Botero's Artrocity[1]

Arthur Imperial

Introduction

In 2004, when war porn photos of tortured Iraqi prisoners at Abu-Ghraib were leaked and widely publicized by the American press, public outrage and mass criticism with the American invasion of Iraq followed producing a severe political disaster in an already tenuous construction of the Global War on Terror. In the US administration's view, the atrocity of Abu-Ghraib was handled tactfully through the subsequent convictions of the soldiers who took part in the photos. However, the continual recirculation of the war porn images deeply resonated within the American political consciousness, psychically etching the photos of

---

[1] This article is best read when accompanied by three images from Fernando Botero's Abu Ghraib series, which are all referenced in the body: *Abu Ghraib 57* (2005), *Abu Ghraib 65* (2005) & *Abu Ghraib 66* (2005). Due to *Problématique*'s inability to attain copyright permissions for these images, they unfortunately cannot be reproduced here. However, all three images are contained in the collection *Botero: Abu Ghraib* (New York: Prestel Verlag 2006), and they are also available online. For an authorized reproduction of *Abu Ghraib 57*, see: http://www.slate.com/id/2153674/slideshow/2153797 /fs/0//entry/2153796/; for *Abu Ghraib 65* & *66*, see: http://www.culturekiosque.com /art/travel/fernando_botero_abu_ghraib.html.

Abu-Ghraib as iconic images of the atrocities of war. Or seen through a more critical lens, these images came to be the consummate expression of American Empire. As such, the atrocity of Abu-Ghraib afforded a salient opportunity for academics, activists, artists and social critics to produce critical responses by utilizing the photos of torture as a site to address larger issues of violent imperial practices by the US.

Renowned for paintings that feature playful 'volumetric' bodies – exaggeratedly swollen or puffed-up figures – that deal mainly with the subject matter of the common daily lives of small Columbian villages, artist Fernando Botero, who was horrified by news reports about the Abu-Ghraib atrocity, set out to paint what he has called 'a permanent accusation'. In a provocative methodology, Botero deferred the use of the circulated photos of torture and instead relied solely upon the written texts on Abu-Ghraib – news reports, confessions, interviews etc. – to guide the form and content of his work. The result was a large collection of paintings and sketches entitled *Abu-Ghraib* that reframe the public presentation of the atrocity. In Botero's rendition of the Abu-Ghraib photos, the bodies of US soldiers are conspicuous for their absence; instead, the tortured bodies of the Iraqi prisoners are front and centre. Due to the content of these paintings (i.e. limbs hanging from a taut rope, naked and bloodied bodies stacked in sexual positions, faces blindfolded or hooded, bodies in bras, streams of urine appearing from somewhere off the frame, unidentifiable torturers symbolized by an ominous boot, a weapon wielding arm or teeth-bearing dogs), US galleries and museums were initially reluctant to exhibit the series. But later on, after the public swell of anti-Abu-Ghraib sentiment, Botero's work garnered much critical acclaim and between 2005-08 he toured his paintings through Europe and many major American cities.

Widely heralded by journalists and blog sites – recirculating the paintings through digital imagery in a similar fashion to the original photos – the Abu-Ghraib Series gained immense popular recognition. One reviewer even drew parallels to Picasso's *Guernica* (Vallen 2005). Yet, there are important stylistic difference between these works. Guernica visually disassembles bodies – distorting form and shape, confusing the lines that demarcate inside and out from one body from another, meshing animal with human, human with animal, bending light so as to jar the viewer's conception of space/time, and is stark in its monochromatic use of colour in order to express the chaotic violence

of war. Botero, on the other hand, is classically trained in the styles of the Colonial Baroque and Italian Renaissance, and therefore maintains his signature of sensually voluptuous figures when presenting the tortured victims at Abu-Ghraib. This unusual choice to maintain his trademark 'volumetric' style refigures the emaciated brown bodies of the Iraqi torture victims as sensuous white bodies. This decision is explained by Botero as follows: "I have two responsibilities simultaneously, I have responsibility with the subject matter and responsibility with the art, because the art has to be good, it is very important that the art is effective from the point of view from painting" (Botero 2007).

