

METRO PICTURES

Goldstein, Andrew. "American Gothic: Artist Robert Longo Gets His Revenge," *Man of the World* (Fall 2016): Cover, 110-127.





American Gothic

ARTIST ROBERT LONGO GETS HIS REVENGE

words by ANDREW GOLDSTEIN photography by BJÖRN WALLANDEP

UNTITLED (ST. LOUIS RAMS/HANDS UP)
2015, charcoal on mounted paper, 65 x 120 inches



opposite page: Artist Robert Longo,
photographed in his studio in front of
UNTITLED (PENTECOST), his 20-foot-long
triptych of the robot from *Pacific Rim*,
New York City, July 2016

The sign on the charcoal-blackened door of Robert Longo's Little Italy studio reads SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES, but on a recent Sunday afternoon, the artist presented another side of what it means to be a refined, if world-weary, badass. Dressed in black and drinking a mug of tea—he foreswore alcohol and drugs twenty years ago—Longo riffed on his work while giving a tour of his expansive atelier, his confident gait somewhere between a shuffle and a swagger. The hyperrealistic charcoal drawings range in subject matter, from an epic tableau of armored riot police confronting Black Lives Matter protestors to a giant, 20-foot-long triptych of the *Pacific Rim* robot surveying the wreckage of his last battle.

Each piece is arresting in its intensity. In one corner, a black-and-white picture frames a close-up view of a woman's full, shapely breasts nearly popping out of her skimpy black dress. "This comes from our culture," he says of the drawing. "It's from when I'm walking around and see a bus ad of a naked lady. Come on! I'm just minding my own business, but I feel it here"—he grabs his crotch—"so this is my revenge on that."

Longo knows, and likes, the taste of revenge. A superstar of the 1980s art world whose work was widely collected and featured in the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale, and two DOCUMENTA shows, he fell off the map by the end of the decade, thanks to his wild lifestyle. Today, Longo, who is married to the German film siren and onetime Rainer Werner Fassbinder muse Barbara Sukowa, is enjoying a virtuoso second act.

His recent black-and-white drawings—of tigers, mushroom clouds, sharks, fighter pilots, and now scenes of political upheaval—

sell for upward of a million dollars and are championed by people with names like Leo, Eli, and Dasha. *Guardian* critic Jonathan Jones has called his drawing of Ferguson police officers holding back black protesters "the most important artwork of 2014." This fall, Longo has a new show opening at Moscow's Rem Koolhaas-designed Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, placing his work alongside that of two other paragons of ferocious intensity: Francisco Goya and Sergei Eisenstein.

Born in Brooklyn in 1953 (he retains the gruff accent) and raised on Long Island, Longo struggled in school as an undiagnosed dyslexic, picking fights to get kicked out of tests. He was skilled at drawing but didn't think much of his ability. "I didn't like the idea of being an artist," he remembers. "To me, artists were those guys with the striped shirts and berets and little skinny mustaches—they just seemed too icky to me." Instead, Longo threw himself into football—he played middle linebacker at the University of North Texas—and played in bands.

But this was the 1960s, and Longo, whose high-school classmate was one of the students killed at Kent State, was drawn to the counterculture. "I was the guy on the football team with the long hair. I wore No. 00. My coach hated me." He became cocaptain anyway, but the game was brutal. "I love the contact of football, but they were really out to hurt you," he says. "I was smoking a lot of pot and taking LSD, and I got hurt. I said, 'Fuck this.'"

Leaving the team, he soon flunked out of school and ended up back in New York City, where he got a job working in a warehouse.

He began taking night classes at Nassau Community College, this time studying art history. "I distinctly remember going from the kid who sat in the back of the class to being the kid who sat in the front. I really wanted to do this," he says. After a summer visiting the museums of Europe and then acing a battery of art-history tests, Longo transferred to SUNY Buffalo to pursue a bachelor's in fine arts.

