Robert Longo: ‘I’m making artworks out of dust’

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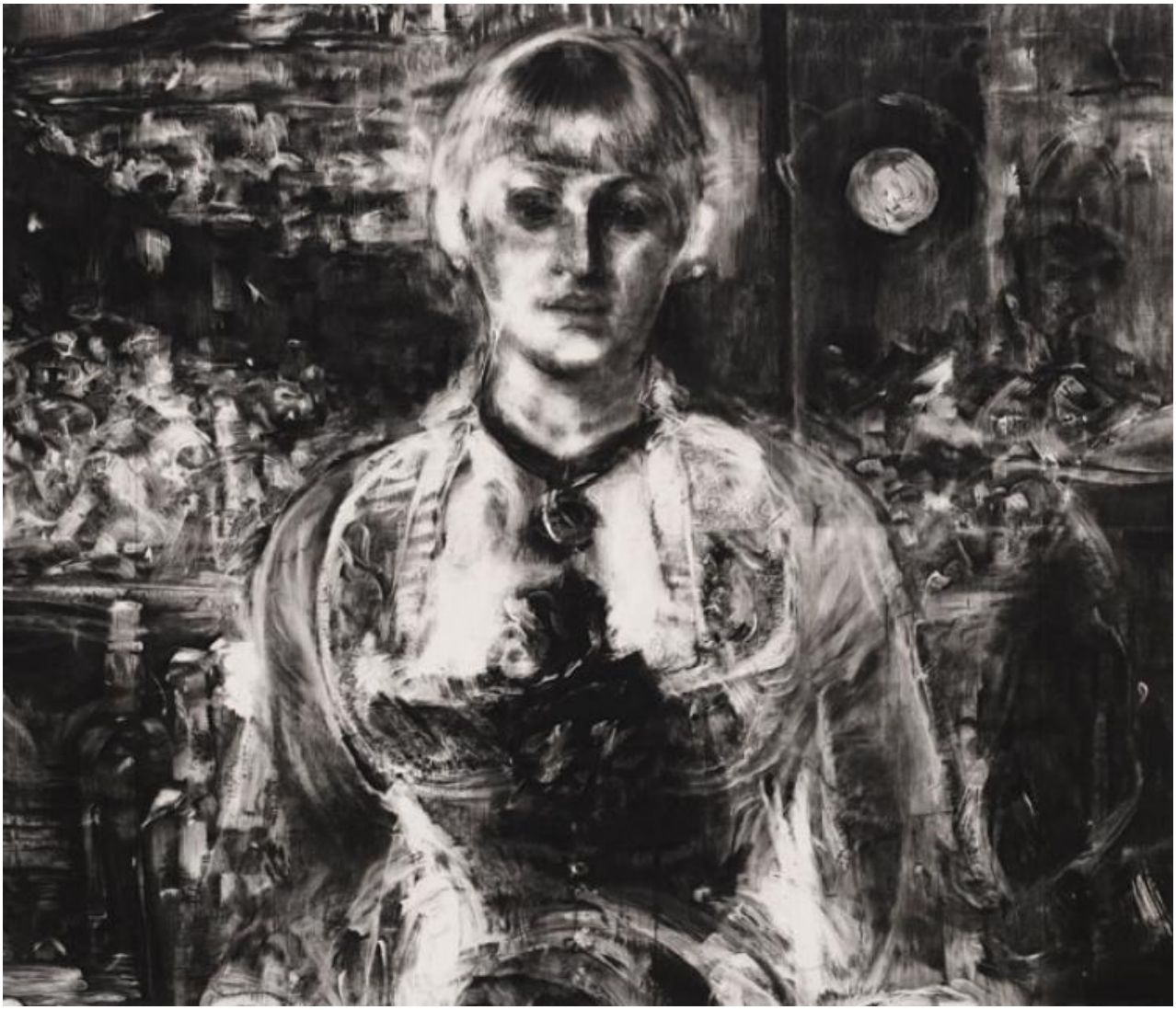
At his first solo exhibition in London, New York artist Robert Longo talks about charcoal, photography, violence and Donald Trump