By negotiating a tension between the subject matter and art, the artist, as Botero explains, must maintain responsibilities to both. Yet, I argue that the manner in which Botero negotiates this tension marks a crucial shift: there is a shift away from the politicizing affectivity of the photos that globally shocked the viewing public, spurring wide-spread discontent with the Global War on Terror and disrupting the workings of Empire, to that of the artistic effectiveness of the paintings from the point of view of the artist. As a result, Botero-as-aesthete must inevitably sacrifice his ethical responsibility to the subject matter of the politics surrounding the tortured prisoners. In order to make 'art effective' from an aesthetic sensibility and moreover, for the viewing audience, violent representational strategies are necessarily involved to represent the Abu-Ghraib atrocity, with the most obvious of these strategies being the substitution of the emaciated brown bodies in pain for Botero's voluptuous white bodies.

The representational violence inherent in aestheticizing political atrocities for the purposes of establishing empathetic relations with the suffering of others is what I will call *artrocity*. *Artrocity* occurs when: an artist, intent on producing 'political art' in order to comment on political violence and its attendant traumas must sacrifice the critical force of the subject matter. In the case of Abu-Ghraib and its aftermath, it is the raced, gendered and classed politics of bodies and space and the feelings of alterity they generate that are sacrificed for the aesthetic qualities (i.e. the perceived 'beauty') of the art itself. Thus, in contradistinction to the overwhelming valorization of Botero's work by journalists, bloggers, academics, cultural critics and the American public, I provide a reading informed by post-colonial and queer feminist theory (Puar and Rai

2002, Ahmed 2004, Chow 2006, Razack 2007, Agathangelou et al 2008) in order to highlight how significant erasures inherent in Botero's reframing of the Abu-Ghraib atrocity are underpinned by logics of colonialism and a patriotic, homonormativized American subjectivity that is complicit with the 'war on terror'.

I will argue that the shifts in Botero's work described above are symptomatic of the power of Empire to render brown bodies disposable, sacrificial and substitutable. Additionally, if read in the context of discursive constructions linking the Global War on Terror and the Christian crusade, figuring a Christian aesthetic, an aesthetic which, I argue panders to a predominantly Christian-American citizenry seeking posttraumatic therapy*,* if not repentance for the 'sins' committed by the US soldiers. As such, I aim to read the cultural productions reacting to Abu-Ghraib as an expression of a US society attempting to deal with the pain and suffering caused by such an atrocity. The purpose of my analysis is to connect a global politics of aesthetics to questions of Empire, which politicizes the paintings-as-text to uncover how underpinning epistemological and ontological assumptions inform the production of knowledge constituting and constructing our lived political realities and subject formations.

Following Rose (2002: 11), a critical analysis of visual methodologies necessarily entails an assessment of the social conditions and effects of visual objects in their relations to the construction of social categories such as class, race, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness and so on. Thus, the production of art is never free from a politics of representation as artistic choices are informed by the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the artist. Moreover, post-9/11 artistic production must be seen in terms of Empire's power to mediate the visuality of war and in turn, to mediate our 'pained' relationships to these violent imperialist practices. In the context of neoliberal globalization, the role of aesthetics is central to the visual/consumer culture that has played a central part in the way we construct our political imaginaries to align with capitalist imperial power. Moreover, the way we live our daily lives in relation to the 'war on terror' is mediated by images of war proliferated through media outlets and the internet which constitute our daily interfacing with the 'outside' world (Campbell & Shapiro 2007:133).

It is important then that close attention is paid to the social relations informed by the circulation of digital media and aesthetic productions under Empire as this interfacing is salient to the construction of our political identities, subjectivities and agencies (i.e. the way we represent ourselves, the way we think and the way we act). Yet, it is in critically analyzing the production of aesthetics as a technology of Empire and bringing to fore the seductive power of consolidation which brings subjects into its fold rendering docile and complicit citizens, that sites are opened to possibilities of resistance. As such, following my critical analysis of the Abu-Ghraib Series, I will illustrate what I call a counter-aesthetic to Botero's artrocity in Gerard Laing's painting *American Gothic*. I argue that Laing's painting resists the violent representational strategies of the Abu-Ghraib Series and works instead towards an affective obstruction to self-referentiality: an aesthetic disruption of the complicit, empathetic subjectivities produced by Empire.

