

METRO PICTURES

Duray, Dan. "Robert Longo: Men, Monsters, and Museums," *Vice.com* (July 31, 2017).

VICE



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Black Pussy Hat in Women's March)*, 2017. Charcoal on mounted paper, 60 x 106 3/8 inches (152.4 x 270.2 cm).

Robert Longo started working exclusively with charcoal 17 years ago, but in another sense he has always been a miner. His work seeks out the buried parts of American life, bringing them to the surface with a mix of irony and melodrama. Longo himself rose to prominence with his iconic "Men in Cities" series, which depicts figures that appear to be either dancing or falling. They are never happy. This was the early 1980s.

Longo was a pivotal member of the Pictures Generation, so named for the 1977 exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space that blended the conceptual and aesthetic. One of this grouping's defining features was its use of appropriation, so it's hardly surprising that its members also like to collaborate. Longo and Richard Prince photographed many of Cindy Sherman's breakout "Untitled Film Stills," for example, and the crew's collective influence has permeated visual culture to the point that even the dumbest Instagram post borrows their language.

Longo was always less of a kidder than his compatriots. You felt pain for his subjects—you couldn't laugh at them the way you could at Prince's gay, cancer-hawking cowboys. The Whitney Museum of American Art recently installed Longo's *All You Zombies: Truth Before God* (1986), a hegemonic amalgam of national and corporate forces, in seeming response to Trump's election. Even though the sculpture is satirical, initial responses now tend to be emotional, which seems to have always been the intent. That's the thing about being avant garde: it might take some time, but in the end you're always right.

GARAGE: How long have you been making large-scale drawings?

Robert Longo: I started them in 2000 and they've grown in size quite a bit since then. I find it profound that charcoal is one of the most archaic mediums in existence, the medium of cave drawings, a 30,000-year-old medium. I like that I'm drawing with dust and powder and burnt material. When I first started working with it I really hated it. I thought it was incredibly imprecise.

You've raised the important question of how one maintains integrity, irony, and subtlety while making political work. I saw your big American flag sculpture at Petzel a few years ago, for example. That's a strongly political work that anyone can get. But how do you walk that line, in terms of not being too explicit?

I came up during the time of Reagan, the early version of Trump. Reagan claimed he wanted to return America to "traditional values." I always thought that was really weird. Did he mean going back to slavery? Reagan, who couldn't even say the word *AIDS*. My work has always had a political edge to it, but now in this particularly heinous time, my rage has amplified the political content. But I think the first thing is not to preach. That's the worst thing.

My recent exhibition at Metro Pictures, "The Destroyer Cycle," contained images that we see on television. What I'm trying to do is select from the enormous onslaught of images that we see on a daily basis and slow them down. Artwork requires more time than news and television do. The viewer must focus. My work is an attempt to slow things down and look at them through the arduous process of charcoal drawing.

Although I am often depicting horrifying moments in history, I find incredible beauty in these images. I love Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* (1814). How does an artist make great art from catastrophes? Each drawing has a different strategy. The images that I make can never be photographs because they've been so manipulated by how I change them. I amplify the drama in them and make them hyperreal; they're not photorealistic at all.

There's a work in this show called *Untitled (Raft at Sea)* (2016–17). I saw a photo of refugees on a raft in the Mediterranean. It was in a brochure for Doctors Without Borders, an organization with which I work. I contacted the photographer, Will Rose, and purchased the image from him, and I combined it with a photo I took at my beach house on Long Island, adding ten feet of water to the original image to make the audience feel as if they were in the water too. I learned that normally it cost \$2,000 to go on the raft, but if you were willing to go out when the seas were particularly rough (as in this image), you only paid \$1,500. And the life preservers were stuffed with newspapers.

How much time do you spend with each drawing?

That one particular drawing took about five months. I try to work on three or four drawings at the same time. I have assistants. It's a very traditional studio situation.

My assistants become like how painters have favorite brushes. I have guys I know that are really good at doing water or really good at doing hair. I want to blow you away with the craftsmanship of the technique of the work but at the same time, ironically, it's not that important to me. The images are far more important than technique. At the same time, people often walk into the gallery and go "Oh, these are photographs," and leave. You realize how little people actually *look*. Artists are somewhat blind in that they can't see what the viewer sees.

I only have the analogy of working on articles, but the more time I spend with a subject, the more I understand it. Did working on the topics of politics and refugees bring you to a new understanding of the situation? Because while very few people in our sphere are anti-immigrant, it tends to feel a superficial empathy.

Of course, because my drawings require in-depth research. I want to learn about what it is I'm doing.

I think sometimes that what I'm doing comes from a weird need for atonement. When I was drawing the prisoners going to Kandahar Airport, it was an incredibly laborious process because the photo was taken at night with a telephoto lens. These men were being led onto an airplane and taken away to a black site where they were probably going to be tortured. There were these ominous figures, the Americans in the background, and this line of people. This show has so many groups of figures that I can't help but think about *The Burghers of Calais* by Rodin, and about the idea of sacrifice and giving up your life for things that you believe in. I find the refugees incredibly heroic.

I don't know that a lot of people would call them heroic, because they've been thrust into this situation, rather than chosen it. Where do you see the heroism?

Because they're getting on this fucking boat and going into the unknown. I mean, could you do that?

Maybe if I had to? No, I can't say that I would be able to bear it, no.

Many are doing this to get a better life for their families. I think that's heroic.

