyond the more or less openly declared homage he pays to the great masters, all his works realised before the mid-sixties reveal an uneasy and tormented artist, with a dramatic character, contained yet sincere, entrusted to frayed brushstrokes and strong chromatic sparks, even if the scrutinised architecture of the image and that hint of restraint that prevents the form from slipping into vortices without return is never lacking.

In paintings such as *Après Velázquez*, his expressive intensity, use of materials and colour choices position Botero close to the Bacon of the post-First World War period and these paintings seem to be inspired by the same atmosphere as his subsequent interpretations of the *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. Yet, in the *Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* or *Las Tribulaciones de Sor Angelica*, with his narrative capacity and visionary powers, he even appears close to the variations of that kind of Mexican painting with a social and popular background.

Already at that time, however, his figures carried in themselves a monumentality and a structural dimorphism that are evident in paintings





*Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos*  
1959, oil on canvas

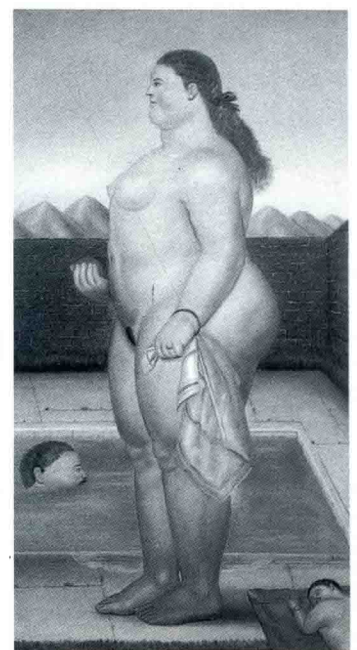
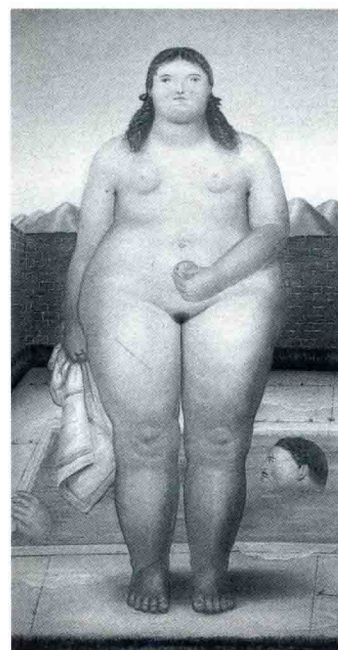
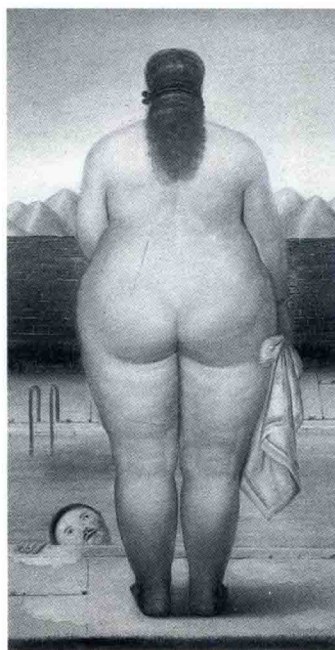
such as *Mona Lisa at the Age of Thirteen* and *Girl in Garden*, which are profoundly tied to his vision.

This approach may be traced back to his Colombian origins, to his consanguinity with a civilisation and a culture with aesthetic parameters extraneous to Western sensibility, which with the passing years grew weaker, moulded by the assimilation of new sensibilities and tempered by an increased sense of compositional architecture, although it remains the founding and fertile source of his every image.

Botero's works carry within themselves something enigmatic, restless, immersed in a climate of suspension. They reveal a singularly sweet and subtle irony; they prompt a smile, they win over the inquisitive gaze, as in the very beautiful and irreverent *Butcher's Table*, where the copious elegance of Chardin's still-lives is translated into a popular tone amid knives, sausages and a smiling pig's head, with a sarcastic, captivating gaze. Or as in the unlikely *Official Portrait of the Military Junta*, a highly colourful parade of generals in magnificent uniforms surrounded by fur-coated women dripping with jewels. Or as in the statue-like immobility of *The Bather*, an absolute synthesis of monumentality and purity, of harmony of the forms of a fantastic new eternal feminine ideal. Or as in the powerful bull that in *Pase natural* seems to give rise to a ritual dance, in a subtle interplay of chromatic cross-references, transposed into a timeless dimension. Or as in the crowded everyday character of *The House of Amanda Ramírez*, where life flows along in a sugary pink atmosphere amid embraces, domestic chores and pleasant conversations in which the existential contiguity cannot help but accentuate the individual's sense of inner loneliness.