Empire's Empathetic Relations

In her paper *Stealing the Pain of Others*, Razack (2007: 377) explains that empathy works as a "double-edged sword: in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration". Razack observes how empathy, motivated by the desire to connect with the pain and suffering of the other quickly turns into a story about the self whereby "empathy involves experiencing what the other is suffering and becoming the sufferer" (ibid: 387). Razack's logic of 'stealing the pain of others' is explicitly reproduced in the journalistic responses to Botero's work which I take as reflective of the views of a larger American public. As will be shown, it is this desire to empathize with the victims of torture through their depiction in Botero's paintings that the suffering of Iraqi prisoners is elided, redirected and appropriated for the American viewing public as referent-object. The pain of the other becomes the pain of the self. Most telling in journalistic responses to Botero's Abu-Ghraib is that the aesthetic violences I perceive as highly problematic are instead evoked as the high points of Botero's art.

Noted art critic and philosopher, Arthur C. Danto wrote in *The Nation*

Botero's astonishing works make us realize this: We knew that Abu-Ghraib's prisoners were suffering but *we did not feel that suffering as ours*…the photographs did not bring us closer to the agonies of the victims. Botero's images by contrast, establish a visceral sense of identification with the victims, *whose suffering we are compelled to internalize and make vicariously our own* (Danto 2006, my emphasis).

In Danto's exposition we see how Botero's paintings have effectively redirected the original shock of the viewer's gaze at the tortured prisoner as an experience of alterity –'we did not feel that suffering as ours' – toward one of an aesthetic relation of identity, where the subject's suffering is now 'vicariously our own'. In a similar vein, identifying the 'deficiencies' of the photographs vis-à-vis Botero's paintings, Honor Jones in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* concretizes this affective shift from difference to identity:

…Botero's paintings seem to move people more effectively than the photographs and testimony they were based on. Although Botero was careful not to include anything that wasn't documented, *the paintings are more affecting than the photos* – which seem to have put people off with their stark reality. People were disgusted, but not moved to empathy. (Jones 2008, my emphasis)

Importantly, yet for misdirected reasons, Jones connects the inability for empathetic relations to occur within the original photos because of their 'stark reality' whereas Botero's work, through the aestheticization of the subject matter, is able to remove that affective quality of disgust. How this feeling of disgust was removed and an empathetic affect was achieved is outlined in Mia Finemann's article from *Slate* which describes the core value of the paintings.

Botero's Abu Ghraib paintings…are searingly powerful…By portraying the Iraqi prisoners as stylized everyman figures, Botero's pictures do something that even the most vivid photographs of torture don't do: They encourage us to identify with the victims…By depicting the prisoners in a simplified,

schematic style, *Botero neutralizes their "otherness" – a strategy that allows American and European viewers to identify more readily with the victims* (Finemann 2006, my emphasis)

Finemann's recognition that Botero's ability to neutralize otherness as a quality that enables 'American and European viewers to identify more readily with the victims' renders an ideal illustration of the appropriative logic of empathy in that the aestheticization of political violence works toward a sense of identification while simultaneously sacrificing, in a totalizing manner, the feelings of disgust produced by the photos which created relations of difference directly signifying the suffering of the other. Here we see how Botero's *artrocity* effectively re-narrates the Abu-Ghraib atrocity from a story about the other to a story about the self. It is the American or the European viewer who, in attempting to empathize with the sufferer through aesthetic means, becomes the sufferer themselves. Lastly, Jack Rasmussen, the director of the American University Museum where the Abu-Ghraib series exhibited, made the following striking remarks about Botero's work in relation to the function of art as a means for the American citizenry to comment on the self.

> Torture in the abstract, when its far away, it's something that you can maybe accept a lot more easily than when it's not next to you…when it's depicted in such a *powerful way*, it's harder to ignore…Torture is not American…*We need to look at ourselves, and that's something that art can do.* (International Herald Tribune 2007, my emphasis)

The uniting thread in these comments is that Botero's ability to aestheticize the pain of others produces what is seen to be a more 'powerful' image than the photos of atrocity, enabling a greater sense of identification with the subjects of torture. Yet, the reason why Botero's paintings garner greater affective power than the photos is evident in the shift from what these paintings are about to whom these paintings are for. As Razack has pointed out above, a feeling of empathy and a need to experience another's suffering incites an inversion of positional importance: a story about the other quickly turns into a story about the self. Where the Abu-Ghraib scandal instigated a deepened

disillusionment with the war in Iraq, Botero's paintings offer an opportunity for the viewing public to empathize with the subjects of torture at the same time they enable an escape from the feelings of alterity that the pain of the other produced in the original photos. Instead, it was only through Botero's reinterpretation of the events of Abu-Ghraib that the paintings gained greater affective power to allow the viewing public to 'look at ourselves' as Rasmussen states, in order to realize that 'torture is not American'. This enables an empathetic relationship that obliterates the other which, following Rasmussen again, is 'something that art can do'.

