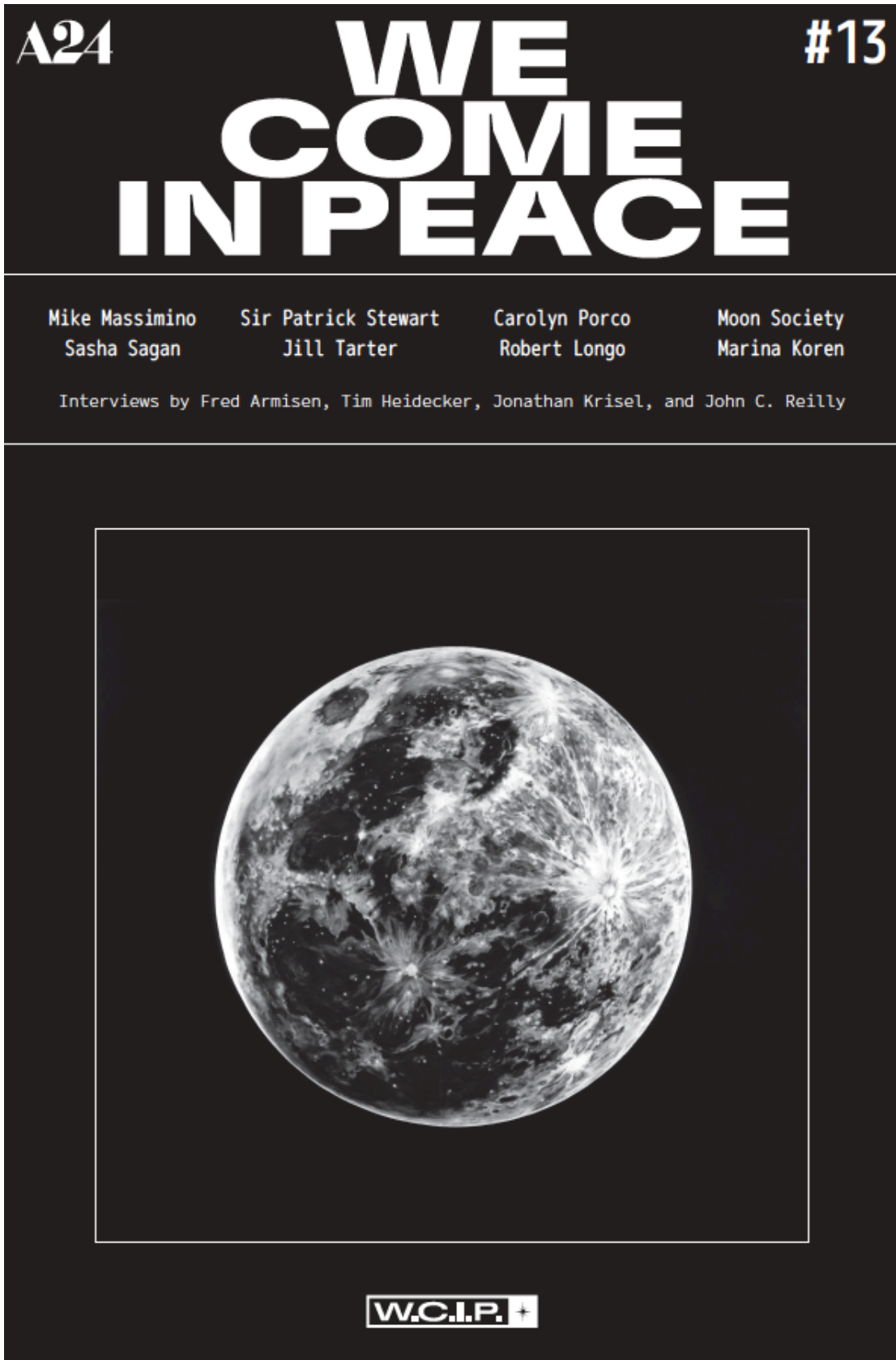


METRO PICTURES

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Robert Longo on drawing the universe in black & white dust

Interview by Fred Armisen

Fred Armisen: I'm in Vancouver, Canada, working right now, and because I live in Los Angeles, I have to quarantine in this hotel room for two weeks, but I'm almost done. I've got a couple more days to go.

Robert Longo: That's difficult. I'm about to fly to California.

Will it be your first time flying [during Covid]?
Yeah. I'm going to get a hazmat suit.

Do it. Go all the way.
Two weeks in a hotel room must be pretty crazy.

