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Hershkovits, David. "Holding His Ground," *The Village Voice* (September 20, 2017): 130-131.



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## THE CULTURE

September 20–September 26, 2017

VILLAGEVOICE.COM



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ART

## Holding His Ground

Robert Longo's optical illusions find their place in the canon

BY DAVID HERSHKOVITS

**F**rancisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein and...wait for it...Robert Longo? What connects the great Spanish artist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the seminal Russian film director of the twentieth century, and the twenty-first-century American who works out of a studio on Center Street? I wondered about that when I saw the announcement of the new "Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo" show, which opened earlier this month at the Brooklyn Museum. So I asked Longo if I could meet him at his studio and then have him walk me through the show.

**Longo's Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)**

Longo's relationship to his own work and the work of other artists represents the vision of someone tasked with a higher calling. When he spends hours upon hours in museums looking at Rembrandt or Goya, thinking hard about art and the role of the artist in the world, he is on a spiritual quest. "Art is my religion," Longo tells me. "Art history is part of my religion. And art history is the story of the religion. Art history is the thing you have to learn to help you make the bullets you put in your gun. It's like the gunpowder."

In Longo's studio, works from his ongoing series of charcoal paintings are in various stages of production. Punk music blasts in the background and a team of black-clad workers looks busy enough doing what they're doing. We pass through to Longo's office. His desk looks like it belongs to a man who has lots to do and needs to keep it together if he wants to get it done; he is preparing for exhibitions in London and Finland.

He's still moving paper around as we prepare to leave for the museum. I comment that he looks organized. "I gotta be," he says. "The thing is I'm sober, I'm 64, and I think I'm making the best work of my life and I really know what I'm doing. And every day I can't wait to fuckin' wake up in the morning. At the same time, I can count on the world to deliver me material because the world is so fucked."

The Goya, Eisenstein, Longo triple play, I learn, was hatched by Kate Fowle, chief curator at the GARAGE, the contemporary art museum in Moscow where the exhibition originated. "She wanted to do something about artists responding to the times they live in," Longo says. "She heard me talk in the past about artists being reporters. And I've always used these guys as influences."

In context, I get it. Goya, Eisenstein, and Longo have all made intensely political work — Goya, particularly, was scathing in his critique of the mores and politics of Spain. The show includes an artist's proof of the "Caprichos," a notebook of prints that were withdrawn from sale shortly after their release in 1799 for Goya's fear of enraging those in power at the time. They're intense to look at even today.

The Goya-Eisenstein connection is also certifiable. Longo spent many months in Russia studying Eisenstein's world. The trip included a visit to the apartment that houses the filmmaker's preserved belongings, where Longo noticed that the notorious bibliophile had "many Goya books around." Eisenstein's struggle to work under Stalin's reign resulted in the birth of cinematic montage, as well as a number of monumental films. Seven of these are on display at the Brooklyn Museum, on seven screens in a single room, the films slowed down to one frame every six seconds, stripped of sound and subtitles. "The image of bayonets from *Potemkin* on the Odessa Steps?" Longo notes. "Eisenstein stole it from Goya."

Though the Goyas amaze and the Eisenstein films and storyboards thrill, it's the Longos that take center stage at the show, with very large pieces positioned in the museum's high-ceilinged rooms. Longo has always liked to work in a large format, dating back to the iconic "Men in the Cities" series that launched him as an art star in the 1980s. As part of what has since been dubbed the Pictures Generation, he and contemporaries including Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince used found-media images as jumping-off points for their work. For the most part, they still do — Longo included. "Now the biggest difference is that I don't



Courtesy the artist/Metro Pictures, New York

so much respond to stuff — I search for stuff," Longo says. "I have an idea of what I want, and I go look for it. On the other hand, I'm still responding to things."

Longo often works in charcoal, creating a hyper-realistic rendering of a memory that never actually occurred. The images are doctored composites of found images. They are drawn to be as dramatic as possible and presented behind glass. The light, the shading, the stark black-and-whiteness are ghostly and sinister. Their realism is an optical illusion. They look like photos, but when you get closer they break down into abstraction. "I grew up with TV, black-and-white," he says. "All the images I saw in the formative time in my life were always behind glass."

A fun fact about Longo is that he played middle linebacker at a college in Texas. Well under six feet tall (and now a smaller version of himself since he suffered a mild stroke in 2012), he's not a man you'd picture butting heads with fullbacks. But he is still tuned in to the sports world, and he understands its powerful hold on the American psyche.

When the killing of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson in 2014 led to riots, Longo struggled to create a work in response. "Whenever I try to draw the images of the protesters it never felt like I gave them justice," he explains. "In my hands, they always looked clumsy, like they were doing the 'Macarena' or something."

Nothing worked until he saw the image of the St. Louis Rams receivers corps, led by Kenny Britt, come out onto the field with their hands up in homage to Brown on national TV. "It was fuckin' mind-blowing," he says. "It was like John Carlos and Tommie Smith with the glove at the '68 Olympics. I kept thinking, 'Here are these football players dressed in a uniform that's not a whole lot different than cops, in militarized shoulder pads, helmets, playing a game based on the idea of war that basically is also a game that forms a weird oppression for young black men who think the way out of poverty is to be an athlete.'"

While the U.S. of the 1980s was very

good to Longo, the same couldn't be said of the 1990s. He left for Europe and set himself up in a studio in Paris. "Going to Europe saved my life," he says, unequivocally implying both physical and professional salvation. "The Europeans were interested in my work even though they knew I was this crazy, drugged, rock 'n' roll guy. European collectors were more open to my work, and I was able to build a European base that is still very strong."

**Untitled (November 8, 2016)**

Another way in which Europe was good to Longo: That's where he met and married Barbara Sukowa, a German actress best known for her work with Rainer Werner Fassbinder. "When we got married we decided to go back to New York," he explains. "And it wasn't easy. I would sell work every now and then. It was tough."

With the art world unmoved by his work, he turned to filmmaking. "When I made *Johnny Mnemonic* [with Keanu Reeves], from '93 to '95, it completed my demise," he recalls. "And Barbara said, 'Why don't you just go back to the studio and draw?' I said OK."

Coming from Europe as she did, Sukowa was amazed by Longo's consumption of pop culture and his insatiable appetite for images. "She made me incredibly aware that I would watch two TVs at the same time with the stereo on," he says. "How all these images we see on a daily basis enter us painlessly, hundreds of them.... How anesthetized I was to media."

As an antidote, Longo took it upon himself to slow down. By making a drawing a day, he realized he could "make that image become accountable, take it in on the molecular level. I made this series called 'Magellan.' I showed it at Metro Pictures, 366 — it was a leap year — images from floor to ceiling.

"I sold maybe two drawings. It was so depressing. Then we showed it in Europe and 25 were sold, then 100 were sold...."

The rest, as they say, is art history.