"It had a really horrible, reactionary art department," Longo says. But it did have a spectacular media studies program, taught by the avant-garde filmmakers—and his future mentors—Paul Sharits and Hollis Frampton. There was also a beautiful art-education major named Cindy Sherman. They fell in love.

It turned out that the two had grown up less than a half hour's drive from one another on Long Island, watching the same classic films on TV. "There used to be a thing called The Million Dollar Movie on Channel 9 that would play the same movie all week—in the morning, afternoon, and at night—so you could see *King Kong* or *On the Waterfront* thirty times if you were home sick," Longo says. In Buffalo, their love of cinema and contemporary art began to merge; when the two moved in together, movie magazines were intermingled with their copies of *Artforum*.

Longo, meanwhile, had become friends with a local artist named Charlie Clough who had a ramshackle, live-in studio in an old ice factory. He was the first working artist Longo had ever met, and soon Longo rented a space of his own across the hall. Longo, Sherman, Clough, and some other friends pursued the idea of siphoning some money from the university's do-nothing art club to



UNTITLED (RUSSIAN SU-30 FIGHTER)
2004, charcoal on mounted paper, 70 x 88 1/2 inches



Longo's studio in New York's Little Italy. opposite page: UNTITLED (PENTECOST) 2016

start an exhibition space in the hall between the studios. When they secured the funding, they started inviting artists from New York City to lecture at the school and display their work at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, their new gallery space in the ice factory. It was 1975, and the artists they convinced to come included Sol LeWitt, Robert Irwin, and Lynda Benglis.

After graduating, Longo and Sherman moved into a loft in the ice factory. Longo, Sherman, and Clough each received state grants and, eventually, National Endowment for the Arts funding to run Hallwalls. In 1976, Longo and Helene Winer, director of the budding SoHo alternative arts group Artists Space, organized a show in Buffalo of groundbreaking work by Troy Brauntuch, David Salle, Paul McMann, and Jack Goldstein. When the curator Douglas Crimp wanted to put together a similar exhibition—the now-legendary 1977 “Pictures” show at Artists Space—he invited Longo to participate.

It was enough encouragement for Longo and Sherman to move to New York City, driving down in the summer and taking an apartment on Fulton Street. Crimp’s show crystallized

an evolving movement of artists who were making art about Hollywood, magazines, branding, and the commercial forces shaping the culture. Longo’s contribution—a cast-aluminum relief modeled after an image of a man in a shirt and tie jumping after being shot in the back, an idea taken from Fassbinder’s *The American Soldier* (1970)—became the most-talked-about work in the show.

For all the attention he received, Longo was still struggling and took a job driving a taxi to make ends meet. In his spare time, he would assist in photographing Sherman posing as different characters against the cinematic backdrop of the city. “I think I knew what she wanted,” he says. “I’d say, ‘This looks like *The Passenger*, this looks like *L’Avventura*,’ and she’d say, ‘No, I want it like this, and let’s shoot it from a low angle.’” These images would enter history as her “Untitled Film Stills” series.

As for his own work, Longo decided to double down on his success from the “Pictures” show and invited his friends—including Sherman, the actor Eric Bogosian, artist Gretchen Bender, and the musician Glenn Branca—up to his roof to take



photographs of them mimicking the dying man in *The American Soldier*, getting them to jump off low ledges to elicit the spastic effect. Back at his studio, he used a graphite pencil to render them on a large scale. “I started to draw because that was the cheapest thing that I could possibly do,” he explains.

Around this time, he and Sherman broke up. When Longo later began dating Bender, they all remained friends and collaborators. In 1981, Helene Winer agreed to show Longo’s new drawings at the gallery she had recently cofounded, Metro Pictures. Calling the series “Men in the Cities,” he paired *The American Soldier*-inspired drawings with clay reliefs of the tops of skyscrapers. “I lived down by Wall Street amid all these white people in suits and ties, and I wanted the buildings to fall down on them,” says Longo. “You realized it was this white world that was basically doomed.”