Robert Longo. Untitled (X-Ray of A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1882 after Manet), 2017 (detail). Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris · Salzburg. Photograph: Artist Studio.

by JOE LLOYD

A bald eagle and the American flag; JMW Turner’s The Slave Ship and Henry Fuseli’s Nightmare; a bullet-riddled window from the 2015 Copenhagen terrorist attack and the billowing smoke from an air strike in Syria. These are some of the images in Robert Longo’s Let the Frame of Things Disjoint, at London’s Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. Named for a line in Macbeth, it comprises 22 charcoal drawings on mounted paper and a handful of sculptures. It is, remarkably, Longo’s first solo show in London.

Longo was born in 1953 in Brooklyn and his career began in the mid-70s, when as a student he was one of the founders of the Hallwalls Contemporary Art Centre in Buffalo. His early work, such as the relief The American Soldier (1977), established a fascination with moments of violence and translation of images from one medium to another (the titular soldier was taken from the Rainer Werner Fassbinder film of the same name). But it was Men in the Cities (1979-81) – a sequence of greyscale drawings of besuited figures distorted as if under the grip of some invisible power – that cemented Longo's place in the American artistic firmament. Drawing has since remained his primary medium, with notable exceptions such as the gargantuan combines of the early 80s. Over the past two decades, he has focused on charcoal, creating drawings that often demonstrate an extraordinary level of technical virtuosity.

Robert Longo. Untitled (Election Day 2016), 2017. Charcoal on mounted paper, 152.4 x 109.9 cm. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris · Salzburg. Photograph: Artist Studio.

His practice deals with authority and resistance, order and chaos, and the way such forces shape individual consciousness. It often conveys the uneasy dance between brutality and spectacle. "It is in the war zone," wrote Hal Foster in a 1989 catalogue, "between schizoid obscenity and utopian hope that the art of Roberto Longo is now to be found."

Longo's most recent pieces have one eye on the past and another on the events of the present. Some of them transpose images from photographs of contemporary events; others recreate significant paintings from the history of art, using x-rays to excavate the artist's process. Everywhere, the past and the future collide: Let the Frame of Things Disjoint begins with a headless bronze sculpture of St Francis of Assisi, who conducted a mission to Egypt during the Crusades and thus participated in the relationship between east and west that continues to underpin world affairs today. Longo's large-scale translations of past masterpieces – such Francis Bacon's Painting of 1946, Édouard Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère and Pablo Picasso's Guernica – are both physically overwhelming and subtle disquisitions into the secret language of paint.

Ahead of the show's opening, Studio International caught up with Longo at the gallery.

Joe Lloyd: It's remarkable that this is your first solo show in London.

Robert Longo: It's my first solo show here, yes. I've been in lots of shows in England, and I used to come here a lot in the 80s. But for an artist – an older artist – the greatest challenge is to remain relevant. I think that now I'm maybe making the best work of my career. I think I'm quite prolific, which almost scares me a little. When I go to sleep at night, I can't wait to wake up in the morning. I'm in a good place. And, at the same time, I'm also incredibly sad and incredibly angry about the political situation that we exist in right now.

Robert Longo. Untitled (The Real Elvis), 2017. Charcoal on mounted paper, 139.7 x 139.7 cm. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris · Salzburg. Photograph: Artist Studio.

