

METRO PICTURES

Sayej, Nadja. "I'm screaming to the choir' – behind Robert Longo's anti-Trump art," *TheGuardian.com* (April 29, 2019).

the guardian



Robert Longo – *Untitled (White House)*, 2019.

It wasn't too long ago that the New York artist Robert Longo was seated at a boxing match with his son at Madison Square Garden. Longo described his latest exhibition, *Amerika*, which has just opened at Metro Pictures in New York – its layout includes a drawing of the White House, a sphere of bullets and a video of presidential tweets.

"My son turned to me and said: 'Dad, be careful you don't turn into Kathy Griffin,'" recalls Longo, referencing the comedian who was lambasted for her fake photo of a beheaded Trump. "It was a bit of a wake-up call to me, it reaffirmed what I'm doing."

As part of his new exhibition, Longo is unveiling a spooky drawing of the White House as a haunted house under a gloomy sky. "Did you ever see the Disney cartoon movie of *Sleeping Beauty*?" asks Longo, wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses, a black outfit and a rockabilly hairdo, seated in the back room of Metro Pictures.

"The evil queen puts sleeping beauty to sleep and surrounds the castle with this evil, thorny forest," he said. "That's where the idea of this comes from, the person inside the White House is asleep. Something in there is not happening."



Robert Longo - *Death Star 2018*, 2018.

This drawing completes his trilogy of political buildings, alongside the US Capitol building from 2014 and the supreme court piece he made in 2018. "It's in three parts for the three levels of government," he said. "I really have a sense of urgency about the work I'm making right now; my pedal is to the metal."

The title of the exhibition, *Amerika*, is the German spelling of America, referencing the Franz Kafka novel, which traces an immigrant's journey from Germany to New York.

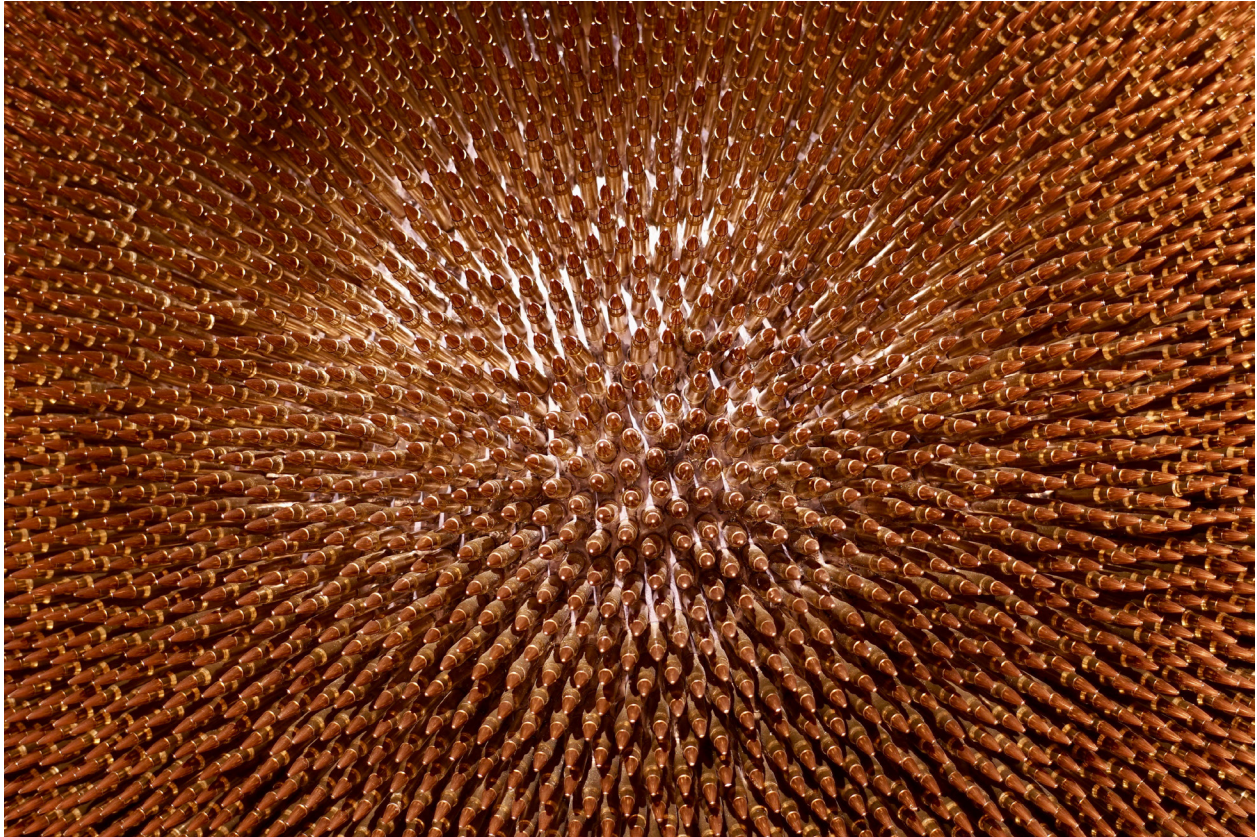
"America is oppressed through a dream. The dream is anyone can become as rich as Donald Trump," he said. "It's problematic, for sure."

