

Robert Longo Discusses ‘Moral Imperative’ That Drives His Latest Work

ART news artnews.com/art-news/artists/robert-longo-guild-hall-pace-gallery-exhibitions-1234602803

September 2, 2021



View of "Field of Agency" at Guild Hall. *Photo Gary Mamay*

Over the past several years, Robert Longo, the famed Pictures Generation artist, has begun creating work inflected with his political views, reflecting on some of today’s most pressing issues from the global migrant crisis to the Black Lives Matter protests for racial justice.

Longo is currently the subject of a solo exhibition, “A History of the Present,” at Guild Hall in East Hampton, New York, which features two recent charcoal-drawing series: “The Agency of Faith,” enlarged images of things like a field of cotton, a Native American headdress, and a protest scene, as well as “Gang of Cosmos,” re-creations of iconic Abstract-Expressionist paintings by the likes of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and others. (The exhibition was the subject of a recent short documentary, *Present History* by the Artist Profile Archive, in which Longo discusses the development of of his work.)



Next week, Pace Gallery, which began representing Longo earlier this year, will open an exhibition of the final installment of his drawings series “The Destroyer Cycle,” which chronicled the Trump presidency and will end with a new work based on images culled from the January 6 insurrection on the U.S. Capitol.

To get more insight into these two exhibition, *ARTnews* spoke with Longo by phone.

ARTnews: What sparked your interest in making political art?

Robert Longo: It was [Ronald] Reagan who lit the flame under me, for sure. From the very beginning my work had a political edge. I think the biggest difference now is my rage is cranked up quite a bit. There was a picture in the newspaper of riot cops in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was shot. When I saw that picture in the *New York Times* I was so shocked, I thought this must be Ukraine, Iraq, but in the background I saw a little McDonald’s sign, an Exxon, I said to myself, “That’s here.” I wanted to rip chunks of images of the world and put them in front of people, ask them what they think about it. Ask people to take a stance.

How has your process shifted in recent years?

I always think that making art has to do with finding something that’s both socially relevant and highly personal, finding a balance like tuning into a radio station. About six or seven years ago, I had a stroke and became really good friends with my brain doctor. He ended up giving me pictures of my brain that he had taken because they needed to go in there and break up a blood clot. So when I started making pictures of trees I tried to slip images of my brain into it. They say there are representational artists who work abstractly, I feel like I’m an abstract artist working representationally.

Has social media influenced the way you work?

It depends. In my early career I responded to images [I saw], but now I have an idea of an image and then I look for it. If I find it I try to buy it. I alter the images, I bring in a lot of different images, I try to make the most perfect version of it, to turn it into something more, like a memory of something. I’ve become more exact.

What do you mean?

I don’t want there to be any distraction from the intention of my image. That’s also why at this new show [at Pace] we’re showing the work without the glass. People come in for a second and they think they’re looking at a picture, not a highly aggressive image made with this incredibly fragile material [charcoal].

That's one reason why I make work in black and white. But it also comes from my own relationship with images—I grew up with a black-and-white television set.

The Pace exhibition will show the final installment of “The Destroyer Cycle.” Can you talk about how it you got started on it?

I was so upset about Trump [being elected president]. And I thought that this will be the body of work that I will make for the next four years, and it will be called “The Destroyer Cycle.” My last drawing for the cycle is based on the insurrection at the Capitol. It's kind of exciting, the end of the story. I've calmed down a bit in the last six or so months.

Will the content of your work change now that there's been a change in administrations?

I don't think it's going to. I think right now the work is focused on process and the environment. One of the things I've been doing, which started with Ferguson, is every time I sell a work that has overtly political content I identify an organization to donate 10–20 percent of the profits. If I do an iceberg, I'll donate to Greenpeace. I have a really great life—it's hard to really enjoy it when I know other people are suffering. I feel a moral imperative to do this work.

Can you talk about the work that is currently on view at Guild Hall?

With “The Agency of Faith,” I'm focused on American sin images. The foundation of the show are the drawings of the Native American headdress, a George Floyd protest image with a flag burning in the background, and the cotton field. These represent what we have to deal with as a country, for sure. The other works [in the series] comment on the environment, technology.

There's also a huge wave drawing in “The Agency of Faith,” which you haven't produced for some time now. What made you return to this subject matter?

I hadn't done a wave drawing in like 10, 12 years. But I was teaching my son to surf and I remembered that when I learned when I was 12 or 13, I was totally obsessed. We'd see these big nasty waves during the hurricanes, they were like claws, trying to grab land and bring it back into the ocean. It's everything, power, change.

How does that series connect with “Gang of Cosmos,” your series of re-creations of Ab Ex masterpieces, which is also on view at Guild Hall?

Well, it's the converse. I was born in 1953, around the time that Pollock made his first major paintings, and I was around 10 years old when Kennedy was assassinated. There was this incredible hope that existed in the America I remember as a kid. The idea was that very soon we were all going to be living like the Jetsons and everyone was going to be equal and it was going to be a great life. The dream of America.

How did you land on the title “Gang of Cosmos?”

The title comes from a Walt Whitman poem that said that America needed a new gang of cosmos. We needed new artists and poets and priests and things like that to separate ourselves from Europe. This was after World War II. Culture was Europe, they had Rembrandt and Caravaggio, but we needed

something of our own. Abstract Expressionism was America's classical art: Pollock, Krasner, de Kooning. It's an honor to be doing this with Guild Hall—a lot of [the Abstract Expressionists] showed work here. I always think about those guys. I'm incredibly jealous of them.

Can you explain more?

The process—they seem so free. This idea that you walk into your studio and just let your soul explode. Supposedly, artists who work representationally tend to get a little looser, more expressive as they age, but I think I've just gotten tighter and tighter. I love my work. I wake up every morning and I can't wait to go to work. And you know, we're only here for a short time.