As such, I regard the empathetic and aesthetic relationships described above as a pain management strategy of an American citizenry attempting to relieve themselves from a post Abu-Ghraib crisis of patriotism as reflected in Rasmussen's statement that 'Torture is not American'. This statement is symptomatic of the disbelief of a citizenry unable to come to terms with the ongoing imperial violence of the US administration. In lieu of an ethically responsible US administration managing the political atrocity of Abu-Ghraib, the patriotic citizen is left in crisis to deal individually with feelings of complicity and guilt, resulting in a search to recoup an imagined compassionate, Liberal-America, through aesthetic means instead. Thus, I am arguing that to gaze upon pain-in-paint as opposed to the 'stark reality' of the photos enables a process of posttraumatic therapy and guilt relief in which the viewing American citizenry can start to regain a sense of security, normalizing their nationalized subjectivity in an act of 'self-securitization' (Edkins 2002).

I have already argued that the journalistic comments cited above reflect an appropriative logic of 'stealing the pain of others'. A reading of Chow's work (2006: 34) can enrich our understanding of how these responses are symptomatic of a Western compulsion for self-referentiality as well as the 'normativization of war'. When daily life is seen through the lens of war, it "becomes the positive mechanism, momentum and condition of possibility of society". Chow explains that war is not only knowledge producing but is itself *self-referential,* where war comes to "represent not other types of struggles and conflicts…but war itself" (ibid: 33). Seeing daily political life through the normativized lens of war, the American public comes to uncritically accept this position of self-referentiality through Empire's border production in

war imagery: to find one's self on the side of viewing the atrocities and brutalities as opposed to being on the screen or canvas ourselves; to come to know war and violence tangentially through the imagery produced not only by the state and its media outlets but by the public's own cultural/aesthetic productions.

As such, the seduction project of Empire is intimately linked to an empathetic and appropriative form of aesthetics which produces a western society of safe, law abiding, neoliberal subjects who accept the destruction of the other as part-in-parcel of their own privileged lifestyle (Agathangelou *et al* 2006, 2008). Cultural production and consumption can thus be read as a form of dealing with, managing or escaping from pain and trauma of the normativization of war. Whether or not they are productive, the Botero paintings facilitate a kind of therapeutic, aesthetic relationship to cope with the political pressures of living under American Empire. Yet, where the pain produced by Empire's relations resonates within its citizenry, the self-referential positioning of the viewer of violence enables an ontological sense of safety. This is the process of convincing one's self that 'we are safe' on the 'other' side of the image: aesthetic viewings of violence as a self-securitizing mode of being.

Where Empire manages images of violence, the American public must mediate their own feelings of pain in the struggle of expression through similar aesthetic means. As such, I position self-referentiality as a technology of Empire that disciplines inward looking as opposed to other-regarding subjects and furthermore seduces the citizenry with promises of global peace, security and the greater good for us/US. Botero's work presents itself as an aesthetic, political reaction to the atrocities of war. However, its consumption might be better read as viewing-as-confession: sating a society's pain by the shock of their own administration's violence. If we are to identify an aesthetic project of Empire, then we need to assess how *artrocity* functions as a specific technology to maintain and reproduce power relations. In order to assess the function of *artrocity* as a technology of Empire and the violence inherent in this production, I turn to the tension in Botero's aestheticentric strategies of queering and Christianizing the original photos.

