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Art Where You're At

Look Closely: These Black-And-White Images Are Not What They Seem

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SUSAN STAMBERG

This is not a photograph. Looks like one, right? Nope. Artist Robert Longo used maybe the oldest medium known to man/woman to create it. It's a drawing he made with ... *charcoal.*



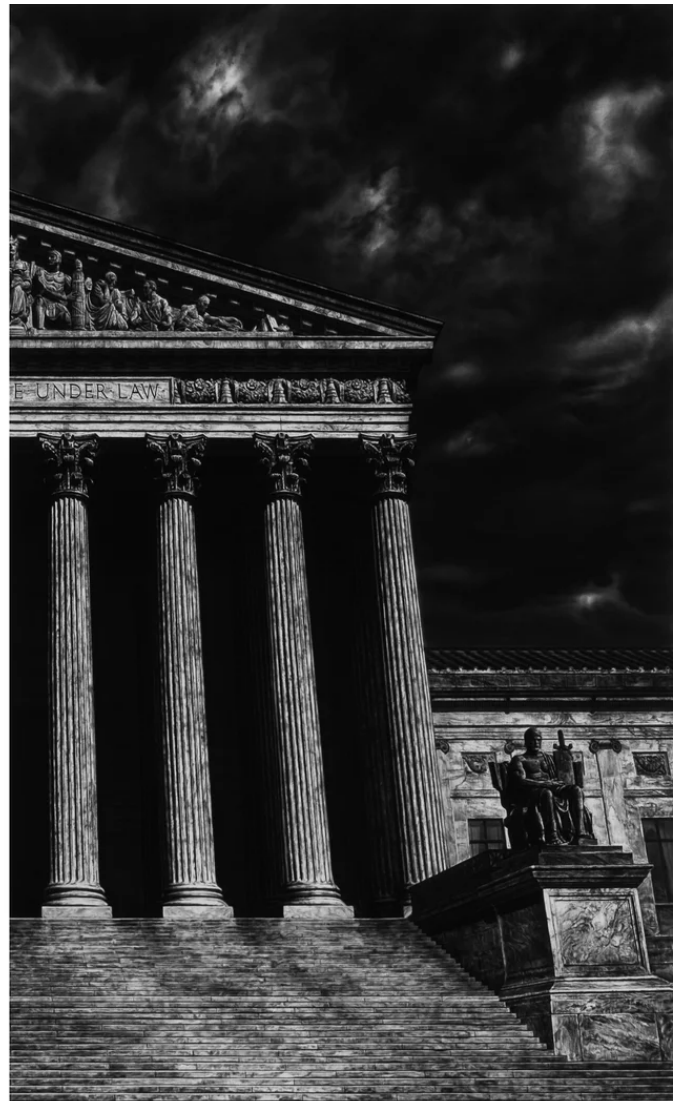
Robert Longo, *Untitled (Capitol)*, 2012-2013. Charcoal on mounted paper. Installation image by Lance Gerber for the Palm Springs Art Museum's exhibition *Storm of Hope: Law & Disorder*.

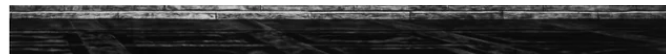
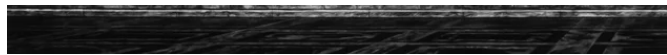
Robert Longo/Metro Pictures, New York; Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

How many pictures have you seen of the U.S. Capitol? Ever seen one like this? Well, if the picture is anywhere nearby, you can't miss it. It's monumental. Takes up a 41-foot-wide wall at the Palm Springs Art Museum in California.

This not-a-photograph is one of seven massive pieces in the exhibition *Storm of Hope: Law & Disorder*, on view until February. None of the seven drawings is a new work — Longo made them over time. Rochelle Steiner, former chief curator at the museum, exhibits them together because "he is so completely relevant for right now."

Hope? *Storm of Hope*? From a man who says, "The dire straits of our national narrative is frightening." And shows the U.S. Supreme Court like this:





Robert Longo, *Untitled (The Supreme Court of the United States (Split))*, 2018. Charcoal on mounted paper.

Robert Longo/Metro Pictures, New York; Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

Hope? With that merciless glowering sky, and the split down the middle. It's not precisely a political statement, it's a 4-inch glimpse of the wall behind the ends of the two massive paper panels. Longo made it in 2018. A Trump year. "Dire straits" in his view. So when we spoke recently, he had "hope for better days. Trump is out. There are vaccines. There are some reasons to hope."

Here's how Longo makes his drawings that look like photos. Photos are part of his process, but his huge pieces (*The Supreme Court* is 10 feet tall by 12 feet wide) are all handmade and take much longer to produce than the snap of a camera. They begin with his reaction to something that's happening in the world — an event that prompts his anger or pain. He harvests photo after photo of the place where the event is playing out — often it's an institution we all know. He arranges parts of various photos into a single image, projects it onto huge paper panels and traces the outlines. Then he starts to draw.

On paper. Yes, with *charcoal*. That ancient medium. Made at first from burned wood. "I'm right there with the cave men," Longo smiles. "I'm making these highly aggressive images out of dust." (He's an interesting talker, as you can see in this video.)