It's crazy, but I have an electronic drum kit set up here. So I get to play and practice a little.
I saw you on *Saturday Night Live*, by the way. I've seen a lot of things you

Installation view of *The Outward and Visible Signs of an Inward and Invisible Grace*, 2006, by Robert Longo. Metro Pictures, New York



do. You're really great, incredibly talented, really. A really great voice for this generation, thank you.

Boy, what a thing to say. I'm a huge fan of yours. Your space images are amazing. Where do those live? Where are those pieces?

Some museums, some collectors--they're all over the place. One person has a moon hanging in her house, which is really great. I think I kept one of them, but that's it. I try to keep one of everything. That's my goal. I have three sons, so that's their inheritance.

What is the feeling when it leaves your studio?

I don't mind letting go of the work anymore, but in the beginning, it was a bit weird. I felt like they were taking my children away, but I was very grateful to be getting money. When you start to work in the gallery system, you realize an art gallery is really like an adoption agency.

I've been reading this biography about Edvard Munch. When he sold his work, he was so freaked out by it that he made a copy of it. You know the really famous painting *The Scream*? He had two or three copies of that which he kept. I've made a copy of the Cadillac sinking into darkness. It was a 1960 Cadillac that my father had.

But how do you make a copy? Do you mean physically doing the same exact thing again, or is there a way to do it more efficiently?



They're always slightly different, for sure. I didn't make an exact copy. I flipped it, so it's like a mirror image. It's not the exact image, but yes, the work is time-consuming, it's laborious. It takes a long time to make and it's a very primitive process. I work with charcoal, which is like dust, but compared to oil painting it's much faster. I don't have to wait for things to dry, but they're really big so they take a long time.

I imagine something with charcoal is very delicate to handle. By moving it, does any of it ever change? Does any of the charcoal ever come off?

The work has to get sprayed with a fixative and then gets framed. The drawings end up weighing like 500 pounds. It's ridiculous. It's an incredibly primitive medium. It's like I realize my ancient relatives are the people that drew on the caves, in that strange way. People look so fast at things, but one part of the gag with these really photorealistic works is that when they find out that they're actually charcoal drawings, they stop and they really look at them. Whereas, when they thought they were photographs, they would look at them in the instance of a snap. But when they realized they'd been actually made by hand, they take time to look at it.

What drew you to do the space images?

When I started doing these charcoal drawings, I was a little lost. I'd always surfed as a kid, and I taught my middle son how to surf. So there I am in the water pushing him into the waves and I'm looking at the waves. I made a drawing of these waves, and for some reason, they really caught on fire. I had always been interested in

“I always wondered, when I die and I’m floating out in the world, will I get to see the Earth from far away? These images have a lot to do with making things that I can’t really see.”

power as the last taboo, and here was the ultimate power: nature.

I made a drawing of waves, I made drawings of Freud's apartment, I made drawings of flowers. At one point my wife was telling my kid this story about a little boy who looks at the moon and how the moon starts to talk to him, and this six-year-old was asking me about the universe and I got very fascinated. I always wondered, when I die and I'm floating out in the world, will I get to see the earth from far away? So, I realized these images have a lot to do with making things that I can't really see.

What a perfect answer.

It was very weird. Around the same time, right before I did the planets, I did atomic bombs and I did roses and



Untitled (Saturn), 2006. Charcoal on mounted paper, 72 x 122 inches (182.9 x 309.9 cm), by Robert Longo. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

things like that. They were all these images that were about the moment of being what they were supposed to be. A wave is supposed to crash, a rose is supposed to bloom, a bomb is supposed to explode, but these planets were something so vast that I couldn't even understand them. I mean, I couldn't even see them. I even bought a fucking telescope to look up at the moon. I got so obsessed with seeing planets.

I think about actual astronauts and how there's still an element of that, the little kid in them that is like, "Isn't it cool to be in a spaceship?" That's what I suspect. That it's still driving them at whatever age they are. Yeah, this idea they sent that Voyager record with the pictures of men and women on it way out into the universe. I had this image in my head that when beings from outer space will come see us, they'll all be dressed like Lucille Ball or Desi Arnaz because of this. It takes a hundred years for shit to get out there. They'll show up like, "Wait, where's Lucille Ball?"

They're going to make sure that they're in black and white.

Did you get to go in one of the capsules or anything like that?

No, didn't get to do any of that but we interviewed an astronaut. I forget that they're regular people. To talk to an

“Drawing and art-making, a lot of it has to do with knowing the cheats.”

astronaut who is struggling to deal with Zoom just like us, it was pretty great. Wow. And then they're off and up in space. The idea of being out there and seeing the earth, it looks so incredibly beautiful. This glass globe. When you're in outer space, you don't see any of the depth of the planet, like topographic details, because it's so small compared to the planet.