Fully penetrating the artist's world – and we must talk of world, since his gaze groups together not only his characters, but also the animals, the still lifes, the landscape and transforms them into a single unitary vision, embracing life in all of its nuances –, the caricature-like element of great initial impact is exhausted in itself in that it offers a key to interpreting his work that is extremely limiting and partial.

His deformation is certainly not the provocative and tortured one of Expressionist denunciation. That existential engagement and that instinct of rebellion of the man-artist towards society are lacking here. The path chosen by Botero is that traced, in Modernity, by Rousseau, that of the transposition of life into a climate of definite unreality and fantasy given solid form, in an enchanted fixity translated with a poetic power of transfiguration of extraordinary intensity into the search for a new, refined and ironic Classicism. It falls within the tradition of Surrealism understood in its manifold meanings and especially within the atmosphere of Magic Realism, which developed in the late twenties in opposition to the overflowing of avant-garde languages, with the desire to rewrite reality in an almost dream-like dimension, ennobling it thanks to the use of sophisticated painting techniques. It is the deformation of the improbable, of the transcending of cohesiveness and logic: characters and objects undergo a structural metamorphosis and at the same time emerge in their apparent obviousness as protagonists of anomalous situations. The unusual, the unexpected are therefore revealed as the characterising and shaping elements of Botero's work. The presences going against the trend are what capture the observer's attention: elements that escape the logical sequence of reality and for this reason provoke a sense of wide-



*The Bather*  
1975, oil on canvas





*Butcher's Table*  
1969, oil on canvas



*The House of Amanda Ramirez*  
1988, oil on canvas

*Official Portrait of the Military Junta*  
1971, oil on canvas





spread discomfort, of disquiet. They reawaken the senses; they stimulate a less obvious and distracted observation.

Through style, Botero wishes to affirm the prominence of an imaginary aesthetics.

His characters are without extreme, conflictive moods; they do not carry feelings of either joy or pain within themselves: they are enigmatic figures that contain something unexpressed.

After all, in representing them, Botero does not take a position in relation to them; he does not express value judgements: when presented with cardinals or musicians, common people or the potentates of the earth, his attitude remains one of detached impartiality.

The artist restricts himself solely to spreading signs, clues, with apparent naturalness, entrusting the task of following them and reconstructing them to the observer. He is asking us for a supplement of attention that goes beyond simple observation in favour of a sentimental participation in his world.

Botero is not exactly an artist of historical memory, nor is he an artist of the looming everyday. It is therefore difficult to establish to what extent the artist's paintings and cycles came about to respond to an ideological or moral incentive or rather to satisfy his inner need to give order and form to his figurative ideas.

For this reason, the series of works created in 2005, focusing on the torture inflicted by U.S. soldiers on Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib jail, is a one-off in the work of Botero, who suddenly seems to have rediscovered the unique, immediate and profound force of denunciation in painting.

As always, he uses that successful process of contamination between colour and light, between the surface of the painting and the very substance of that painting at the basis of so many previous pictures, yet never expressed with such humanity, that is touching, riddled with fear, indignation and emotion.

The images of those humiliated, wounded, beaten bodies, walled alive inside the immobility and indifference of history, are intended to be a testimony and a warning in which aesthetics for once makes way for truth to allow art to return to being a privileged tool of boundless communication. A man upright behind bars, hands tied behind his back, perceives the approach of his jailer in the darkness, others piled up together suffer the weight of humiliation of a violated intimacy, while others are affronted by derision and impotence, still others the arrogance of physical and psychological violence. They feel the closeness of the abyss of life, the agonising concern that they will not be lost in a death that would be liberation, but will remain forever in that state of dramatic suspension.

There is a widespread sense of fear, of tension. No neutral space exists; the atmosphere is the claustrophobic one of torment, of the reduction of everything to the unknown and hostile location of a cell, of the compromising of the human world and bestial ferocity.

Botero pushes his images to the very edges of the canvas, seeking to paint every portion of space with the strong, implacable colours of truth. He hurls into the foreground a suffering, lacerated carnality, faces from the last day before the judgement, with mouths twisted by grimaces of pain, howls interrupted on the point of being born, bodies imprisoned in rooms that are hell and obsession, bodies that are on a boundary, without knowing whether their night, a dark night, emptiness of sounds and light, will see a new dawn.