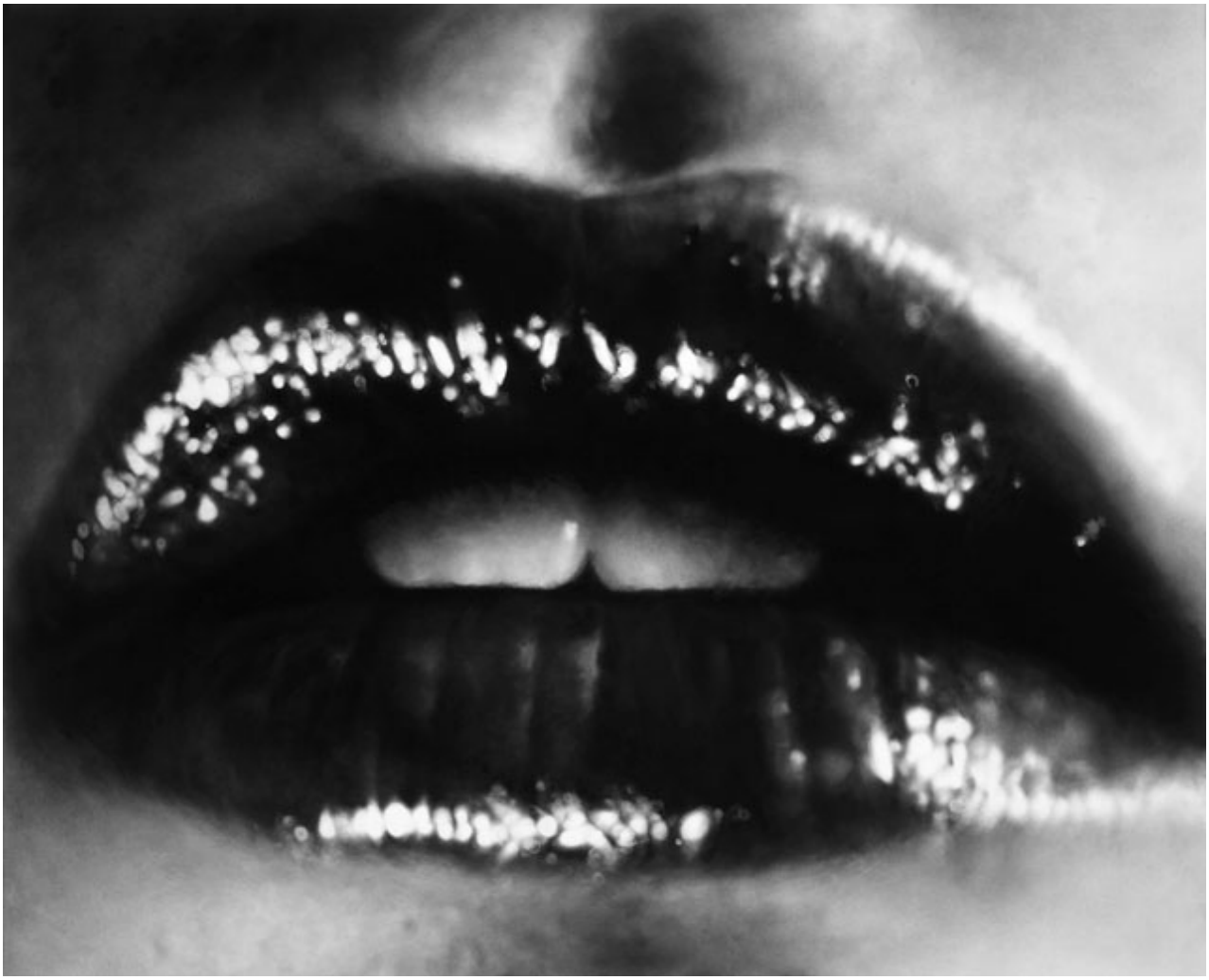
I came of age as an artist during the age of Ronald Reagan, and Reagan was the original Trump. He said, "Let's make America great again" first, and stupid things, like: "Let's return America to traditional values." What's that, slavery? The difference between Reagan and Trump is that Reagan at least had something of a self-deprecating humour, and Trump is dead serious. He's a fascist bully – an egocentric, narcissistic, fascist bully. I despise him.

JL: Although you have worked in numerous mediums – performance, film and sculpture, and several of the latter feature in this exhibition – it seems to me that drawing has stood at the core of your practice, from Men in the Cities forward. What led you to choose the medium?

