

Robert Longo by Michelle Grabner

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In the following interview, Robert Longo discusses how he seeks to slow down the act of seeing and creates an “extreme experience” for viewers through the translation of the photographic into monumental drawings. An influential figure in contemporary art since the early 1980s, and following a [major exhibition](#) at the Albertina Museum in Vienna and his [current exhibition](#) at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Longo addresses image-culture’s entanglement of politics and power, and his engagement with American iconography and canonical art-historical work.

Michelle Grabner You recently closed a major museum exhibition and currently have one on view: *Robert Longo* at the Albertina Museum in Vienna and *Robert Longo: The Acceleration of History* at the Milwaukee Art Museum until February 23, respectively. These museum exhibitions are on the heels of fall exhibitions at Thaddaeus Ropac and Pace in London. How does the proliferation and distribution of images in our information-based economy influence how you think about the curatorial aspects of exhibition making? In other words, what are the conversations you are having with curators these days?

Robert Longo As the artist, I’m inside the work. I’m blind to how others see my work. Collaborating with a curator is a great opportunity to have a dialogue with knowledgeable, respected eyes. My desire has always been to share. The director of the Albertina

Museum and curator Klaus Schröder were looking at my work from the outside, formally, from a traditional point of view; Margaret Andera, who curated my Milwaukee Art Museum exhibition, saw my work more from the inside with a more conceptual perspective. It was interesting in both cases to allow the work to unfold in space and time like a movie. Place became a vehicle for meaning.

MG Since the Reagan era your work has navigated a vast range of global and domestic politics—from neoconservatism to populism—while also bridging late twentieth-century information technology into our current cyber-system age. How have these contexts impacted your image selection?

RL The availability of images from the image storm has absolutely exploded. Everyone is recording everything: from a mass murderer recording himself to cat videos. The sheer number of images has made my navigation of them more intentional. I believe I am a chronicler of the time that I live in with a moral imperative. I'm free of sponsorship or the government.

MG Because you have always been interested in power structures, first manifested in your early '80s *Men in the Cities* (1977–83) series, how has your relationship to culture's authoritative signifiers impacted your investigation into depictions of dominant ideologies?

RL Human history has always been about domination, hatred, envy, and corruption. Since those early works, I have remained skeptical of power structures and convinced that politics is organized hate. But in responding to culture's authoritative signifiers, I don't want to merely illustrate or perform recreational outrage. However, at times I'm suspicious of anything that makes sense.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (American Eagle 2017)*, 2017, charcoal on mounted paper, 70.25 × 96 inches. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum.

MG Do you have a specific interest in American iconography and vocabularies?

RL Of course I do. I'm tragically an American artist. I've become increasingly aware that America is a sports team. Its main goal is to win, which is directly antithetical to what it means to be simply living and being.

MG Drawings from your *Destroyer Cycle* (2014–20) are culled from a lexicon of unambiguous and mainstream political images. Examples in your Milwaukee exhibition include *Untitled (American Eagle 2017)* (2017) and *Untitled (Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; January 6th, 2021; Based on a photograph by Mark Peterson)* (2021). But you have other series that are more coded and less transactional. I am thinking about the drawings in your *Et in Arcadia Ego* (2009–16) and *Hungry Ghosts* (2015–17) series. Can you discuss your interest in the range of images you choose to translate and the categories that you employ to organize your series?

RL Politics shape the world. Even images that are not unmistakably “political” are still political. Making art is inherently a political act. Ultimately, I'm interested in the mystery of an image. I'm drawn to an image on a profoundly visceral, emotional level—a cinematic epicness. You mentioned my *Hungry Ghosts* series, which are drawings based on the X-rays of historical paintings. Making those drawings was a chance to make the invisible visible, a desire to see beyond the surface.

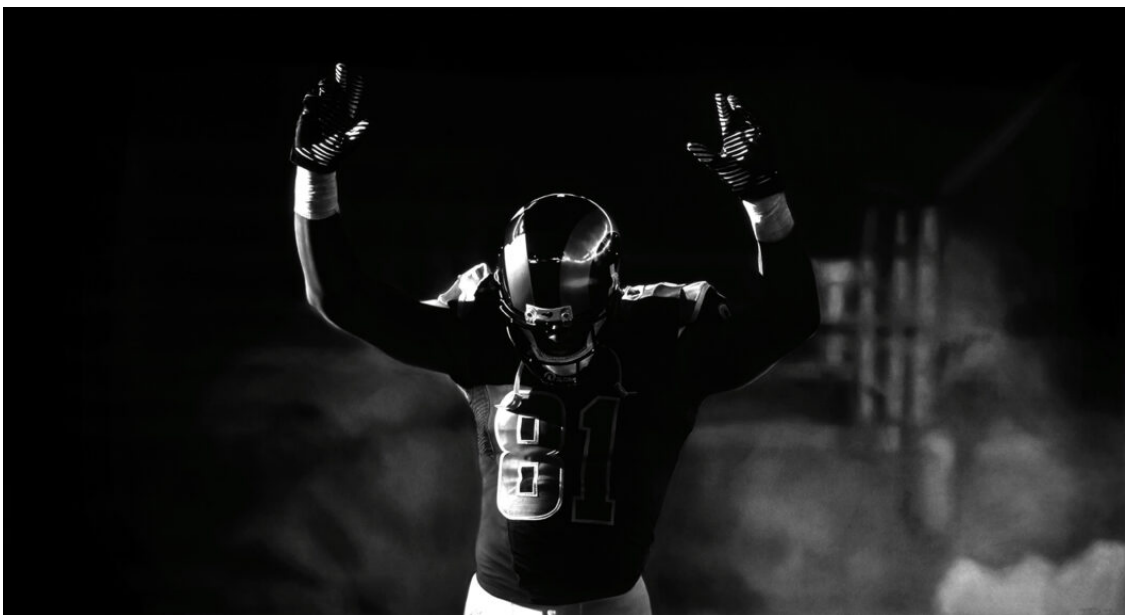
MG Your process of rendering images and translating the photographic to the hand-drawn definitely seizes the viewer's attention, especially viewers who initially believe that they are looking at photography only to discover that the work is a charcoal drawing and

