

Artist Robert Longo: ‘Taking down statues was one of America’s greatest moments’

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5 December
2020

Visual Arts

Ahead of a solo exhibition in LA, the New Yorker talks about his hyperreal transformations of the everyday



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Jonathan Griffin

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Robert Longo makes aggressive, powerful images. They are usually big. Sometimes very big. High-definition, high-contrast, high-octane. Stereotypically masculine, he’d be the first to admit. Emphatically American.

At Jeffrey Deitch gallery in Los Angeles, where Longo’s new exhibition *Storm of Hope* is being hung, I’m surprised when a baggy figure wearily rises from an office chair and shuffles towards me. Longo offers an elbow.

In person, Longo, 67, is more approachable than the striking black-suited persona with the rockabilly quiff who appears in publicity photographs. After a mild stroke in 2012, he slowed down somewhat. As *Storm of Hope* attests, however, these days he is firing on all cylinders.



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Longo normally divides his time between New York City and East Hampton, but is in California for the installation of his first solo exhibition in Los Angeles in more than 12 years. The exhibition is open by appointment only, until January 30 2021.

He has known Deitch, a fellow New Yorker, since the late 1970s, when the gallerist posed for his series “Men in the Cities” (1977-82) — the work that put Longo, then only in his mid-twenties, on the map.

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At that time, “power seemed to be the last taboo”, he says. “I’m an old hippie. So power I’m highly suspicious of.” For “Men in the Cities”, Longo drew men and women in business suits on bright white backgrounds, seemingly being blasted by an invisible force.

“We were the original sinners,” he says of the gang of young, brash and wildly successful artists that also included David Salle, Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl. While others were painters, however, Longo did precise pencil and charcoal drawings on paper, appropriating images from mass media.



New York artist Robert Longo © Horst Ossinger/dpaAlamy

He fit more comfortably with the Pictures Generation, the group named after curator Douglas Crimp’s 1977 Artists Space exhibition, in which Longo featured alongside Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine and Philip Smith. He lived with Cindy Sherman and played in a band with Richard Prince. “Then the '80s fell apart,” he says. “And I got blamed for the '80s!”

He moved to Europe in 1990, living for a few years in Paris and working in Spain and Germany. “It saved my life,” he says. He got sober and started reading. (“I’m dyslexic,” he explains. “I’ve become a voracious reader. But I’m really slow.”) He even made a

feature film — *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), starring Keanu Reeves and Dolph Lundgren. The art world moved on and, for a while, seemed to leave Longo behind.



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Over the past several tumultuous years in America, however, Longo has been reinvigorated. The earliest work in the exhibition is also its most massive: “Untitled (Capitol)” (2012-13), a seven-panel charcoal drawing, 12.5 metres wide, of the Capitol building in Washington DC. As with all of his pictures, the finish is flawless — belying this notoriously smudgy and crumbly medium — and fantastically detailed. Longo’s work is not photorealist so much as hyperrealist: it goes beyond the formal textures and limitations of photography to arrive at an image that is hallucinogenically vivid.

Longo’s aim is to get his viewers to see — *really* see — the images that pass before their eyes every day in newspapers or on screens. The idea for “Untitled (Capitol)” came to him during the nadir of the Obama administration, when the president was in gridlock with congressional Republicans. To make his drawing, Longo researched not only the neoclassical building, but also the bicameral legislature that it contains.

If Longo appears to offer his loaded images without comment, look closer. The follow up to “Untitled (Capitol)” is “Untitled (The Supreme Court of the United States, Split)” (2018), a craggy rendering of the marble edifice that looms ominously over the viewer against a dark sky. “Untitled (White House)” (2019), which completes the “Spirit of the Laws” trilogy, goes further still, putting the viewer at the bottom of what appears to be a gaping sinkhole in the White House lawn.



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Longo's pictures are highly editorialised. To “crank up” the volume, as he puts it, he trims unnecessary details and combines different photographs, sometimes taking his own. “How do you slow down the storm of images? By piecing these things together, I’m trying to find the perfect version of that image,” he says

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While Longo relies on skilled assistants for his prodigious output, he has the first and the last word. “I need to be the lightning in the Frankenstein studio,” he says. “I have to make it come alive.”

He shows me “Untitled (California Wildfire)”, a widescreen charcoal drawing made earlier this year. On one side is a car driving through the smoke, headlights on. Recalling a video filmed by surfer Laird Hamilton as he fled the 2018 Woolsey Fire in Malibu, Longo appended his own dramatic narrative to the scene. (He is deeply influenced by cinema.) In his version, however, the car appears to be driving towards the flames, not away. “You can’t escape this stuff!” he says.

In an adjacent gallery, technicians with forklifts are tinkering with a room-sized steel frame. The structure is part of Longo's sculpture “Death Star 2018”, a suspended two-metre sphere that bristles with nearly 40,000 assault rifle bullets — equal to the number of gun deaths in the US in 2017. Each bullet was placed according to a specially written algorithm. The eye naturally picks out patterns; Longo tells me he wanted to describe pure chaos.



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“It won’t be here until December,” he says, dejectedly. Earlier this year, the ball was badly damaged in transit, and Longo elected to build a new one. It wasn’t as easy as he’d hoped. In 2018, it was no problem acquiring 40,000 empty bullet casings. This year, he says, it has been nearly impossible, due to a surge of people buying weapons and ammunition in response to the pandemic and the Blacks Lives Matter protests.

Police in riot gear; an American footballer taking a knee; cranes looming over a monument of a confederate general: racial politics dominate *Storm of Hope*. “I’ve always been very, very aware that I’m a white man,” Longo says. “And that my heritage is basically contributing to a great number of things being fucked up in the world.” He has been excited by Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and other social justice movements. “I thought, when they began taking down statues: this is one of the greatest moments in American history. What country has statues to people who were traitors?”

‘Storm of Hope’ runs until January 30, Deitch.com

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