These men, so authentic in the pain accentuated by the force of their defencelessness, represent the evidence of the transcending of the clarity and harmony of forms; they are beyond the irony and calm reflection and reveal Botero's capacity for unexpected indignation and a civil conscience from which is born the concretion of the world, its resistance to every wind, even that of the new barbarism.





Circus

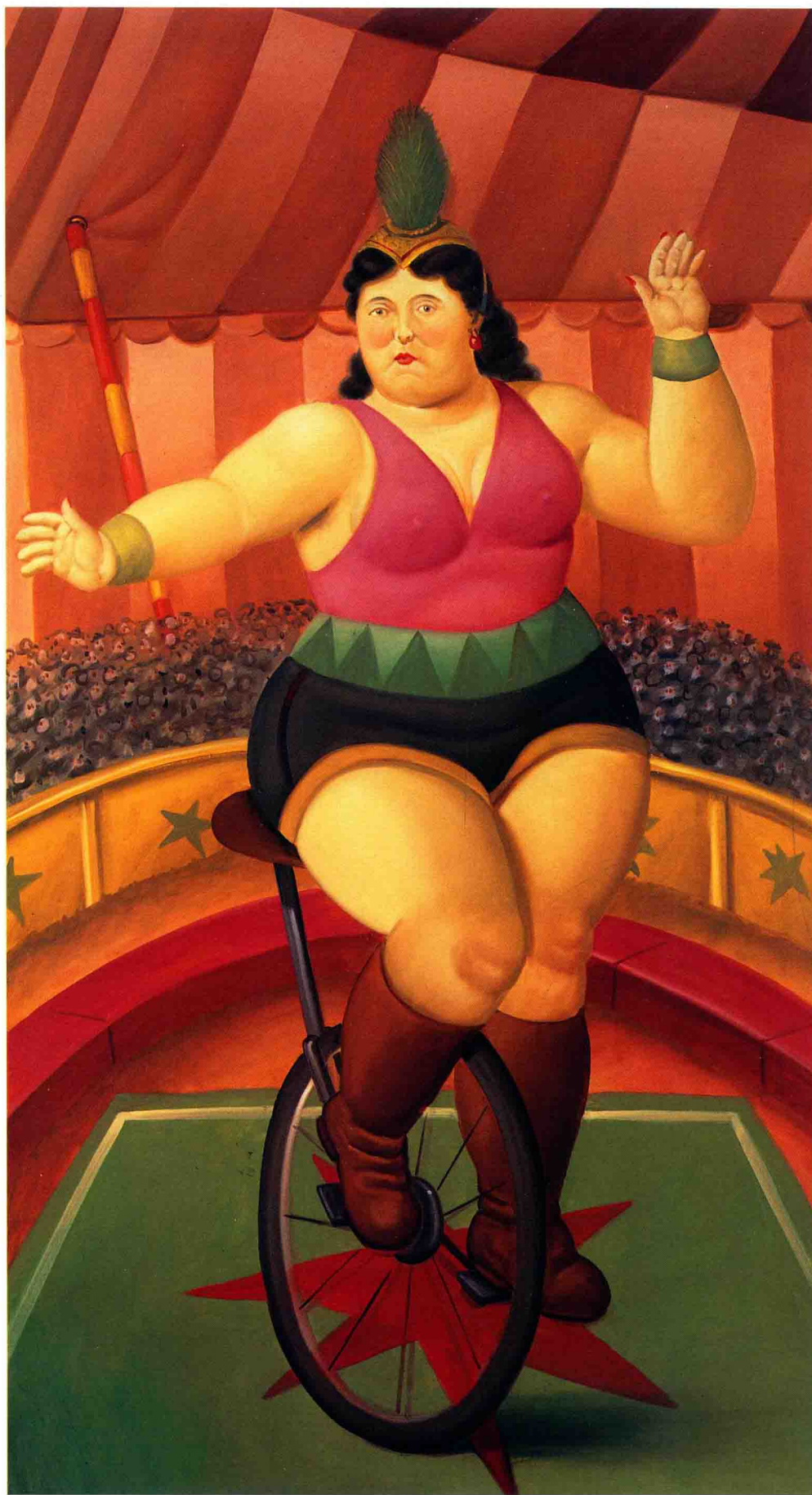
1. *Circus Ataid*, 2007  
oil on canvas, 123 × 190 cm











2. *Equilibrist*, 2007  
oil on canvas, 187 × 103 cm