In 2014, Longo made a sinking American flag and his 2012 series *Protocol Verso*, paired the flag with photos of protesters.

"There's this saying, those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it," he said. "But those that know history just repeat it."

Also in the exhibition is Longo's *Death Star 2018*, a sculpture representing gun violence statistics in America, made of 40,000 bullets welded to a steel ball (40,000 people died from guns in 2017).

It ties into his 1993 sculpture of the same name, which was made from 18,000 bullets. Gun violence has doubled over the past two decades, so in turn did the number of bullets he used in the artwork.



Robert Longo - *Death Star* 2018, 2018.

It came as a surprise that despite buying almost 100,000 bullets for the sake of art, that didn't raise any eyebrows. "Nobody knocked on my door and said: 'Excuse me what are you going to do with all these?,'" said Longo. "The people selling the bullets asked if I wanted to donate to the National Rifle Association. I said, 'No, I don't think so.'"

"I always loved Caravaggio and this piece is like David with Goliath's head, that's what the ball is, in a way," he said.

This isn't the first time Longo has played with guns. His early series *Men in the Cities*, showed Mad Men-era figures caught in cinematic, almost video game-like moments after being hit by gunshot wounds. Longo came into the limelight again for his 2014 drawing of police battling protesters in Ferguson after 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer.

Longo, a Pictures Generation artist who saw his rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s alongside New York artists like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, is known for fusing conceptual and pop to question authorship, advertising and reappropriation.

"I've become this old man carrying all these newspapers around – that's my job, to catch these images and slow them down. Turn them into this archaic medium of charcoal drawing."

He references Ken Johnson, a *New York Times* writer, who once called his art "as subtle as a head-butt."



Robert Longo – *Icarus Rising*, 2019.

“I think my art is a head-butt, a punch in the face, a kick in the balls, a kick in the ass,” said Longo. “I am preaching to the choir. But I’m not preaching, I’m fucking screaming to the choir. What the fuck are you going to do about this? The sense of urgency that – every day it’s something.”

Longo continually paints the portrait of the daily news cycle in his new film *Icarus Rising*, where he rips up news images – like Trump’s meeting with Vladimir Putin – in slow motion. He also rips up the face of Stormy Daniels, who had an alleged affair with the president.

“I had a bit of a reservation of ripping an image of a woman in half, but I found her quite heroic,” said Longo. “We shouldn’t forget who these people are.”

What separates his White House drawing from the other buildings is the presence of the American flag. Why would he choose to represent the flag on the White House now?

“The thing with the flag is to rise above, like that Black Flag song, the flag somehow rises above it,” he said. “The model of America is great, but we’re not that great. Maga? Great again? We owned slaves 200 years ago. What’s the fucking deal?”