RL: My degree was in sculpture, but I studied film a lot, and film and sculpture have similarities. In the 80s, I was doing a lot of films and performances, and I ended up making movies. And then I ran out of money, and realised that drawing had always been this really important thing for me, and that it was a medium that existed between all the high arts. It's kind of this bastard medium, which is always in a brown room in the basements of museums. So, here was something I could actually exploit and make my own, and make drawings as big as abstract expressionism, and, using glass, make them objects with a heaviness, a weight. They also have a sculptural element – once a drawing gets to a certain point, I carve it with erasers.

JL: And in your more recent work, there has been a turn to charcoal.

RL: My earlier drawings were mostly graphite. The charcoals started in 1999 or 2000, kind of by accident. It was the Christmas vacation and I went to the studio and couldn't find any graphite. Although I hated charcoal, this imprecise medium, I started to draw, and began on the first wave drawing. And there was something about charcoal.



Robert Longo. Untitled (Where the Outside Meets the Inside), 2017. Charcoal on mounted paper, 118.1 x 147.3 cm. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris ·

Salzburg. Photograph: Artist Studio.

I like that, with charcoal, I'm making artworks out of dust. And it's an incredibly fragile medium – although I saw that film by Werner Herzog, Cave of Forgotten Dreams, about the paintings in the Chauvet Cave in southern France. They are 32,000 years old and they are charcoal drawings. So I like to joke that my ancestry goes that far back, that I'm like the caveman in a weird way.

But I've always used the same paper, a cold press archival paper that has just enough of a grain to invoke photography while not interfering with the work. I think that, psychologically, people now tend to see the world and memories in photographs. And if you have traditional representation and modernist abstraction, my art exists somewhere in the middle. Maybe I even translate photos. My images can't actually be photos, but I like that people come in and sometimes think they're photographs until someone tells them the truth and their perception of the work changes. The idea that they are these labour-intensive voodoo objects is really important.

JL: As well as being labour intensive, some of these charcoals are humongous.

RL: The medium also dictates some limitations, such as the weight of Plexiglas and paper size – it only comes 70in [178cm] wide – so I put them together with steel structures. So, as you can see in the Iceberg piece [Untitled (Philosophy in the Bedroom), 2017], there is a seam right down the middle and once they are placed together they don't come apart. The paper is mounted atop honeycomb aluminium, like an airplane wing, and then they have to be framed. They end up weighing about 600lb [272kg]. I like work that makes you work. Some of those drawings downstairs, you couldn't bring through the door; they had to close the street and bring them up here through the windows. The scene was quite wild – you could see Manet floating in the air.

JL: I love the tales of installing Richard Serra sculptures, where they have to tear down a wall to bring the piece inside.

RL: Richard Serra is one of my godfathers. I started an alternative space in Buffalo [the Hallwalls Contemporary Art Centre]. Cindy Sherman and I worked together there for several years. People would come and get snowed in, and Richard was once snowed in with us for about seven days. As a young artist, I wanted to know everything that he had in his brain. We became friends and, whenever I see Richard now, it is always this big joke. He leans over to me and whispers in my ear: "You're still making big art, right?" Like I'm part of some weird fraternity, trying to make things that are physically challenging.

JL: And also like Serra's paintings, your drawings are largely in monochrome.

RL: When my younger son was a kid, he said to me: "Why do you work in black and white?" And I was looking at an old copy of Life magazine, showing him bomb tests. And I realised that there would be a picture of a circus or a famous garden in colour, but then

you would get to the Vietnam war or Calcutta and it would be black and white. So maybe I think of these things in black and white as the truth.

I didn't quite have the courage to become an artist initially, so thought of becoming an art conservator or historian, so I know how paintings are really made. All the white in my drawings are the paper, and so they're actually the opposite of traditional paintings, where you work from dark to light. If you are painting a tree, you start with the dark green; Rembrandt would finish with a little dab of white on the forehead.

