

METRO PICTURES

Fowle, Kate. "Robert Longo," *Garage* (Fall/Winter 2016): 146-155.

GARAGE

Robert LONGO

KATE FOWLE MEETS ROBERT LONGO. Born in Brooklyn in 1953, Longo was among the five artists included in the seminal 1977 exhibition *Pictures* at Artists Space in New York. The subsequently named Pictures Generation were proponents of appropriation as an art form, reasserting the immediacy and impact of the image after minimalism. Forty years later, Longo's drawings, sculptures, videos, and performances are infamous for how they invent, cull, and recycle images from an expansive cultural visual cache to comment on their potency, while examining the role of politics and power in society.



LONGO retrospectives include exhibitions at The Menil Collection in Houston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Isetan Museum of Art in Tokyo. He gained accolades for his feature film *Johnny Mnemonic*, as well as for music videos for New Order, Megadeth, and R.E.M., among others. In the late 1970s, he and the artist Richard Prince formed the band Menthol Wars, and he plays in the X-Patsys with his wife, the actress Barbara Sukowa, and the artist Jon Kessler. Longo, who also directs shoots for fashion magazines and brands, can be considered one of the few artists who truly works across all art forms today.

Longo sat down with Kate FOWLE, chief curator of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, to discuss his forthcoming show, *Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo*, which he also co-curated. Opening in Moscow in September 2016, the exhibition will present his work alongside that of the Spanish old master Francisco Goya and the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, revealing unexpected connections between the artists – from their shared pleasure in picturing the world in black and white, to the ways in which artists give us fresh perspectives on the age in which we live.

Kate FOWLE One of the great things about developing a project with you is the opportunity to see the works as they are made in the studio. In the past few months I've watched *Untitled (Pentecost)* come to life, literally emerging from the surface of the paper. How did the idea for the work come about?

Robert LONGO I've always really liked watching sci-fi movies with special effects, and I've enjoyed witnessing the evolution of special effects over time. *Untitled (Pentecost)* is based on a still from a recent sci-fi film called *Pacific Rim* [2013]. It's not a great film, but I loved the gigantic robots constantly fighting, trying to save the world from aliens. The robots are controlled by pilots who sit in their heads. Actually, the robot I'm drawing only has one guy controlling him, named Stacker Pentecost. I identified more with that.

KF What do you mean?

RL I find the idea of the little guy controlling the monstrous robot compelling. It seems Freudian, like the id or the libido. One day I was surfing

the internet and this picture appeared and I thought, "Wow, that's it!" The image moved me. It reminded me of my large-scale church drawings from around 2010, *God Machines*, and of a piece I made in 1982, *Now Everybody (for R. W. Fassbinder)*. However, this work is unlike any other piece I'm making at the moment. Yet, as an image, it captures something of our time, a representation of technology going berserk. It's only a split second in the film.

KF It's an apocalyptic image, but it seems to me that it is actually out of time. It could be in the past, present, or future. In that way would you say it's an archetypal image?

RL Yes, that's partly the point. It was when I was making the series *Magellan* in 1996 that I first started going off on this tangent, inspired by the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious. I kept fantasizing about the images in the collective unconscious of today, when we are bombarded by so many images. Geoffrey O'Brien wrote a brilliant book called *The Phantom Empire: Movies in the Mind of the 20th Century*. It's about the impact of images, both moving and still, and how they quietly, profoundly, almost imperceptibly affect us. With the amount of images we see every day, how do we process the impact they have on us, or deal with any that stay with us? I find that a seminal question.

KF You once said that *Magellan* was about the consequences of images on the psyche.

RL Some images I connect to on a deep psychological level. In 1996, when I was making *Magellan* – which was shortly after I made the film *Johnny Mnemonic* – I realized I had become so pictorially anesthetized that images didn't mean anything to me anymore. I was numb. I wasn't taking on any of their consequences. I don't know why, but I was thinking about the avant-garde filmmaker Hollis Frampton and his last project, titled *Magellan*, after the explorer who first circumnavigated the world. It was intended to be a 36-hour film cycle that would be shown in segments every day for a year and four days, but he never completed it. I decided to do a project where I chose one image a day for a year from the endless stream that came into my life – from magazines, newspapers, books, movies, and television – and make a drawing of it. There was no Google image search then – I didn't use the internet as I do now. There were

ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (CANTALIERE, BIANCO), 2015
CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER, 96 x 70 INCHES
COURTESY THE ARTIST

“With the amount of images we see every day,
how do we process the impact
they have on us,
or deal with any that stay with us?”

ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (PENTECOST), 2016
GARAGE ARTISTS COLLECTIVE
CONCEPT BY THE ARTISTS



Witness
the making of
Robert LONGO's
Untitled (Pentecost), 2016



images of rock concerts, murder scenes, sports events, animals, superheroes, plants, riot police, eyes, mouths, people mourning, people kissing, people being tortured, and more. I would make a picture become accountable for itself – an image that I would take into me, both physically and psychically. Drawing is a really specific way of analyzing something. You digest the image on a molecular level, which I find extraordinary.

The irony is that, in hindsight, *Magellan* has become my image lexicon, the vocabulary for my subsequent work. It's astonishing to realize that our world has not changed much since. If you look at the series, you can find almost all the subject matter I've investigated since *Magellan*. At the same time, the images I was finding in 1996 also remind me of the ones I saw when I grew up. I realized how much all those pictures had an impact on me. There are archetypal images now, which are surrogates for ancient archetypes.



ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (AFTER KLINE, NEW YORK, NY, 1953), 2014
CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER, 10 1/4 × 70 INCHES
COURTESY THE ARTIST

KF Would you say you were copying the images? Did you change them at all?

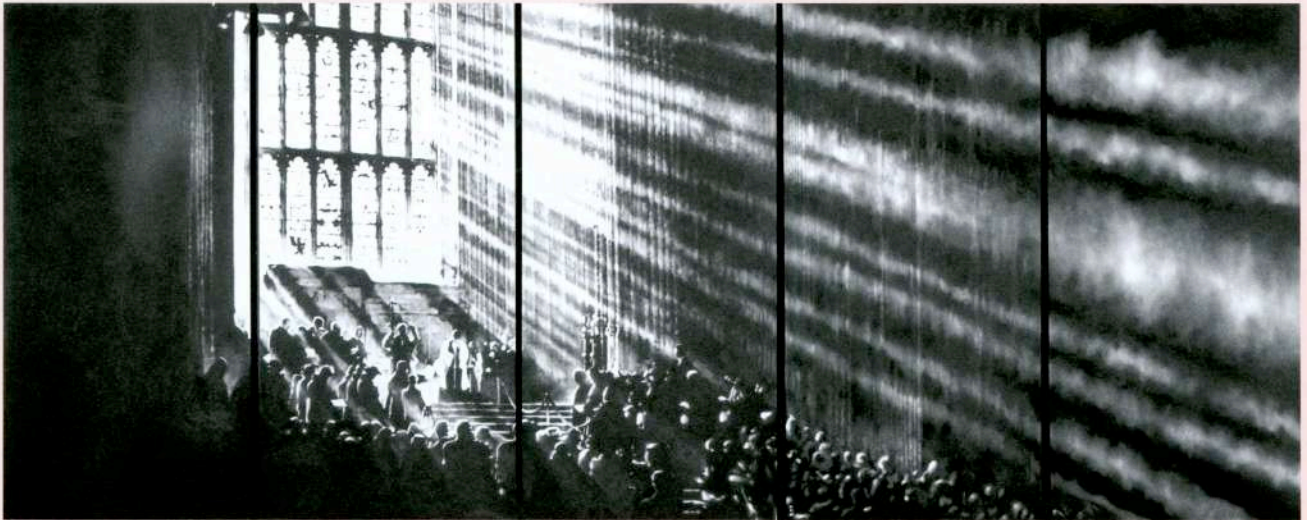
RL I would select an image and crank up the contrast on a really old Xerox machine to get it to the dramatic place I wanted. So, there was a level of manipulation involved, but the pieces were more “direct,” more physical translations of images into a drawing, compared with the way I work now.

KF Because you no longer use the Xerox machine and rely on computers more?

RL Well, I still don't really know how to use the computer, but the ability to search is different. The difference between appropriation, which is how my early work was described, and what I do now, is that, in the past, I would be fanning through, say, a magazine and I would find an image that activated something in me and I would decide to use it in some way, to amplify it. Now I have ideas of specific images I want to find, and I search for them. I still watch television, scour newspapers and magazines, but I have this radar for images I want and I pursue them in many different ways, down to getting the rights for them from the photographer, museum, artist, or producer. Once I have the image, I decide what I want to make of it. The result is often far from the original photograph, even though the drawing appears to be like one. Ultimately, you would never be able to see the image I end up making in real life. The works are highly sensitized translations, which at times become subjectively altered. They are far from copies. They are hyperreal.

There is also the fact that they are drawings. A photograph is recorded in an instant. A drawing takes months to make. That reference to time is important, as is the fact that my works are often composites. They are abstractions, in a way – I have this thing about working between modernist abstraction and classical representation. I want the works to register somewhere in the middle.