I'm going to say this is a dumb question, but to draw a perfect circle-- I'm just going to guess it's not easy to draw a planet. I take for granted that you know how to do it, but that seems like the hardest part, to draw a sphere. To make sure that we got it right, we made a template. We cut out a template that was perfect, and we put that onto the paper and traced that out. So, for instance, when we did the rings of Saturn, we had a template cut out on a laser cutter because it's way too precise to try and do by hand. We cheated as much as possible. Drawing and art-making, a lot of it has to do with knowing the cheats.

I got to play God every now and then. I added a couple of extra craters on the moon and things like that. Planetary travel is so incredibly abstract to me... I remember as a kid, catching bugs and putting them in a box and putting holes in the top, and then I remember later on in my life, taking acid and looking at the stars and thinking that, "Wow, we're in a box and there were the little holes in the top."

There's something logical about that, but the idea of space travel and that we want to do it at all--it's hard enough to go across the ocean, but we're still thinking, "Keep going, keep going. Let's find another way to go"-- it's pretty incredible.



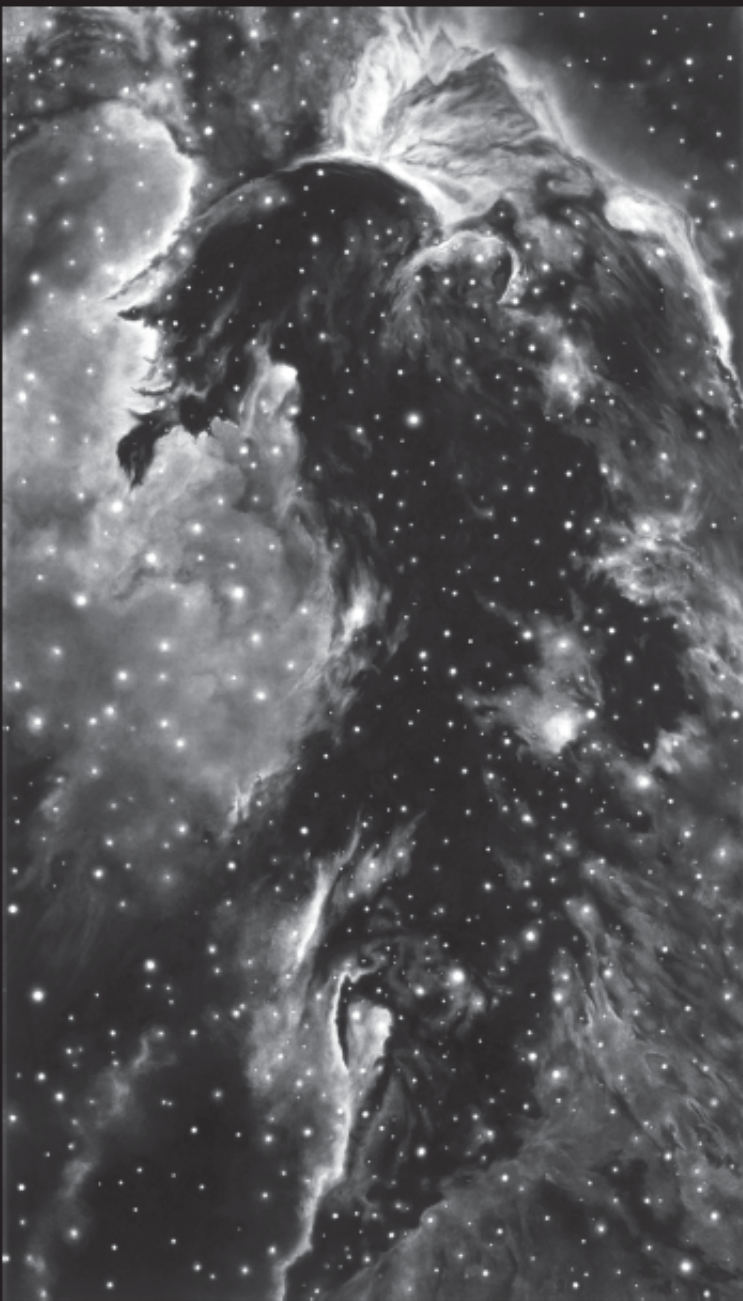
Untitled (Neptune and Triton), 2006.
Charcoal on mounted paper, 52 x 100
inches (132.1 x 254 cm), by Robert
Longo. Courtesy of the artist and
Metro Pictures, New York



Untitled (Daddy's Caddy), 2010.
Charcoal on mounted paper, 59 3/8 x 96
inches (150.8 x 243.8 cm), by Robert
Longo. Courtesy of the artist

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