JL: Many of your works, including those in this exhibition, are translations of images: whether photographs of recent events or x-rays of paintings from art history. How do you select these sources?

RL: In the very beginning, I was basically responding to images. I was making pictures of pictures. But now I'm much more of a searcher: I feel the images I want to make and I search them out; and if I can't find them, I create them – I went to photograph the icebergs for example. I had a stroke four years ago, and, right before, I was taking pictures of trees in a park. Then I went to see a brain surgeon who showed me pictures of my brain, and it looked like my fucking trees! So these drawings of trees became drawings of my brain.

I try to buy the rights for images as often as possible, or get permission. For Guernica, I asked the Picasso Foundation if I could do it, and the only limitation it imposed was that I couldn't make it the exact same size, so my piece is 5in (12.5cm) shorter. When I did the abstract expressionist show [Gangs of Cosmos, at Metro Pictures, New York in 2014], I didn't think I would get permission. And everyone gave me permission: it was amazing!

I go to abstract expressionists a lot: the American civil war and abstract expressionism are, to me, the origins of my being American. Barnett Newman said this great thing, that he thought abstraction expressionists are representational artists working abstractly, and I think I'm an abstract artist working representationally.

JL: Abstract expressionism is so interesting as an American cultural phenomenon.

RL: Abstract expressionism is like making art after the world tried to destroy itself. It was like the great dream of America, along with Kennedy. Then Kennedy was shot in 1963, and that's about the time Ad Reinhardt was making his black paintings. One of the things I found out was that the CIA used them as a propaganda tool – they weren't accepted in the United States, but then that same time the CIA was showing them to eastern Europeans saying: "Look, you have to do social realism, but this is what you could really do, you could be free."

The first books about abstract expressionism were black and white, so when I first saw abstract expressionist paintings, they were black and white. And in black-and-white photography, a dark red and a dark blue will both look like black. What interested me about drawing those images is that I could create a highly sensitised translation. I decided

I wanted to understand how long it took to draw the brushstrokes compared with making a brushstroke. Each drawing became like a forensic site: I had maybe 100 photos of each painting to study.

JL: One word that comes to my mind when looking at some of the pieces here – such as Untitled (X-Ray of A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1882, After Manet), 2017 – is excavation.

RL: For me, Manet is one of the guys at the start of the modern art. The history of the painting was getting to the point of pre-Raphaelites, where you can get almost perfect representations of reality, and then this toy comes along and you can click and woosh! Paint was no longer in the service of illusion, and you can follow the line to abstract expressionism where painting is the subject matter. And it's totally, incredibly free. Photography actually freed painting in a weird way. I was flying from Paris to New York, and I got stuck for a night, and I saw that the Musée d'Orsay was open after 10pm, and it was empty – this was just after the terrorist attacks. For some reason, that night, I felt like I was seeing modern art being born. The paint seemed like it wanted to explode. It didn't want to be a picture any more, it wanted to be something more.

I think Manet is extraordinary. I knew that this gallery was once the Abermarle Club, the first club to let women join and a base for the suffragettes, and I knew that A Bar at the Folies-Bergère was in London, so I went to the Courtauld Gallery to get an x-ray. Sometimes the conservators don't want to do this, until they meet me and realise that I'm reverent about what they do – I think they're the saints; they save art. So I ended up spending three hours there. When I got the x-ray, I saw the difference between the way her hands were originally – a very diminutive pose – and what they turned into, a "what do you want?" It's a really powerful image, and I found that moment quite extraordinary.

In the corner of the painting were bottles of Bass beer, which I found out was the first company in London to copyright its label, the red triangle. So I wondered what was Bass beer doing at the Folies-Bergère – surely there should be champagne? It turned out they had Bass there because the English guys would go to Paris and would have some beer: I love this idea! I also discovered there were two sets of eyes; I think in the final version the eyes are lower set. Walter Benjamin talked about the loss of the aura. X-rays are like seeing the aura. Also, living in a time as we are now in which religion is so important, religion is all about believing in the invisible, and with x-rays you are actually seeing the invisible.