Right at the beginning of the 1980s art boom, the show was an instant sensation. The dealer Leo Castelli and a young Turk named Larry Gagosian signed him up for shows. At the same time, the so-called Pictures Generation (named after the Crimp show) was making stars of artists such as

Bender, Richard Prince, and Barbara Kruger.

“Julian Schnabel, Neo-Expressionism, and Reagan were bringing money back into the art world,” Longo says. “Greed became good. I always say that Neo-Expressionism was about what art was, and what we were doing was about what art could be. Somehow, I got caught in the spillage of that shit, and I actually started to sell work—and that was a really big break.” The Tate, MoMA, The Menil Collection, and a museum in Japan each bought a piece. He started to get into major exhibitions. In the four years after his Metro Pictures debut, he was shown at MoMA and in the Whitney Biennial, “The New Art” show at Tate Gallery, DOCUMENTA 7, and the Carnegie International.

Longo poured the money he was making back into his work, turning away from “Men in the Cities” to bring together sculpture and painting into aggressive, ambitious combines with increasingly political messages. *Sword of the Pig*, for example, is a triptych of a church steeple, a naked male bodybuilder, and an IBM missile-launching site. Longo describes the image as “a really weird apology for masculine oppression of women.”



BODYHAMMER: GLOCK 19
1993, graphite and charcoal on paper, 97.5 x 49.5 inches



BODYHAMMER: MAC II
1993, graphite and charcoal on paper, 96 x 48 inches



BODYHAMMER: .38 SPECIAL

1993, graphite and charcoal on mounted paper, 96 x 48 inches



BODYHAMMER: UZI

1994, graphite and charcoal on paper, 96 x 48 inches

“You would get the idea when you’re stoned, and then you do coke for the energy to execute it.”

— ROBERT LONGO

“I just saw the money as fueling more of what I wanted to do,” he says. “It was the same with drugs. You would get the idea when you’re stoned, and then you do the coke for the energy to execute it. But, eventually, as a drug addict, you start doing harder and harder stuff, and you realize it doesn’t work anymore.”

Longo was living the rock-n-roll lifestyle. He immersed himself in the experimental music scene and played in No Wave and punk bands, including Menthol Wars (Richard Prince was a fellow member). But the excesses started to take their toll. He and Bender broke up. By the end of the 1980s, Longo’s career was in dire shape. “A lot of the dealers I wanted to work with in Europe realized I was totally out of control,” he says. Reviewing Longo’s 1989 LACMA survey, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith wrote a merciless squib, titled “Once a Wunderkind, Now Robert ‘Long Ago’?” In the article, Smith intoned, “Like a successful movie director, Longo has been able to fulfill every visual dream, and the results are often nightmarish.” The combines, once a hot commodity, fell precipitously from favor. “That whole body of work that happened from 1982 to 1990 seems to be forgotten,” Longo observes.

When the movie producer Joel Silver offered him a chance to film a 1992 episode of *Tales from the Crypt*, he grabbed it. He stayed at Hollywood’s Chateau Marmont and sometimes played basketball with Hans, the twelve-year-old son of Sukowa, who was living nearby.

“Barbara was a pretty hot star at that moment. She was represented by William Morris, and she was being chased by Warren Beatty,” Longo recalls. “The only

contemporary artist she knew was Richter—the guy she was with before me was a friend of his. The only American contemporary artist she knew of was Cindy.” They started dating and got married two years later. It was the second time Fassbinder indirectly changed his life.

Around the same time, Longo met the sci-fi novelist William Gibson, the revered author of *Neuromancer* who coined the term *cyberspace*. Fans of each other’s work, they talked about turning a Gibson short story, “Johnny Mnemonic,” whose hero is a high-tech courier of digital information in a dystopian future, into a black-and-white film à la Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville*. While he and Gibson hoped to raise two million dollars for their project, art collector and early investor Staffan Ahrenberg introduced them to a battery of producers. Suddenly, their little art-house film ballooned into a \$25 million feature.