Botero's Aestheticentrism

> We know torture exists everywhere, but the country that
> represents human rights and democracy like in this country, all
> these things that I admire, and the idea of compassion that
> conveyed America, it was the shock, it was because it was
> unexpected, the sympathy for the US fell all over the world, this
> is the biggest damage to the representation of the country.
> (Botero 2007)

In order to speak about his own anger with the atrocities at Abu-
Ghraib Botero is at an impasse in attempting to bring dignity to the
Iraqi prisoners he desired to paint. To be sure, Botero states, "anti-
American it's not...anti-brutality, anti-inhumanity, yes... I have a great
admiration for this country. I'm sure the vast majority of people here
don't approve of this." (Botero cited in Baker 2007) It is clear from
Botero's interviews that he was motivated by empathy for the suffering
of the prisoners at Abu-Ghraib. Botero states:

> [T]his was terrible, there was no respect for these old people,
> that's why some of my paintings, I tried to make them look like
> prophets, to show that these people in their power have a
> tremendous dignity and this was treated in a terrible way by
> ignorance, it was something important to give back dignity to
> these people (Botero 2007).

Inspired to 'give back dignity' to the prisoners of Abu-Ghraib,
Botero's aesthetic strategies to reframe the tortured bodies nonetheless
belie his benevolent motivation. The paintings maintain the subjects in
maligned sexual positions but deny the affective recirculation of
humiliation and shame, those qualities that gave the photos their
'shocking' quality. As such, in this contradictory move, Botero provides
the prisoner a status of dignity not by removing them from the violent
conditions of humiliation and shame produced by the sexualized
practices they were forced to participate in, but instead, through its
memorialization as high art.

Let me point to some aesthetically motivated, strategic shifts that
can be traced from the photographic representation of Abu-Ghraib to

Botero's work. First, as recognized above, the bodies of the tortured are 'volumetric', inhabiting a large part of the canvas in order to create a sense of confined space; second, for the most part, the figures of the torturers are absent, replaced by limbs or a stream of urine that enter from off frame, or symbolized by the barred teeth of rabid dogs; third, the faces of the tortured are given greater focus by the use of blindfolds and when depicted with sandbags, the face is only partially covered; fourth, the colours used are muted - ochres, grays, or dull greens - unless splashes of red are used to denote blood or to bring attention to the undergarments or hoods worn by the prisoners; fifth, in relation to colour, the majority of bodies are seemingly those of white males, given pink or yellow hues as opposed to the brown bodies of the Iraqi prisoners.

In identifying the shifts enacted by these paintings, I argue that Botero practices what Karatani (1998) has called aestheticentrism: the aesthetic love of the other while simultaneously bracketing any form of alterity, strangeness, discomfort or disinterest. According to Karatani, pleasure is derived not from the object itself but the act of bracketing specific reactions such as displeasure, disgust, discomfort and threat in order to hierarchize beauty and form over the complexity of content. He observes further that the aestheticentrist engages in a bracketing but *always forgets to unbracket* taking the reality of the other for what is achieved during the bracketing in order to maintain the act of worship. As such, Karatani states that "aestheticentrists always appear as anti-colonialists" in their ostensible respect and admiration for the bracketed other (ibid: 153).

While Botero empathizes with the sufferers, seeking to give dignity back to the prisoners as a dutiful anti-colonialist would do, he is – as described in his choice for art over subject matter – more concerned with aesthetic representation (form) as opposed to maintaining the stark reality of the original photos (content). Pleasure and beauty are central concerns for the aestheticentrist:

> "Art is supposed to give pleasure," Botero said – even art like this. "You look at the crucifixion and think, it's so beautiful," he explained, but at the same time, the more closely you study suffering, the more "you feel it. You *feel* it." (Jones 2008)

Botero must bracket the various sensations of alterity in the original photos by engaging in a strategic erasures, substitutions and restagings of the events of Abu-Ghraib. As Botero privileges form over content, composition becomes a pertinent issue in the sexual positioning of whitened bodies to elicit visual pleasure.

In analyzing the Abu-Ghraib images, Puar (2007: 85) explains that the sexualized pyramiding of brown bodies gives a symbolic and political effect of "fusion, hierarchy, singularity and collectivity" representing a known and controllable enemy. In Botero's paintings, the austere pyramiding seen in the photos are bracketed and effectively replaced by aesthetically thoughtful composition of voluptuously smooth – that is to say clean and hairless – white bodies strewn delicately over one another (see Botero, *Abu Ghraib 57*, 2005). Swollen as opposed to skeletal, the voluptuous bodies garner a sense of floating atop one another as opposed to the hard, cramped stacking seen in the original photos. The differing shades of skin tones used for the bodies produce an identification of individualized suffering more palatable to the white, patriotic American gaze as opposed to the threatening collective fusion of brown, possibly terrorist mass body pilings of the Iraqi prisoners.

