

Forbes

Robert Longo Coast-To-Coast; Bigger And Better Than Ever

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Installation view, "Robert Longo: A History of the Present" at Guild Hall.
PHOTO BY : GARY MAMAY

More than initially meets the eye rewards viewers who get up close with Robert Longo's artwork. What first appears simply black and white reveals itself as "medium black," "warm black," "black black" "cold black," "regular black" and a dozen other subtle variations of the shade. Most astonishingly, photographs turn into drawings.

When coming face-to-face with Longo's monumental pictures, jaws drop when that realization is made. No one working in photorealism produces at this scale. The mind boggles at the labor involved.

Longo's unique combination of medium, size and subject matter are currently on view from coast-to-coast. "Robert Longo: A History of the Present." at historic Guild Hall in East Hampton, New York, and "Storm of Hope: Law & Disorder." at the Palm Springs (California) Museum of Art, dramatically display an artist still working at the height of his powers 40 years after first commanding the art world's attention as part of the "Pictures Generation."

All Art is Political



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue Removal; Memphis, 2017)*, 2018, charcoal on ... [+] COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; JEFFREY DEITCH, LOS ANGELES; AND PACE GALLERY.

Longo (b. Brooklyn, New York; 1953) has described all art as political. He has been deeply engaged in movements since partaking in anti-Vietnam War activism. Longo attended high school with the man who was photographed face down, dead, a fellow female student screaming in anguish over his body, a victim of the 1970 Kent State shooting.

At Guild Hall through October 17, Longo's pictures are featured in two galleries, one focusing on his contemporary interpretations of the Abstract Expressionist artists who shaped his creative roots, the other presenting visitors with drawings addressing the traumas of American history.

A field of cotton. A closely cropped Native American headdress. A broken bird's wing. The Nagasaki mushroom cloud. A riderless horse, boots in backwards, from John F. Kennedy's funeral. A protest for George Floyd.

Similarly, in Palm Springs through February 6, 2022, seven monumental-scale charcoal drawings chronicle our time through critical, social and political subjects. Central to the exhibition are Longo's works representing the three branches of the U.S. government: the Capitol, the Supreme Court, and the White House. Longo's room-filling, seven-panel, 41-foot *Untitled (Capitol)*, from 2012-2013 anchors the exhibition and serves as a showstopper. Also included are four works referring to environmental reform, the representation of history through monuments, the perils of immigration and the fragility of the free press.

Both exhibitions showcase Longo at his flame throwing, provocative best. With notable exceptions (Nagasaki, George Floyd), these are quiet, still drawings—massive—veneers in a velvety charcoal chiaroscuro containing a screaming, thrashing interrogation of America's wide-ranging abuses and hypocrisy. These are history paintings in the tradition of Francisco Goya. His images of contemporary events and their blistering critique of the nation's rush toward authoritarianism and white nationalism under the presidency of Donald Trump feel destined for immortality.

Robert Longo x Abstract Expressionism

"A History of the Present" begins with his "Gang of Cosmos" series—exquisitely rendered, highly sensitized, black and white translations in charcoal—based on prominent paintings from the American Abstract Expressionist movement. Many of the artists who made the works these interpretations are based on lived and worked in the East End of Long Island, infusing the local landscape's presence in the realist abstractions.

"Eliminating the color allows you to focus on the brushstrokes and manner each of the artists used to create their unique style," Guild Hall Museum Director Christina Strassfield told Forbes.com of Longo's

“Gang of Cosmos” series. “It is wonderful to see the visitors come in and identify each; I hear ‘that is the Pollock,’ and, ‘there is the de Kooning,’ and, ‘that is the Rothko.’”



Robert Longo, *Untitled (After Pollock, Convergence, 1952)*, 2020. On view during “Robert Longo: A ... [+] COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Rothko was the most difficult for the artist to transition from oil painting to charcoal drawing.

“He was all stain—there’s layers and layers of charcoal to try and build up the value of the work—that was really hard to do,” Longo said of 2014’s *Untitled (After Rothko, No. 14, 1951)*, which checks in at a massive 70 x 80 9/16ths inches.

Why so big?

“I’m American—if it’s big it’s good. Seriously. I have always liked big art,” Longo told [The Artist Profile Archive](#). “Big art challenges ownership, it also shows a kind of commitment that I believe enough in this thing to make it this big. I believe making things big is a very American mentality.”

In addition to reconnecting Longo with the Ab Ex influences of his youth, “A History of the Present” sees him returning to the ocean and surfing the East End going back decades. Now teaching his son to surf, Longo created another of his classic wave drawings in 2021 specifically for this exhibition. *Untitled (Dirty Boy)* represents the largest wave drawing he has made to date—12 feet wide, seven feet tall—and his first in 10 years.

Robert Longo in New York City

Robert Longo’s artwork goes on view in his hometown of New York with [his debut exhibition at Pace Gallery](#) September 10 through October 23. “I do fly / After summer merrily,” showcases the final installment of the artist’s “Destroyer Cycle,” a series of never-before-seen works further examining notions of American power, violence and mythmaking.

The presentation includes six large-scale charcoal drawings created in 2020-21 along with a new sculpture: a highly reflective stainless-steel polyhedron acting as an omniscient eye reflecting the works surrounding it.

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