produced with exceptional verisimilitude. Is this extreme disruption required in order to glean attentiveness from a viewing public awash in images? In your experience as an artist, was this always true?

RL We live in a culture of extreme impatience. In our current world, attention is power. I want seeing my work to be an extreme experience, not a casual one. The way I make these drawings is indeed a tactic to encourage the viewer to look more closely and to slow down. The making of the work is experienced in looking at it; you're witnessing the time it took to build the image. I'm after a truth that reflects back to us, that implicates us; it's a mirror with a memory.

MG The discourse around your early work was generally directed at the critique of the veracity of the image and engaged with discussions of appropriation and authorship. Why do you think these conversations have waned in the discussion of your work? Or in art discourse at large?

RL I think these conversations have waned because I'm not sure anyone truly owns anything anymore, but I always try to buy the rights to images I find. Also, it's important to note that my charcoal drawings are often composed of several source images that are highly altered. In the rare instances when I make few changes to the image, I include the photographer's name in the title, as I did for *Untitled (Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol; January 6th, 2021; Based on a photograph by Mark Peterson)*.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Kenny Britt, St. Louis Rams; Hands Up)*, 2016, charcoal on mounted paper, 65 × 120 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Milwaukee Museum of Art.

MG And how does your interest in translating canonical works from art history play into this discussion? I am thinking specifically about *Untitled (After Goya; The Third of May 1808, 1814)* (2024) and *Untitled (After Pollock, Convergence, 1952)* (2020), both included in *The Acceleration of History*.

RL My drawing based on Goya's *Third of May* was my attempt to deal with images from Gaza in a way that was not too volatile or graphic. Goya's painting is widely considered the first modern representation of war and a reminder of the relentless cycle of violence that has surrounded us for hundreds of years. The Pollock work is a bit more complicated and loaded on a lot of levels. It's about the intersection of abstraction and representation, as well as freedom of expression at a time when the world tried to destroy itself. Abstract Expressionism was the first great American art.

MG How does the monumental size of your drawings contribute to what I understand as a commentary on the velocity and immediate consumption of cultural production? And how does size factor into your interest in abstraction?

RL The scale has always been influenced by Abstract Expressionism. It proves a commitment to an image. At this scale, the labor and time is both homage and atonement.

MG The inclusion of sculpture and video in your Milwaukee exhibition demands different experiences from viewers. These works foreground dimensional and temporal qualities not available to image production or in the pictorial. Yet temporalities are profoundly communicated in the image's precise historical contexts and their citations: for example, *Untitled (Kenny Britt, St. Louis Rams; Hands Up)* (2016) or *Untitled (Protest for George Floyd; Minneapolis Minnesota, May 28, 2020)* (2021). What implications are in the title *The Acceleration of History*?

RL The title is based on a Gerard Piel text, which I learned about through Paul Virilio. I love the title because it captured the feeling of the work. I don't see much of a difference between the durational experiences of a video, sculpture, or a two-dimensional work. The picture happens every time you look at it. There's a democracy in viewing an image because you can read it however you want, moving around in time and space.

“I'm after a truth that reflects back to us, that implicates us; it's a mirror with a memory.”

— Robert Longo

MG Let's conclude with a conversation around style. You and I are both old enough to be imprinted by Hal Foster's "anti-aesthetic" thesis, along with your early Pictures Generation branding. Yet you are not copying photographs and found images but instead abstracting them. Is "style" involved in this process?

RL I'm dealing with timeless narratives via the ancient medium of charcoal to interpret contemporary events. I think the "style" that is present in all the works is hyperrealism. It's photo-based but highly altered. I'm trying to reclaim images from photography; there's a physical labor involved in handmaking a drawing that doesn't exist in the chemical or electronic process of photography.



Installation view of *Robert Longo: The Acceleration of History*, 2024–2025. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum.

MG To follow-up on this question about style, I can't resist revisiting a provocative comment that you made regarding too much expression in art. You boldly said something to the effect that looseness in your drawings looks "too arty." Can you say more?

RL Expression runs the risk of veering into self-indulgence, a desperate hope for meaning. Don't get me wrong. I'm jealous of gestural art. In the meantime, I'm selling fire in hell.

Robert Longo: The Acceleration of History is on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum until February 23.

Michelle Grabner is an artist, writer, and curator based in Chicago and Milwaukee. Grabner is the Crown Family Professor of Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she has been teaching since 1996.