Botero explains that the volumetric style he uses is intended to give the bodies 'sensuality' (Finemann 2006). Bracketing the hard, skeletal frames of the brown bodies and substituting the softness of the whitened male bodies – along with the fact that they are in drag – engenders a *homonormativized* queering of the subject in an attempt, I would argue, to remove alterity and threat of the originally queered Iraqi bodies. The aesthetic pleasure taken from the orgy of white voluptuous bodies as opposed to pyramided brown emaciated bodies speaks to a homonormalized and homonationalist viewer whereby the pain of the sexually tortured brown bodies in the original photos produces affects of shame, humiliation and guilt to circulate in the viewer appropriating their suffering for themselves, the substituted eroticized white sensual body (i.e.'good gay citizen') enables the viewer to obstruct this circulation by bracketing the alterity of the threateningly queered Iraqi subjects in order to gain pleasure from images of sexual acts (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008).

If we are to take the argument that the pleasure taken from Botero's work is exemplary of a voyeurism connected to BDSM culture that

plays with experiences of pain and sexual tensions, then it must be acknowledged that BDSM practices are dependent on a contract of trust by both the delivering (tops) and receiving (bottoms) to derive pleasure from the acts of domination and submission. Whereas the reaction of disgust to the original photos are unable to fulfill this engagement – since the subjects of torture are the accused terrorists whom cannot be trusted – to allow the viewer the ability to 'get closer to the agony of the victims' is to enable, as Botero has done, a trustable whitened, sensual subject in order to engage in the stealing of the other's pain. Refigured through a homonormativization of the Iraqi prisoners recalling BDSM tropes, Botero shifts the humiliating sexual practices of the original photos into a seductive, sexualized gay orgy of white male bodies toying with the subject of pain and torture not as political and ethical atrocity but instead as forms of sexual, aesthetic pleasure.

Yet, the homonormativized queering strategy still produces a resonance of alterity particularly in the homophobic, patriotic American viewer which Botero must aesthetically manage. Botero then, must seek out other strategies of bracketing in order to erase this remaining alterity in order to further intensify a perception of artistic beauty. An important bracketing is found in his reframing of space where Botero's choice of colour and texture transforms the stark, grimy and blood stained atmosphere of the Abu-Ghraib prison into a cleaner, softer, woody, *church-like* space removed of blood and dirt. (see Botero, *Abu Ghraib 65*, 2005) A comment made by Rasmussen, noting similarities between the Abu Ghraib works and the pain and suffering in depictions of Christ, is unintentionally insightful here: "He's using the iconography of Christian art… In a way you could argue that he's making martyrs out of Arab men" (International Herald Tribune 2007).

This rather outrageous statement does well to elucidate the underpinning function of empathy to save the sufferer through aesthetic means. The relationship between Botero's work and Christian iconography, is explained in another interview where Botero notes that while he did not intentionally paint the Abu-Ghraib series to mimic images of the suffering of Christ, he does realize that his childhood in Columbia surrounded by the atmosphere of the church and his training in Italy surrounded by religious iconography must have informed his art (Berger 2007, see Botero, *Abu Ghraib 66*, 2005).

The visual and symbolic 'transfiguration' from accused terrorist to Christ-like figure portends a distinct shift in how affect is mobilized in the interaction with the subjects of Botero's work vis-à-vis the Iraqi prisoners in the photographs. With the photos the viewer is 'disgusted with their stark reality rather than moved to empathy'. Botero's whitened bodies of the Iraqi prisoners, in their similarity to the whitened of images of Christ, enable the viewer to come 'closer to the agonies of the victims to internalize their suffering as our own'. As Finemann pointed out above, it is the 'neutralization of their otherness' which strategically allows the American and European viewer (i.e. white Judeo-Christian) to identify more readily with the victims. As such, the possibility of aesthetic identification with the victims necessitates violent strategies of racial erasure, homonormativization and Christian reframing in order to elicit an affective response of empathy.