“The journey of this got weirder and weirder,” Longo says. The fact that it was a big-budget movie with a huge cast and crew “meant a lot of people fucked with it,” he says. Longo got Keanu Reeves for the lead role and then filled out other parts with the musicians Ice-T and Henry Rollins, mostly for fun. But while Longo had secured the involvement of *Raging Bull* cinematographer Michael Chapman, he was forced to go with the Canadian-born DP of *Weekend at Bernie’s* because the producers insisted on filming in Canada. The script was rewritten incessantly. As Longo puts it, “It was fucking horrible.”

Back in New York, Longo was completely lost. “The backlash was pretty severe in the art world—I felt like an outcast. Everyone was

snickering about the movie,” he says. “The United States had pretty much dried up for me at that point.” He and Sukowa had just had their youngest son Joseph and he couldn’t afford assistants to make new art; he could barely get together the rent for his studio. His wife suggested he go back to the studio and just draw.

He did. He made one black-and-white drawing every day for a year—for 366 in total, since it was a leap year—and showed the resulting work at Metro Pictures in 1997. Featuring images from pop culture and his personal life, the show sold poorly, but the work laid the foundation for his next stage. During the 1999 Christmas season, Longo holed up in his studio and found he had no graphite—only charcoal, “which I had always fucking hated because it’s messy and creates all this dust and is so imprecise,” he says. But he didn’t want to leave, so he started to make a large drawing of a wave from a surfing magazine his son Viktor had lying around. (Longo passed down his love of the sport.) “I was thinking about how, in the ’80s, my work was about this kind of meditation on power, and I thought, Well, here’s real power: nature,” he says. Capturing the thrill and the annihilating crunch of a grand, cresting wave, the drawing had an epic scope.

From this first series, Longo moved onto other subjects that also evoked the terror and beauty of the sublime. “I like the idea of violence,” he explains. “I try to make my own work happen every time you look at it—I think that moment of impact is really important.” After 9/11, he accidentally inverted an image of the exploding towers, transforming it into a mushroom cloud, an idea that led to his



A freshly stretched canvas



UNTITLED (NAGASAKI, B)
2003, charcoal on mounted paper, 96 x 72 inches

previous spread: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris, Salzburg, this page: Courtesy of the artist; Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf; and Metro Pictures, New York. opposite page and following spread: Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. last spread: Courtesy of the artist; Captain Pezmel, Berlin; and Metro Pictures, New York.



UNTITLED (IVY MIKE)
2003, charcoal on mounted paper, 82 x 60 inches



UNTITLED (COPS)

2016, charcoal on mounted paper, two panels. overall dimensions: 101 x 140 inches

“Sickness of Reason” series. Slowly at first, Longo’s market began to rush back.

His drawings have become markedly more political, from the Ferguson drawings to his recent Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac show, titled “Luminous Discontent,” which featured drawings of a bullet hole from the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, a crowd of Vatican bishops with their backs turned, and a storm-tossed rendering of Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* that evokes Europe’s migrant crisis.

So distressed is he about America that even Russia has started to look good. Having visited that country to prepare for his Kate Fowle-curated show at billionaire couple Roman Abramovich and Dasha Zhukova’s Garage Center for Contemporary Art, he reports, “We’re just as much an empire as the Soviet Union was.” But while the world

may be in turmoil, Longo is steady, now in his prime. “That’s one thing I can always rely on—the world to provide me with shit for my work,” he jokes.

Today, Longo’s past continues to evolve. “Men in the Cities,” for instance, has become a cross-generational icon, quoted in the *Mad Men* credits and ads for Bottega Veneta. Cindy Sherman recently persuaded him to print photographs of the series’ original source images, which have now been made into a book. He’s thinking of revisiting *Johnny Mnemonic*, too. “I’m either going to reedit it or I’m going to try to make another film,” he says. “Either way, I need redemption with it.” Like the linebacker he once was, Longo can take a hit—and he’s never stopped hitting back.



UNTITLED (LEAVING IRAQ)
2012, charcoal on mounted paper, 70 x 120 inches