

METRO PICTURES

Miller, M. H. "Bringing Together Eisenstein and Black Lives Matter, in Art," *TMagazine.com* (November 16, 2016).



The artist Robert Longo in his studio, in front of his drawing "Untitled (Shipwreck, Redux)," 2016. Often lumped in with the three other male commercial behemoths of his generation — Eric Fischl, David Salle and Julian Schnabel — Longo has, in the last two years, refashioned his art in a more blatantly political image.

At 63, Robert Longo has become an increasingly topical artist. Often lumped in with the three other male commercial behemoths of his generation — Eric Fischl, David Salle and Julian Schnabel, or "The Four Brushmen of the Apocalypse," as Lynn Hirschberg called them in a cheeky 1987 *Esquire* story — Longo has, in the last two years, refashioned his art in a more blatantly political image. He created a modern classic with his diptych, "Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)," a photorealist depiction of Ferguson, Mo. police officers in riot gear, partly shrouded in a cloud of tear gas, the golden arches of a McDonald's restaurant visible in the background. (He'd follow this thread further in 2016 with a drawing of the Baltimore police during the riots over the death of Freddie Gray.) His "Untitled (Football Players, Rams, Hands Up)," 2016, featured the St. Louis football team's receivers entering the stadium for a game and making the "hands up, don't shoot" gesture that has become a familiar symbol in Black Lives Matter protests. Another charcoal drawing focuses on a close-up of a bullet hole in the window of the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris.



"Untitled (Bullet Hole in Window, January 7, 2015)," 2015-16. "I don't feel like a political person on one hand," Longo says of his newer work, "but I feel anger and rage about the situation."

Longo's current exhibition at the Garage Museum in Moscow pairs some of his recent works with etchings by Francisco Goya and films by Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein is a particularly interesting point of comparison, as Longo has manipulated the films in the spirit of Douglas Gordon's "24-Hour Psycho," slowing them down to the point of making the films into stills that offer only an eerie suggestion of movement. In this context, Eisenstein's work begins to look not unlike Longo's charcoal drawings. With this show, one can't help but think about the artist's fascinating, strange and overlooked background as a filmmaker.

Everything in Longo's SoHo studio — the walls, the floors, even Longo himself, in head-to-toe black — seems to look like a scene from one of the artist's black-and-white works. During a recent visit there, Longo described the period of time between his arrival in New York as a young artist in 1977 and the end of the 1980s as a "jet-fueled nitro dragster." As a result of contemporary art's new commercial prospects during this era, or maybe just due to hubris, many major artists from Longo's generation attempted to make feature films in the 1990s. This included Salle, Cindy Sherman — Longo's former girlfriend, with whom he moved to New York from Buffalo, where they were both in school — and, of course, Schnabel, the only one of the pack whose film career took off.

In the beginning of his career, Longo — who worked for avant-garde filmmakers Paul Sharits and Hollis Frampton in Buffalo — started sourcing his work from pop culture images taken from movies. He wanted to make a film so he could use his own movie stills in his work. "It wasn't easy," Longo says. "I learned how bad films are actually made."

As early as 1977, he had attempted to make a feature film: an eventually aborted project called "Empire/Steel Angel," intended as a vehicle for Eric Bogosian in the role of a Lenny Bruce-esque nightclub performer. The film fell apart, but was eventually reimagined as the 35-minute video "Arena Brains," which satirized the downtown art scene and premiered at the New York Film Festival in 1987.