JL: We talked earlier about the current American situation. Much of your work of late has a definite political bent. Do you believe artists have a responsibility to engage with society at large?

RL: I think making art in general is a political statement, whether abstract expressionism or pictures of fucking daisies. It is a freedom of expression. When Reagan became president, I became very aware that there potentially could come a time in my life when someone could tell me I couldn't make art any more. In 2015, I made my first bullet-hole

drawing [Untitled (Bullet Hole in Window, January 7, 2015)]. It was from Charlie Hebdo. And I was so moved by this image because the perpetrators were specifically trying to kill artists.

JL: Armed police occur often in your recent work.

RL: That started when I did drawings of the police at the Ferguson protests. I first saw those pictures in newspapers and thought, "Oh, that must be in the Ukraine or somewhere," and then I saw the McDonald's and the Exxon sign and realised it was in the United States. So I bought the rights to a couple of photographs and made a composite image of this wall of a couple of hundred of highly militarised cops. I was so outraged that this was happening. And so cops have now become a bit of a theme for me.

The irony about the Ferguson cops is that their equipment is leftover equipment from all the wars that the United States has had. Barack Obama tried to limit police access to these weapons, but now this new idiot, [US Attorney General] Jeff Sessions, is allowing them more. I remember a reporter asked him why the police needed bayonets, and he said: "They are very good for cutting through seatbelts."

After Ferguson, I wanted to do a matching version of the protesters but, no matter how much I tried, I couldn't give them the nobility they required. And then during one of the NFL games a group of the St Louis Rams [officially now known as the Los Angeles Rams] came out with their hands up in solidarity, and it reminded me of the famous photograph of the [1968] Olympics in Mexico City when Tommie Smith and John Carlos wore black gloves [for civil rights]. What struck me so profoundly was that what the football players were wearing was not all that different from what the cops were wearing.

JL: I feel there has been a long-standing interest in violence in your work. Men in the Cities have this sense of unseen force, of an uncontrollable power imposing itself.

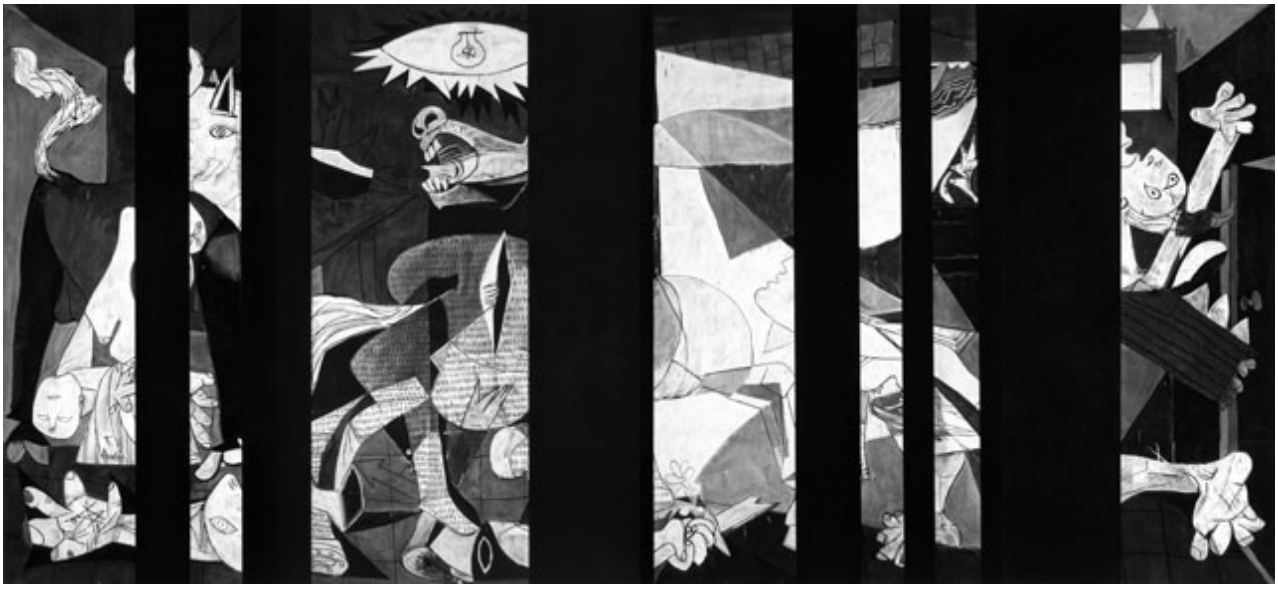
RL: What's interesting about those is that, if you're successful as an artist, you create an archetype, and so you start to lose authorship. Some Men in the Cities were hanging in a museum, and my younger son was there with his girlfriend, and she asked me if I got the idea from the iPod ads. And recently – it was very sad – the Russian ambassador in Turkey was shot, and people texted me and said it looked like one of the Men in the Cities. He was the right age, he was wearing the right clothes, the right haircut. Of course, the guys in Men in the Cities were my friends – they were basically punk rock guys, they always had skinny ties on.