In addition to the transfiguration of accused terrorist to Christ and the reframing of space, the scale of these paintings is life size. Taken together with the above, this invokes in a kind of religious experience of viewing. Inhabiting the gallery space that confronts the viewer with an overwhelming political atrocity turned iconographic image, one is invited to see the terrorist-as-Christ and thus to confess the 'sins' of Abu-Ghraib in the church-like space represented in the paintings. Read as religious iconography, the power of Botero's art is not only in its beauty, but in its ability to mobilize a "circulation of affect" theorized by Ahmed (2009) that starts with empathy and guilt but ends with relief in order to regain the viewer's position of patriotic American. These affective shifts produced by Botero's *artrocity* incite a kind of viewing-as-confession: the boundaries of friend/enemy drawn by the American War on Terror are re-inscribed such that the sacrifices of the tortured prisoner accused of terrorism enable the viewer to absolve their guilt and ultimately, as Botero himself has done, erase one's complicity in the atrocity.

Against Artrocity

Botero's Abu-Ghraib series presents a peculiar case in relation to the challenges of ethical responsibility in reproducing images of bodies in pain intimated by Dauphinee (2007) in her paper "The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery". Addressing the recirculation of the Abu-Ghraib images intended for 'ethical' purposes,

Dauphinee argues that the use of these images function to reproduce the same logic of violence inherent in the initial proliferation of the photos: "…the circulation of this imagery for the purposes of resistance is always subject to the objectification of suffering that the photographs produces" (ibid: 145). As Dauphinee explains there is an "ethics of choice concerning how we express and interpret this materiality" (ibid: 147).

She explains further that there is always an "absolute state of tension" in the ethical use of these images that render the photographed bodies exposed to our gaze as abject subjects that are nameless and humiliated (ibid). The intensification of shame and humiliation comes not only from the sexual acts the prisoners were forced to participate in but also by the visual recording of the prisoners and the recirculation of these images for the purposes of our critical scholarship. This recirculation sutures our own complicity in these practices. In a sense, the logic underpinning this argument is that we too, as critical scholars, partake in the act of torture itself, contradictorily taking up the position of torturer – the subject of our critique – by extending and prolonging the initial acts of violence through a precariously critical usage of the images.

Salient in Dauphinee's critique is that the ethical dilemma of recirculating images of bodies in pain concerns the way we reproduce dominant knowledges that legitimize violent practices in the context of the War on Terror. If we, as critical scholars, attempt to reinterpret and rearticulate the violences inherent in Empire that govern asymmetrical power relations, then it is pertinent, as Dauphinee states, that we "interrogate ourselves as both producers and consumers" in order to question "how, why and with what effects we are employing [these knowledges] in our resistance efforts and to ask ourselves what our answers might mean for others" (ibid: 149).

Yet, where Dauphinee follows Scarry on the impossibility of experiencing or expressing the pain of the Other, I want to resist Scarry's (1985: 4) statement that "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language". I believe that the struggle of life under Empire is our struggle to express the pain we experience through our cultural/aesthetic productions as political acts of resistance. What is it to then share instead of steal the pain of the other and what is at stake in

this act? Does the sharing as opposed to the stealing of pain help us as self-referential subjects of Empire, to link our own privileged struggles of dealing with the aesthetics of pain with other subjects experiencing pain on the frontline in a more transnational manner? Moreover, how does sharing our pain force us to reassess the way we come to represent marginalized subjects of violence and the epistemological/ontological assumptions of race, gender and class that underpin our analysis? Following Chow once more, there is "the possibility of a critical self-consciousness that can be imagined in ways other than the delirium of self-abnegation or self-aggrandizement" (ibid: 22). As such, what we need to concern ourselves with is not the achievement of a proper, objective 'expressibility' that relieves the inherent doubt of pain. Rather, we need to theorize alternative modes of expression – to politicize instead of paralyzing our expressions – to disrupt the normalization of war and pain and its accompanying self-referential mode of being.

