

Working Towards Affection: An Interview with Robert Longo

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For a guy with a band, time is an issue. Robert Longo is with the X-Patsys; noted German film actor Barbara Sukowa is the vocalist and married to Robert Longo. Highly accomplished musician colleagues make up the rest of the band. When you listen to them together, you recognize there's no messing around in this tight group and time is a key element. Like in Longo's art where there are also issues of time: rhythm, sequencing, the duration of looking and a sense of the moment. Think of his now iconic first series, "Men in the Cities," 1979-1983, which seemed at the same time to herald what was next and reflect what was current. Figures—men and women—made elegant by their slenderness and simplicity of dress, twisted, writhed, were ecstatic or wounded, as they confused, by Longo's intention, our seeing them as dancers or victims of violence.

Longo's language, when he talks about figures, is precise. The drawings were intended to be aggressive, their impact explosive, like "shots from a gun," "a punch in the face," "like the change of chords in a rock song," straight to the gut. He meant them to be seen as drawings constructed, as he said, to be part of a complicated system, and the first smaller works, at 40 by 60 inches, were sold as triptychs. By 1981, when each of the works was larger (nine by five feet), they were purchased as single pieces, and Longo felt they were being misread or misunderstood. They were identified as figurative when he saw them as abstract and gestural; confused by scale, people referred to them as paintings, and they were separated from their intended place in a system and seen as singular.

Back to time, in this case as metaphor. The pendulum had swung, and in that imperceptible pause at its apex—a caesura and a change. A new body of work, the "Combines," "25 feet long and it's all one piece." No one would take them apart. By scale and the introduction of narrative they were an early engagement with film. Collisions is how Longo describes them—"very deliberate, almost sentence structures," using different materials to present the images and to represent images residing in art's history. About them Longo said simply, "I was able to do whatever I wanted material-wise and medium-wise." He did something else, too, in this shift. He put into practice the theory that governs his work: "I have this view," he told us, "about how things work on both an individual and a cultural level: it's a wheel or cycle made of formalism, romanticism and mannerism." At the outset, in the formal stage, the artist is engaged by an idea, an intention. This is a period of discovery, exploration, excitement—building a form but not

certain how or where it is going. In the period of romance, the frame is there and now the content is loaded on; it becomes rich. Then comes mannerism, the facility, the virtuosity, that should make an artist skittish and have him on the run, where it's all too good and too easy and, as Longo says, "you forget why you did it in the first place."

So, on the designate of time there's a swing or a revolution to the extreme, Longo's mannerism, and you begin again, fresh. Like the shift from "Men in the Cities" to the "Combines" and similarly with other bodies of work where the interior clock prods: time to move on.

Longo talks about a certain kind of balance that making art negotiates between something social and something personal. For him it's as finely perceived and executed as balancing on the working edge of a knife—lightly, the same way you'd reach for a piece of time. He identifies two bodies of work: "Monsters," 1999-2004, and "The Sickness of Reason," 2001-2005. "Monsters" is a series of charcoal drawings of waves, some as large as six by 10 feet, the subjects surging forward and rearing back on themselves: power, volume and light, inexorable, unstoppable, inevitable—like fate. "The Sickness of Reason" series is drawings of nuclear explosions, somewhat smaller in scale than the waves. Horrific, but strangely, terribly, almost tranquil in their association with the heavenly space they enter, or maybe through their summoning the crowded and angel-filled skies of Rubens and Titian. Full-blown red roses are also imagery in this series. These drawings are square, the red, red flowers holding the frames in perfect equilibrium. Longo has dyed the paper red, and the drawings, like the others, are charcoal, but with the addition of ink.

The waves, the bombs and the roses are their own complete subjects. As the interview below discusses, they are also metonymies. And again, time is an element. Robert Longo describes them as all "things that were existing at the moment of their being: a bomb is supposed to explode, a rose ... to bloom and a wave ... to crash. They are at the moment of their fulfillment."

But before their fulfillment, I see them, as well, as an anomalous suspension of the already determined, as an attenuation of the moment—because he has drawn them and we are looking. He and, therefore, we are seizing the elastic potential of the subjects that are organic, motile and imminent. I read the state of imminence as being about desire and about avoiding the inevitable denouement and letdown of progression. Like the sustained drum solo, when the overriding melody has been suspended, and listening, heart pounding, head nodding the tempo, you are part of the building intensity until the drummer pulls back, the other players step forward, the whole piece resumes again, the wave crests and unfurls and the first petal drops silently off. Longo said he believes there is a vicariousness in art.

Before "Monsters" and "The Sickness of Reason," there were other bodies of work, other times, difficult times in the us and in global politics, a personally problematic period for Longo. The "Black Flags," the crosses, the "Bodyhammers," which were drawings of eight feet high handguns where the barrel of the gun is a camera focused on taking a picture of

your face. Longo describes them as “chunks of Americana,” “an homage to the end of the world” that represented, as well, his transition moment from the 80’s to the 90’s. He had also just completed his film *Johnny Mnemonic*, which had left him spent.

Lost and floundering, he returned, through the wise counsel of his wife, to his studio to work alone. He asked himself “where did I come from?” Interrogating his personal myth of origins—his answer: “I came from appropriated material. I always responded to images in media, that was my planet.” And the body of work that emerged, one charcoal drawing each day for a year—a leap year—produced “Magellan,” 1996, which was in every sense a renaissance. A personal diary, a chronicle of the times, “Magellan” brought him home and allowed him to stay there quietly, watching his youngest son grow, drawing all his children, drawing images from television, the newspapers, everything that happened by—images as he said, “that fell into my net.”

Seeing media from Barbara’s perspective reminded him that he had become inured to its content. Now he assumed the moral role of recording witness. He said, “Somehow I feel it necessary to record and make accountable these images, selecting one a day. This phantom empire of images that assault us on a daily basis, entering us quietly and invisibly—what are they doing to us?” With that question rides a sense of elegy, and poetry, to be sure that did find their way into the 366 drawings. Some were images he loved, nurtured and lingered with, making them beautiful. Others he liked less and made dark.

“Magellan” sharpened his “drawing chops,” reminded him that he did love making art and led him to the use of chiaroscuro as a technique he would continue to employ and delight in. Most importantly, it brought him back to pictures. A picture about a subject, and that’s where he’d started—present in the image that is what drawing is. That credible medium that shows evidence of its maker’s hand and individual engagement. In our conversation with Robert Longo, we conjured the ghost of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres who designated drawing the probity of art. With this Longo agreed.

“When I draw,” he said, “I take it into me. I look at it, it goes into every part of my body; it comes out of me.” The quiet, focused work of “Magellan” was laced and bound, being diurnal, by time and it insisted on the artist’s giving over to what he identified as reverie. That’s art asking a lot and giving back at least an equivalence.

As the interview concluded, Robert Longo talked about the drawings he was doing now, noting in what way the work was different from what he’d done earlier. “I want to give more than I did before. That’s the biggest thing. The fact that you can actually take time and look at these recent works and get lost in them is important.” The time it takes for looking.

We spent close to four hours in conversation with Robert Longo, then wrote a quick note the following day thanking him for the pleasure of his company and his generous mind. He answered back with a note of his own, saying that perhaps all he should have said is that “making art is simply an advertising for the act of believing.” Hope and faith and a commitment to conscience.

Robert Longo was interviewed in his studio in New York on June 10, 2010. *Border Crossings* asked him—where did art begin for you?—and the conversation went on from there. To read the interview pick up Issue 115 on newsstands now or [click here](#) to subscribe.