JL: That late-70s, New York avant-garde aesthetic.

RL: Exactly! That's where it started. I saw James Chance and the Contortions, and I said: "These are psychotic impulses." And when I was a kid – making art is the way you find something socially relevant that is also highly personal – we played this crazy game called Who Could Fall Dead the Best. I pretended I had a gun, and you and one other person would run at me, and I would I pretend to shoot, and you would pretend to die. And whoever died best got to be the guy with the gun again. This was at the time of the Sam

Peckinpah films, where everyone was dying really dramatically. When James Cagney died in a movie, he would just fall over. Then Peckinpah came along and everyone would be blown through doors. And these moments of explosion were really important.

One thing I had suppressed until recently is that I graduated in 1970. That was the year of the Kent State shooting [of four student protesters]. And you know that really famous photograph of the girl crying over the dead body? That's the kid I went to high school with. All of a sudden, I realised how much that picture had an impact on me. All the images that I make, I have to be in, I have to be there. I can't have that distance. They're not illustrations in that sense. I have to be there.



Robert Longo. Untitled (Guernica Redacted, After Picasso's Guernica, 1937), 2014. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris · Salzburg. Photograph: Artist Studio.

JL: The largest piece in this show [2014's Untitled (Guernica Redacted, After Picasso's Guernica, 1937)], replicates perhaps the most famous modern painting of the aftermath of violence. You have covered up parts of Picasso's work, causing whole segments of its schema to disappear.

RL: I read a lot of books about Guernica, and, apparently, while Picasso was painting it, his two lovers were having fights in the studio. I realised that it qualifies as this great anti-war painting, but people don't see it as that any more. I started seeing these government redaction letters that were coming out in newspapers and thought why don't I redact Guernica, to make you see it in a different way?

Guernica Redacted went to a museum in Germany and then to a museum in Ohio, the Wexner Center. When the museum was closed, a disgruntled security guard came in and started shooting a bunch of art. He put two bullet holes in the drawing, and then shot himself in front of it. So Guernica still provokes.

JL: How important do you find the staging and presentation of artworks, such as in this current exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac?

RL: As a young artist, my heroes were people such as Serra, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci – I worked for Acconci and for Dennis Oppenheim – these guys that made installations, this idea of place as a vehicle for meaning. So an exhibition, for me, has always involved a lot of planning, almost like you're making a movie for this space.

When they open, I feel this weird combination. I have to figure out what I have learned, and I have to calm down about all the mistakes. I always think of the artist as a mortician. You have this idea, this idea comes to life, and then you have to kill it by making it. And then, as a mortician, you have to prepare it for the funeral, which is the exhibition when it's on view. And then it gets buried.

• *Robert Longo: Let the Frame of Things Disjoint is at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, until 11 November.*