

METRO PICTURES

Viveros-Fauné, Christian. "Robert Longo: *Fugitive Images*," *Artland.com* (December 2019).

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Untitled (Refugees Moonbird Sighting, Mediterranean Sea; May 5, 2017), 2019, charcoal on mounted paper, 97 x 120 inches (image) 246.4 x 304.8 cm 102 7/8 x 125 7/8 inches (frame) 261.3 x 319.7 cm.

Though making beauty out of disaster would appear to be a contradictory pursuit, it boasts a venerable tradition. Goya's depictions of insurrection and bloodletting in the paintings *The Second* and *Third of May, 1808* are a case in point. Ditto for Théodore Géricault's shipwreck *The Raft of the Medusa* and Picasso's antiwar masterpiece *Guernica*. In each of these cases—and in more recent artworks like the music video for the anti-gun violence song "This Is America" by Donald Glover, aka Childish Gambino—catastrophes of various kinds take shape as iconic memorials. Call them epitaphs for humanity's worst mistakes, reappraised, reconceived and reimaged.

Iconic memorials, in the form of giant charcoal on paper drawings of global media images of death and disaster, are this month's monumental fare at Chelsea's Metro Pictures gallery. They have become the stock in trade of artist Robert Longo, a 1980s wunderkind whose Reagan-era pictures of contorted businessmen once drew comparisons to the paintings of commercial juggernauts Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Eric Fischl. Since 2014, Longo has zeroed in on blatant politics as subject matter with remarkable directness and impressive skill. That year the New York artist created a 10-foot wide hyperrealist depiction of a battle-ready phalanx of Ferguson, MO, police; in 2016, using an altered photograph taken by Doctors Without Borders, he drew a 23-foot triptych of immigrants pitching dangerously on a dinghy in the Mediterranean.



Untitled (Marching Soldiers; (Party Foundation Day) Pyongyang, North Korea; October 10, 2018), 2019, charcoal on mounted paper, 81 1/2 x 140 inches (image), 207 x 355.6 cm, 87 3/8 x 145 7/8 inches (frame) 221.9 x 370.5 cm.

For his most recent outing Longo has expanded his aptly named “Destroyer Cycle.” On view are eight microscopically rendered, XXXL monuments to some of our era’s most impactful digital and print pictures. Among these are meticulous drawings of a video-game-like capture of a Russian air strike in Syria, a caravan of thousands of Central American migrants trudging toward the U.S.-Mexico border, a detachment of North Korean soldiers goose-stepping across a parade square, and a group of wintry Jewish tombstones defaced by swastikas. In each, the artist recovers memorable images from a ceaseless torrent of visuals sprung from various media. Consider Longo’s use of scale—as well as “Fugitive Images,” the title of his current show—as a hedge against forgetting. Both also do double duty by celebrating the enduring act of drawing itself.

An unlikely portrait of the late Jamal Khashoggi proves central to the exhibition. A head-and-shoulders drawing of Longo’s subject disappearing into what looks like a field of CCTV static, his depiction of the murdered journalist gains intensity where smudged horizontal lines of black charcoal and a sea of white paper give way to uncertain grays. The same goes for the artist’s panoramic view of Congress seated inside the Capitol Building’s House of Representatives chamber. Massed together for Donald Trump’s second State of the Union Address, Longo describes mostly dark-suited male figures enveloped in apocalyptic darkness in his mammoth drawing—excepting where a swath of female representatives and lawmakers displays contrasting areas of revelatory light.

Longo’s blurred beacon of light—which is owed to his adaptation of various photographs of congresswomen wearing white to the actual February 5, 2019 event—recalls a line from the poet Marianne Moore: “by darkness a star is perfected.” Moore’s meaning is deceptively simple: absent other characteristics, a thing is known by contrast. In our time of topsy-turvy ethics and news fakery, the law is known by its violation. Similarly, the images Longo rescues from the news and the internet can be recognized by opposition. They glimmer when pitted against a flood of lesser visual data, and blaze like brushfires when elevated by his capacity to transform them into memorials in black, white and every smoky and dappled shade in between.