KF For the most part, your works are black and white – or perhaps it's better to say that you predominantly work in charcoal on paper – which could be seen as a logical translation of the photos you used from magazines such as *Life*, or the black and white TV images you grew up with. But now the images you cull from are often in color, and in the past few years you have even made works in response to paintings. I'm thinking in particular about the show you made at Metro Pictures in New York in 2014, *Gangs of Cosmos*, where you made 12 charcoal drawings of well-known abstract expressionist works – which all use color – by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Joan Mitchell, that you had studied in the museums where they now hang, as well as in photographic reproductions. The works you made are



ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (CATHEDRAL OF LIGHT), 2008-2009
CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER
FIVE PANELS, 119 7/8 x 298 3/4 INCHES OVERALL
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE HANS MAYER, DUSSELDORF



ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (EDDIE: XII), 2011
CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER, 80 x 70 INCHES
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
GALERIE HANS MAYER, DUSSELDORF

immediately recognizable, but at the same time there is this amplification of detail that makes them perceptibly different from the originals, because you see things you usually don't realize you are seeing. And, of course, they are all rendered in charcoal. On the one hand, the series is this incredible homage to the artists, and on the other, it is an almost forensic study that is mesmerizing in its attention to detail.

RL I started to think that maybe the reason I work in black and white is because I think black and white is the truth, perhaps because, as you say, I grew up in a world where the news and information was given in black and white. On another level, though, the way in which I work with black and white is a highly abstract process. When you take a photograph or painting that is in color and translate it in black and white so that the viewer understands it as color, it changes everything, particularly because the chemical translation is very different from the way the human eye translates something.

KF Can you explain that further?

RL We get permission to take photographs of a work and always use color. Then, if you translate those photos into the gray scale of black and white, digitally or chemically, some colors – dark red and dark blue, for example – look pretty much the same. The machine makes an arbitrary decision, but the human eye can decipher a difference, even if you can't tell what the actual color is when it's taken away. So when I make a drawing I make decisions so as to make the colors different.

KF So you make a decision based on how the retina receives information?

RL Yes, I differentiate color tonally in charcoal, by hand and eye. And through this I have realized increasingly that the drawings are not black and white. Working in charcoal really isn't about this.

KF I remember when you were making the Joan Mitchell piece, *Untitled (After Mitchell, Ladybug, 1957)* (2013), you explained to me that, in the process, you understood how tall she was and the fact that she was right-handed, where the composition started, and even her mood when she was making the work. In thinking about the slippage of past, present, and future in your own works, it struck me that this series amplified

how you "time travel" and immerse yourself in an image and the way it is made, or what it is saying, to really get it to speak from the past, in the present, and resonate into the future.

RL Totally, yes. I remember making the Mitchell piece with more than 50 photographs that we had taken in the museum surrounding the drawing, all taped up on the wall. It looked like a murder investigation. I talked to Paul Auster about Mitchell – who he met – regarding how violent her relationship was with Jean-Paul Riopelle, the French-Canadian painter. People talk about Pollock in terms of how violent his paintings were, but they are like ballet next to Mitchell's. She was like the Sex Pistols in comparison. The level of violence in her paintings is like a knife fight. And what's so great about forensically studying the work is that you learn things, like how long it takes to *draw* a brushstroke versus how long it takes to *make* a brushstroke. And you can tell by the weight of the paint, and by the way she takes a stroke across to the right, which hand she uses. I realized that she must have been a little bit shorter than I am and that she couldn't reach the top of the painting, so she made a couple of brushstrokes at the top just to fill it in. Most of the activity of the painting is basically around the guts and the heart, which I thought was quite amazing. So you start to learn things about these paintings and about the people who made them, their outlook on life.

KF What made you want to focus on abstract expressionist artists for this series?

RL There are a number of reasons, but the starting point was when I read a story about Willem de Kooning inviting Franz Kline over to his studio one night to show him this new toy he had, which was an opaque projector. I imagined them getting drunk and de Kooning saying, "See this little doodle I have here of this woman? I am going to take this and put this in my new toy." And he projected it on the wall and there was this big image. Then he encourages Kline and says, "Why don't you do that, too?"

At the time, Kline was making images of chairs and stuff like that, on pages torn out of the telephone book. So, he projected one of these small works using the opaque projector and the image became much bigger than the canvas, so what he ended up painting was abstracted. The experiment basically exploded into what

Kline became. What hit me was that abstract expressionists, with whom I always felt a kinship, were working with projectors and representational images. I realized that there was a definite connection and I wanted to access that. The first work I made was based on a Kline painting, *Mahoning* (1956). As I drew, it became so clear that the lines came from chairs. They weren't some aggressive, angry gesture. They were chairs! The fact that these forms are representational at their core fascinates me.