The Artist Profile Archive: Robert Longo



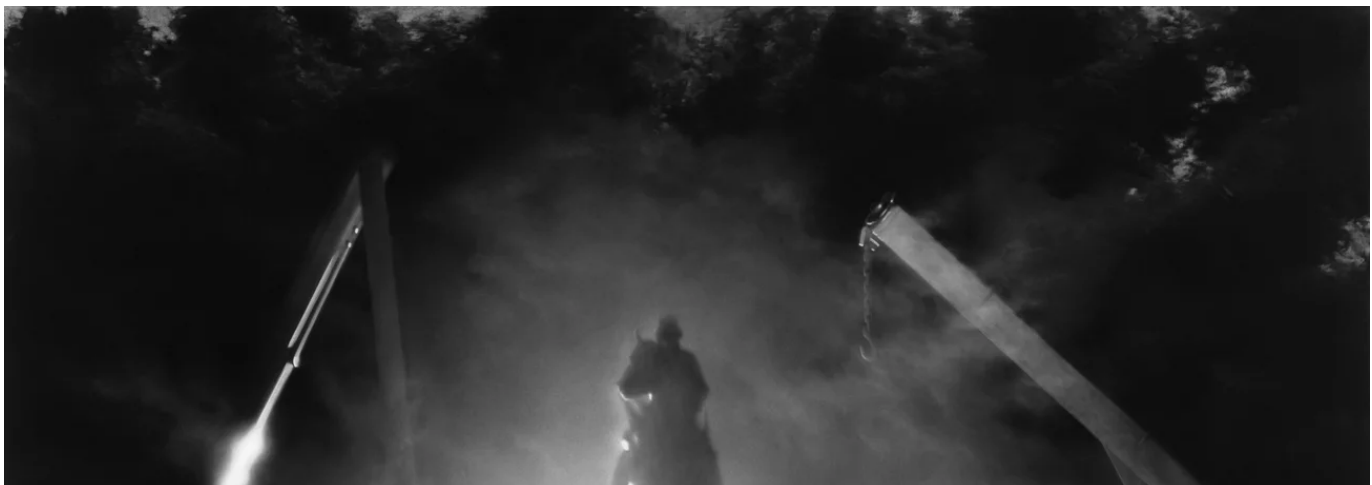
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"I think making any art is a political gesture," he declares. "Period." He speaks quite thoughtfully, and very personally. "Once I began making art, I discovered self-love. Art saved my life for sure."

So ... paper and charcoal ... laboriously applied, small stroke after small stroke. "Charcoal turns everything into grays," Steiner says. "We're used to seeing in technicolor." Charcoal, on Longo's immense paper, "changes the way you pay attention." Which is Longo's intention. "He's a chronicler of our times."

The work is political, but it's about more than politics. The curator explains that when Longo and his generation of artists (he was born in 1953) started working in the 1970s, "they were really thinking about images, and then began making images out of images." Images from TV, movies, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, all vying for our attention. "We're constantly bombarded by them," Longo says. He and his artist friends (Cindy Sherman among them) felt that changed how they looked at the world.

"They didn't make paintings of what they saw out the window," Steiner says. "They were thinking about what's in the media." At the same time, they were feeling enraged about what was happening in their world, their country, democracy. Longo turned the rage into artworks.





Robert Longo, *Untitled (Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue Removal; Memphis, 2017)*, 2018. Charcoal on mounted paper.

Robert Longo/Metro Pictures, New York; Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles and Pace Gallery

The artist found a subject for his powerful technique when newspapers and TV screens filled with images of Confederate generals being dethroned. This one, of Nathan Bedford Forrest and his horse, was removed from a public park in Memphis, Tenn. To me, through Longo's charcoal, he seems to be on a ghostly march through the mists of history. Forrest was a cotton plantation owner and slave trader, an important Confederate army general who, after the war, became first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Longo went to work on images. He made the streetlights brighter, got rid of police barricades and some nearby viewers, moved construction cranes around to different positions. He made it more ominous. "Looks almost like a stage set," Steiner thinks. Longo says, "I just amped up the drama a bit."



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Iceberg for Greta Thunberg)*, 2020. Charcoal on mounted paper.

Robert Longo/Metro Pictures, New York; Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

Finally, perhaps just when we've come to need it, this 15-foot-long expanse of whiteness feels like chilly calm after all the drama. Then you read the title, see that it's dedicated to climate activist Greta Thunberg and realize Longo's not just icing us down. He's sharing his alarm about the environment. This time he used his own photographs, taken on a trip to Iceberg Alley, where giant icebergs drift from the Arctic to Newfoundland and Labrador.

Steiner says when you stand near the drawing it towers over you. Kind of nervous-making. "Could it fall right on you? It's something enormous, more than you can manage."

And yet ... it's so beautiful. How do you make beauty out of the possibility of horror? Longo has a simple answer: "The lust of the eye," he calls it. "You want to seduce people" to confront it; get us to look at things we really don't want to see. So beauty, in works born in anger or desolation.

The curator says Longo is one of the kindest, most gentle people she knows. And yet these fierce drawings. "I think his anger comes with love and compassion for humanity," she says. "That's what fuels the beauty."

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