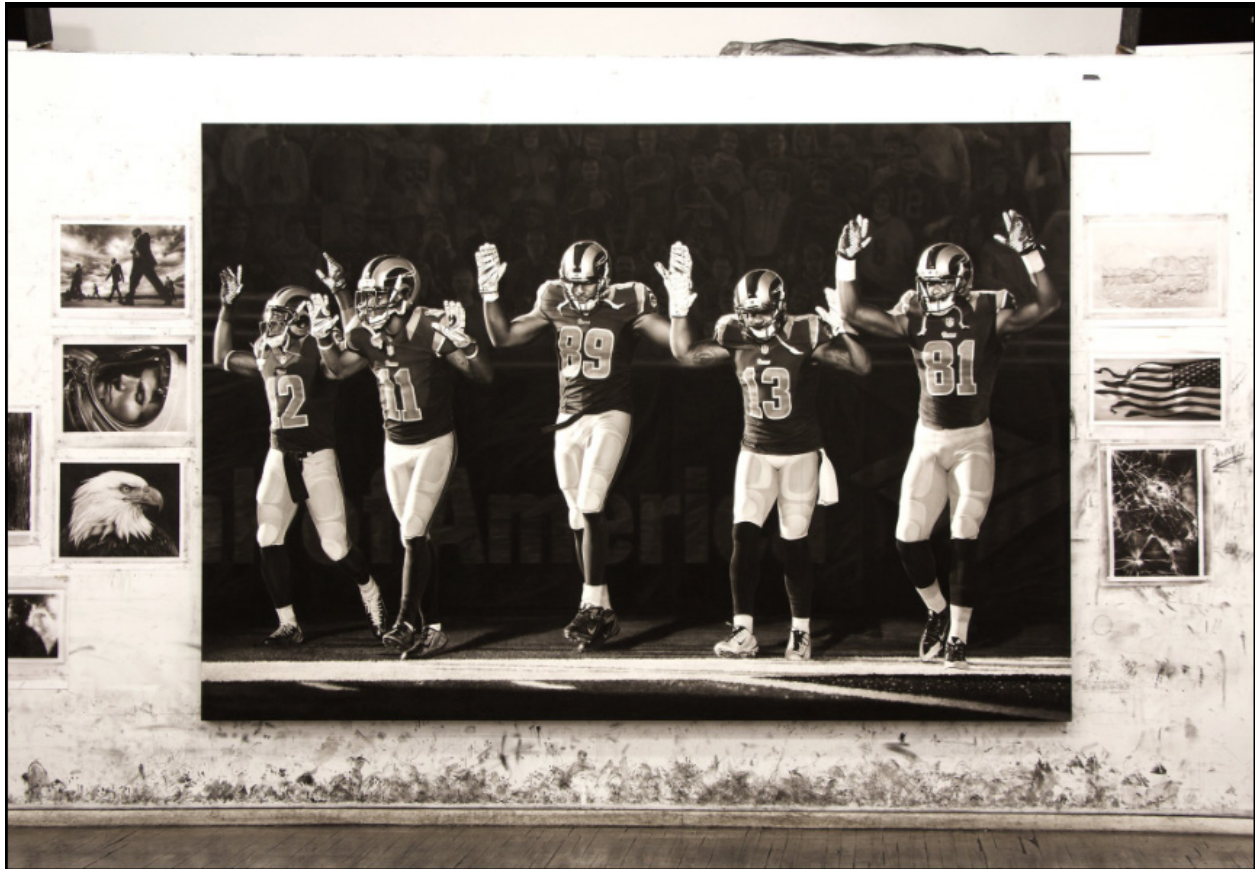


Longo's "Untitled (Pentecost)," 2016.

Around this time, Longo had already become an in-demand music video director, working with R.E.M. on "The One I Love." The videos were an attempt to "teach myself how to make movies," Longo says, and he generally enjoyed the practice; it was on a continuum, he figured, with his other artworks. He particularly liked that, at least at first, the record companies stayed out of his way. But as music videos became a more expensive industry standard, he started to butt heads with label executives. He recalled directing the video for Living Colour's "Middle Man," in which Longo invited the band's friends and family to a club and shot the group playing the song. The record company complained there were too many black people in the video. ("They're a black band!" he says.)

This kind of oversight would seize his experience directing his first — and, to date, only — feature film: 1995's "Johnny Mnemonic," a cyberpunk thriller written by William Gibson and starring Keanu Reeves. The plan was to make a kind of updated "Alphaville," a moody, black-and-white exploration of contemporary technology. But the studio quickly stepped in, demanding numerous rewrites, complaining that the film was too dark. "William Gibson wrote 'Neuromancer' and basically invented cyberpunk, and here were these schmos telling him what to write," Longo says.