There is also a quote by Barnett Newman that I really like. He believed in myth and the unconscious as a driving force and said something like abstract expressionists are, "representational artists working abstractly." I always think that I am an abstract artist working representationally,

KF You've recently started a series based on X-rays of paintings that were taken by the restoration departments of the Louvre and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. These range from Rembrandt's paintings of Christ to van Gogh's bedroom in Arles. In other words, the subjects and artists are diverse, so what is the driving force behind the series?

RL When I found images of the X-rays of the portraits that Rembrandt made of Jesus, I learned he used actual young Jewish men living in Amsterdam as models, but unlike the finished paintings, the X-rays reveal that the subjects appear very Semitic. This discovery was intense, because the final paintings conceal that. What I was seeing in the X-ray was some other kind of truth – that Rembrandt had Westernized this guy, made him European, which clearly he



ROBERT LONGO
UNTITLED (AFTER MITCHELL, LADYBUG, 1957), 2013
CHARCOAL ON MOUNTED PAPER, 69 1/4 x 96 INCHES
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK

so it hit a chord. I also imagine what it was like trying to make art in the early 1950s, following the Second World War – a rejection of European ideas, when the world tried to destroy itself. It must have been an incredibly exciting time to be an artist and to express something meaningful beyond all the rhetoric.

wasn't. It was also exciting that the X-rays accentuated the wood that Rembrandt painted on. When I first saw the grain of the walnut, it looked like that scene in *The Matrix* when everything turns to numbers. It looked as if electricity was flowing through it, seemingly futuristic.

When I began this series based on X-rays, I revisited Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which Benjamin describes an artwork's loss of the aura. This series was a way for me to reclaim the aura. At that same time, I came across a text by a poet who asserted that believing in God is to believe in the invisible. And I thought, "Wow, these X-rays actually enable you to see the invisible." That took me on a whole other tangent in terms of how these works relate to others I have made.

KF That's interesting, because, at the moment, you are making quite different series simultaneously. As well as the X-rays, you are also making large-scale works that relate to current political issues. I'm thinking of the image of the cops from the 2015 Baltimore riots, or the football players from the St. Louis Rams coming out of the stadium with their arms up in support of the Ferguson protests in 2014.

RL Those images are also X-rays, in a way. Each drawing is an effort to see what's really there. I'm not by nature a political person, but I feel I am being compelled to make this work. The imposing scale of my charcoal drawings combined with the medium's inherent intimacy create a sincere attempt to slow down the image, to provoke the viewer to consume the full power of the image. It goes back to *Magellan*, and the fact that when you see these images momentarily in the newspapers and in magazines, you don't realize what they are truly saying. I want to really see these images, and I want to identify what they reveal about our world right now.

KF That is what lies at the heart of the show we are developing for Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. When we started discussing the idea of an exhibition that would juxtapose your work with Eisenstein's films and drawings and Goya's etchings, the concept boiled down to presenting works by artists of different times and continents, who each comment on the social, cultural, and political situation of their time. You have been influenced by both artists – among others, as we have discussed – but in narrowing it down to three people we found a clear trajectory in both impulse and approach. All of the works are black and white, although they are very different in technique and scale, and none is "documentary" in process,

but each artist is creating a commentary on what he sees and experiences in his world.

RL As a kid, I always remember hearing the phrase, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." Similarly, I understand the history of art as a series of rungs on a ladder that each subsequent artist has stepped onto. As an artist, you aspire to establish a rung that future generations have the chance to step onto, to climb higher. When I look at these great artists, their work, and how incredible their visual language was, I am looking for help to get to the next level. When you are younger, you think your life is about moving into the future. When you are older, you realize the future comes at you and it changes the past.

I'm not trying to say I'm equal to these epic artists. Rather, I'm humbled by them and by how important they are to artists, to art, and to history. When I present them in a different context, it is exciting to see their work take on a new life. I've learned so much in our research for the show, from the fact that Eisenstein actually looked to Goya for inspiration in how to frame his shots, to the fact that Goya's etchings – the ones being loaned to us from the Museum of Revolution in Moscow – are so unbelievable in quality and clarity of message. They are so fresh and relevant, it is as if they'd been made yesterday. And then, by slowing down Eisenstein's films so they appear to be still shots, suddenly you see how he saw the world and what he wanted to tell us, beyond the propaganda that he was enlisted by the Soviet government to portray.

By considering again the images we have inherited from Goya and Eisenstein, I have truly come to understand what it is to slow down my own work. Although we are all privy to a barrage of daily images, it is actually possible to seek out the ones that matter. It's about focus and seeking resonance.