I admire them for the same reason I admire the protesting football players in my drawing of The St. Louis Rams. A couple of years ago I did a drawing of the riot police in Ferguson [Missouri] and this piece was at an art fair, which some people said really wasn't a good idea. And I said fuck that, it's where it belongs. When I saw those photographs of the riot cops in the newspaper, I thought maybe the images were from Iraq or Ukraine. Then I noticed in the background I could see McDonald's and Exxon logos, and it completely freaked me out that it was in America. So I think the outrage around that drawing was because I amped up these militarized cops. I did research about why the cops were so militarized, and about how they were trying to obtain leftover equipment from the war in Iraq.

Football and sports are really big things to me. This image of the St. Louis Rams receiving corps was really powerful. If you know anything about sports, the receivers are the most eccentric guys on the team, and the receiving corps, when they were being introduced at the stadium in St. Louis, all came out with their hands up. It blew me away. I thought this image was as powerful as John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the '68 Olympics in Mexico City holding their fists high in the black power salute during the national anthem.

I'm also very conditioned, image-wise, politically, from a perversely early age. I played football. I was a jock, but I was kind of a hippie jock.

What position did you play?

I was the middle linebacker.

Wow, that's you hitting guys, right?

Yeah. I really loved the violence of it. I went to high school with Jeffrey Miller, the kid who was pictured on the ground with a girl crying over him at the Kent State shootings in 1970. My life changed radically that year. I became one of the guys that organized the protest in the high school. That photograph truly affected me. I made this connection to how indelible this image was in the media. It really planted something profound in me.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Riot Cops)*, 2016. Charcoal on mounted paper, two panels, 101 x 140 inches (256.5 x 355.6 cm).

You mention the trenchant nature of certain images and I wanted to bring up this sculpture of yours that the Whitney Museum recently put on its terrace.

My monster, yeah. It's called *All You Zombies: Truth Before God* (1986). The Whitney called me to tell me they were installing it, and I thought: this is really great, you're going to put it up right before the inauguration? I thought it was fucking great. A monster in the White House, and a monster in the museum.

The relevance of a lot of your older stuff, like "Men in Cities," feels ever-growing. Is there anything that you feel has been overlooked?

I think there's a whole body of work that doesn't exist in people's minds and that's "The Combines," a series I worked on from the early to late 1980s. It's the work I did after "Men in Cities." They have their place in the world right now.

But these charcoal drawings are also going to be featured in a show at The Brooklyn Museum, right? Alongside Francisco Goya and Sergei Eisenstein?

Yeah actually [Garage Museum of Contemporary Art curator] Kate [Fowle] had this idea. I've known Kate for ten or so years and she has the courage to tell me when she doesn't like something. She's brilliant.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Raft at Sea)*, 2016. 140 x 281 inches (355.6 x 713.7 cm) overall.

When she proposed the idea for this show, and then as we started to do it, I got more and more involved and ended up co-curating it. I told her about some Eisenstein drawings that I'd seen in a book that I really wanted to see in the flesh. So she arranged for both of us to visit the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art to see them. We couldn't get any loans of Goya paintings, but we were able to borrow some etchings. They're so intense. One thing that Goya, Eisenstein, and I have in common is that we all work in black- and-white, and our work is a way for us to respond to the times in which we live. We made a selection from four series of Goya's etchings, and they're presented alongside several Eisenstein films that we slowed down to one frame every six seconds, also removing the sound and the subtitles. The intention is for the viewer to see the Eisenstein films as just images.

When I was in college in Buffalo, I got really involved with structuralist filmmakers, and I worked for Paul Sharits and Hollis Frampton. There was this guy there, Ken Jacobson, who was the first guy I ever saw who used an anamorphic projector to project films one frame at a time. I thought this was the coolest thing I'd ever seen.

People think I got the idea to slow the film down from Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, but the idea is much older than that. I find that the composition of the Eisenstein images is so spectacular. Slowing them down so the viewer can see each frame is essential.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Prisoners, Kandahar Airport)*, 2016. Charcoal on mounted paper, 92 x 143 inches (233.7 x 363.2 cm).

You and Eisenstein have a very similar eye, in terms of framing, in terms of drama, in terms of tension, in terms of aesthetics, and in terms of structure versus lack of structure. That rotted meat in *Battleship Potemkin* seems like something you'd make a drawing of. Did he inspire that in you? What do you attribute that to?

I love his composition, so absolutely. The graphic quality and the formal elements of his images are spectacular. Interestingly enough, Eisenstein was highly influenced by Goya. I met this Eisenstein expert, Naum Kleiman, in Moscow, and visited Eisenstein's apartment. He had all these books about Goya there. There is one particular sequence that Goya painted, in a work owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, in which six paintings function almost like a storyboard. If you look at Goya's prints in that cinematic way, you can see the impact that this work had on Eisenstein for sure. Art is all about influence. It's like a ladder that you're always trying to climb, and if you're lucky, you get to establish a rung of your own.

Speaking of film and things from your career that might be worth a revival, do you think *Johnny Mnemonic* could have another life?

It's interesting, the first rock video I ever made was for Golden Palominos. I recently re-watched it and realized that I had made a three-and-a-half-minute version of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. It's ironic, because Vertov was a contemporary of Eisenstein.

Johnny Mnemonic was a really tortuous experience for me. William Gibson and I were trying to make this low-budget, black-and-white, update of Godard's *Alphaville*, or something like that, but we couldn't get enough money. The problem began when the Hollywood studio got involved, and we lost our original intent. *Johnny Mnemonic* is sixty percent of what I was hoping for. Keanu Reeves had become huge because of *Speed*, so the studio decided to make my movie a summer movie, and they forced me to make these changes. The irony is that people have told me that the film has become a cult classic. When I was in Berlin I met, through Trevor Paglen, the most intense computer hacker guys. And they were all reciting lines from the film to me. It was great.