In an attempt to rupture the continuing aesthetic compulsion of self-referentiality, I provide what I call a 'counter-aesthetic' to Botero's work – a cultural production against forms of artrocity that seeks to politicize instead of aestheticize atrocities. I find such a practice in Gerard Laing's painting *American Gothic* (see Figure 1). Laing's piece satirizes the famous Grant Wood painting of the same name. Wood's painting portrays an iconic scene of 19th century Americana: a pitch-fork holding farmer stands beside his wife posing in front of a rural home. Instead of the farmer and his wife, Laing substitutes England and Graner, two of the several military personnel convicted for the photos, in their own iconic thumbs-up pose standing behind a pixelized cut-out of the pyramided Iraqi prisoners. Rupturing the domesticity of the original Wood painting, Laing resists the aestheticentric's compulsion for bracketing by embracing the displeasure of placing the figures of torturer and tortured into the domestic space of an American farm.

In Laing's piece, a visual tension is created by the positioning of an off-centre England and Graner partially covered by a pixelized image of the tortured prisoners which creeps onto the scene from off frame. This stark juxtaposition ruptures the visual and political symmetry of the original painting which depict the traditional roles of man and woman in American life. Laing's resistance to bracketing obstructs our capacity for identification with the subjects as we are first unable to reconcile the placement of England and Graner in military garb with the 'secure'

space of rural America. Laing disruptively signals that Empire is here and now, in our own backyards, in our own homes. We cannot identify with the space without first confronting the jarring pixelization of the bodies that are foregrounded in the composition. The pixelized bodies become an obstruction to identification and thus, our ability for self-referentiality. A stray hand obstructs the only opening in space on the left side of the painting. We do not know where we are supposed to stand in relation to the image; though it is familiar to us, it renders the self insecure and unstable, unable to empathize.

(Figure 1 – Laing *American Gothic*, 2004)

References

Agathangelou, Anna M. and Kyle D. Killian. "Epistemologies of Peace: Poetics, Globalization and the Social Justice Movement." *Globalizations* 3, no. 4 (2006): 459-83.

Agathangelou, Anna M., M. Daniel Bassichis and Tamara L. Spira. "Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire." *Radical History Review* no. 100 (Winter 2008): 120-43.

Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117-39

Baker, Kenneth. "Botero's distinctive style evokes moral energy". *San Francisco Chronicle* (Jan. 29 2007). Accessed Jan. 2009 <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/01/29/DDGCCNQ6E61.DTL&type=art>.

Berger, Rose Marie. "The Poetics of Botero's Abu Ghraib Paintings." *Foreign Policy in Focus* (2007). Accessed on Jan. 2009 <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4856>.

Botero, Fernando. "Interview: Fernando Botero's 'Abu Ghraib' – A Conversation with the Artist" (2007). Accessed Jan. 2009, <http://webcast.berkeley.edu/event_details.php?webcastid=19149&p=1&ipp=15&category=>.

Campbell, David and Michael J. Shapiro. "Guest Editors' Introduction." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 131-37.

Chow, Rey. *The Age of the World Target*: Duke University, 2006.

Danto, Arthur C.. "The Body in Pain," *The Nation* (2006). Accessed Jan. 2009 <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20061127/danto/print>.

Dauphinee, Elizabeth. "The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery." *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 139-55.

Edkins, Jenny. "Forgot Trauma? Responses to September 11." *International Relations* 16, no.2 (2002): 243-56.

"Fernando Botero's Abu Ghraib Art Claims Spot in Nation's Capital," *International Herald Tribune* (2007). Accessed Jan. 2008 <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/11/05/arts/NA-A-E-ART-US-Abu-Ghraib-Art.php.>.

Finemann, Mia. "Cartoon Violence: The True Power of Fernando Botero's Abu-Ghraib Paintings" *Slate* (2006). Accessed Jan. 2009 <http://www.slate.com/id/2153674/>.

Jones, Honor. "Botero's Abu Ghraib." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 84, no. 1 (2008): 149-61.

Karatani, Kojin. "Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism." *Boundary 2* 25 no. 2 (1998): 145-60.

Puar, Jasbir K. and Amit S. Rai. "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots." *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 118-48.

Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Heteronationalism in Queer Times.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Razack, Sherene H. "Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (2007): 375-94.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies.* London: Sage Publications, 2002.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Vallen, Mark. "Fernando Botero Paints Abu Ghraib." *Mark Vallen's Art For a Change* (2005). Accessed Feb. 2011 <http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2005/04/fernando-botero-paints-abu-ghraib.html>.