Robert Longo. A Retrospective

Temporary exhibition
Author(s): Robert Longo

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The chronological organization of the Robert Longo retrospective in Nice [now shown at Museu Coleção Berardo] makes very clear this process whereby each new sequence in the work emerges formally from the preceding ones. As you would expect, the show opens with *Men in the Cities*, a set of large-format charcoal drawings that made Longo famous in the late 1970s. Against immaculate backgrounds, individual women and men dressed in sober black and white take up contorted and
uncomfortable postures, like a frozen moment of a dance. Or like Robert Capa's famous photo of the falling Republican soldier in Spain. These *Men in the Cities* do indeed seem to be buckling under a hail of machine-gun fire. In fact, all friends of the artist, they were trying to dodge the tennis balls that Longo threw at them when getting them to pose on the roof of his New York studio. He photographed their poses and then used the images for his drawings. The idea was that these drawings 'always had to be presented in groups of three, five or seven. ... This idea of grouping drawings together led to the *Combines*.' The *Men in the Cities* thus form what is like a succession of freeze-frames, whereas the Combines, which juxtapose different styles and materials, are like
'frozen montages from films.' 'What interested me,' says Longo, 'was collision: the collision of styles, of materials and of images. The combination of elements was meant to lead to an entirely new entity that was more than the sum of its parts. Their materiality is equivalent to the actual work of cutting up the film.' This movie-like form of collision was manifest in the work of a number of American artists in the early 1980s, notably in the paintings of David Salle, Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl. In the *Combines*, Longo was moving in a more sculptural direction as he extended his drawings and paintings with three-dimensional elements, all forming part of the same polyptych. In *Sword of the Pig* (1983), a naked bodybuilder
(from the neck down) fits between the silkscreened image of a strange factory and an aggressive black sculptural form. In *Black Planet* (1988), a dark sphere bleeds black bile, spewing out thick strands of neoprene. As for the bronze *Black Flags* (1990), they consist of blackened Old Glories, sometimes flapping in the wind and sometimes at half-mast, but always charred by some remote, restive population, or weighed and bogged down by petrol.

Intimate immensity

In the early 1990s, Longo, a passionate cinephile, made a film,
Johnny Mnemonic, starring the young Keanu Reeves. After the massive amounts of energy expended on this Hollywoodian adventure, he felt the need to concentrate on drawing, which he did in his *Magellan* series. This comprises 366 black-and-white sketches, each made on a particular day in 1996 (a leap year). Longo took his subjects from the daily newspaper, based on formal considerations and what the images 'said' about the times. The resulting images—an astronaut, Bruce Lee, a car crash—clash together like the different parts of the *Combines*. Judging by the
[Nice] show, the *Magellan* series defined the parameters for the works to follow. In these we see terrifying drawings of waves, H-bomb explosions, planets and big white sharks, all of them capturing the terrifying beauty of natural forces. These are offset by pictures of blood-red flowers and the faces of sleeping children: extreme violence next to supreme tenderness. Longo started making these giant-format drawings in 1999, trying to create a feeling of 'intimate immensity' and to suggest the scale of a world of vital forces beyond man's control. 'All these images represent the ultimate state of their subject: a bomb is supposed to explode, a wave to break, a rose to bloom.'

And this incredibly beautiful violence is also the violence of a time-bomb period in history. One motif leads to another by formal analogy, each one engendering the next: 'For example, 9/11 happened at a time when I was drawing waves, and gradually these started looking more and more like flames and smoke. I started using photos showing smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center to represent waves. Someone also sent me a photo of the World Trade Center collapsing, and it came out of my printer backwards. In fact, it looked incredibly like a mushroom cloud.'

Fatal romanticism

A few years later, in 2005, 9/11 ceased to be an implicit influence in other motifs and became the subject in its own right, with a big triptych in which the central panel, supposedly representing the towers, is a black monochrome. Already, in the Men in the Cities—whose disarticulated bodies seem to anticipate, twenty years before the event, those desperate figures falling from the New York towers—the black of the clothes formed flat, relief-free zones, abstract areas landed amidst figurative drawings. With Longo, though, black is not so much the reassuring surface that we come up against as a bottomless abyss, a long fall or nightmare that offers no prospect of an end. Falling is much more frightening than hitting the bottom, because when you hit the bottom you can at least come back up. Longo's black betokens a loss of the self in fathomless, infinite depths.

Few artists have so successfully grasped the essence of our dark times, when no one can say if and how we'll 'bounce back.' An intuitive spectator, for more than thirty years now, Longo's charcoal drawings have been developing what Werner Spies calls a 'fatal Romanticism.' 'There is nothing in his most recent works to indicate the existence of something beyond an abyssal melancholy. The most we could say is that horror is turned into a supremely effective sublimity. For these eddying waves swallowing everything up or those blooming mushroom clouds, unfurling their ever-changing variations of a mortal spectacle on their different stages—all these images are quite literally pictures of apocalypse, images that no other image could ever follow.' Significantly enough, the last work in the [Nice] show is a black monochrome.

Richard Leydier
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