As a result of continuous revisions, Reeves didn't know what his character arc was. Meanwhile, the studio forced numerous actors on the filmmakers in order to sell the movie to different territories. One of them was Takeshi Kitano, whose schedule made him largely unavailable to shoot; another was Dolph Lundgren, who was popular in the Middle East, and about whom Longo has little to add. During filming, Reeves became a major celebrity after the success of "Speed," and the distributor of "Johnny Mnemonic," looking for a hit, moved the film up to a summer release and "tried to pump some more special effects and money into the movie" — while also trying to get rid of Longo. Gibson, under pressure for more rewrites, wrote a scene that became the film's self-referential centerpiece.



Longo's drawing "Untitled (Football Players, Rams, Hands Up)," 2016, hanging in the artist's studio. He describes watching the St. Louis Rams on television and seeing the receivers enter the field with their hands up. "It was like John Carlos and Tommie Smith with the black leather gloves at the Olympics," Longo says. "It was so powerful. That image blew me away because the football players were wearing the gear that was so similar to the cops."

"It's a scene where Keanu is underneath this bridge and his car has just fallen and exploded," Longo says. "And I built this hill that looked like the curve of the earth. And he gets up on this hill and gives this incredibly great tirade about how he wants room service. Basically that scene is how William and I felt about that movie. 'I want room service!' I want to make the movie that I want to make!" He compared his experience in Hollywood to going to the store to buy a can of paint, and realizing once he arrived home that he purchased the wrong color. "Multiply that by \$20 million, and that's what it was like."

The film has had the unlikely effect of making Longo into a kind of science-fiction cult-hero. He hasn't ruled out making another movie, though he already has returned to a sci-fi theme in a recent drawing, which is on view in the Moscow show. Roughly the size of a billboard, the work shows a large robot, standing in the ruins of a city, visible through beams of pale light shining among debris. The image is dramatic and frightening and, Longo admitted with a mischievous smile, comes from a scene in the 2013 action film "Pacific Rim," about high-tech robots fighting monsters. "It's a moment when the guy who's driving the robot, he's in the head, and he's this little guy, and he gets out of the head," Longo says. He likens the scene to his own career trajectory.

"There was a point in my life where I started realizing I wasn't driving," he says. "I saw this image and it reminded me so much of my own history."



Longo in his New York studio in 2016. "I have a degree of freedom that I've never had before, and confidence," he says. "I've made lots of mistakes in my life, and in hindsight, there are a lot of things I wish I could change. But it's not gonna work out that way. So I'm gonna try to live as long as I can and utilize what I've learned."



"Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)," 2014. "I was so flipped out when I saw those pictures in the newspaper," Longo says of the Ferguson protests. "I thought it was like Ukraine or something like that. Then I saw the McDonald's in the background, and Exxon, and it was like: What is wrong with the United States?"



Longo on the set of his only feature film, "Johnny Mnemonic," in 1994.



Sergei Eisenstein, "Ivan the Terrible," Part I, 1944, Slowed down version (1% of the original speed), Gosfilmofond (National Film Foundation of Russian Federation) Robert Longo. Film Still.



Longo with Vernon Reid, the guitarist and songwriter for Living Colour, in 1988. The artist directed the band's video for "Middle Man."



Longo is also an accomplished guitarist, and sang in a punk band called Menthol Wars. Here, the band performing at Tier 3 in New York City in 1980, from left: Richard Prince, Joe Hannan, David Linton, Longo and Jeffrey Glenn.



Longo's drawing "Untitled (Cops)," 2016, hanging in the artist's studio. "Those are the Baltimore cops," Longo says. "I thought a lot about Leon Golub when I made that drawing. They're faceless, but you can see them behind these shields — and they look like they're hiding. Like, 'What am I doing?'"