

ART & DESIGN

Robert Longo: ‘Gang of Cosmos’

Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON MAY 1, 2014

Petzel

456 West 18th Street, Chelsea

Through May 10

Metro Pictures

519 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through May 23

Robert Longo’s art is typically as subtle as a head butt. His two related Chelsea exhibitions aren’t exceptional in that respect, but it is impressive for its sweeping allegorical vision.

At the Petzel gallery the main attraction is an immense, photorealistic drawing of the United States Capitol. Rendered in charcoal on seven separately framed sheets of paper by Mr. Longo’s team of expert illustrators, it measures 10 feet high and over 37 feet across. It’s awesome.

Another room is occupied by an ugly, towering, faux bronze slab representing a corner of the U.S. flag. It juts up from the floor at an angle, looking like the aft of a sinking ship and called “Untitled (The Pequod),” in case you don’t get the point. In a third room hangs a drawing of the midsection of a saddled horse with an empty boot pointing backward in the stirrup, the traditional symbol of a fallen leader. It’s copied from a photograph of the horse that led President Kennedy’s funeral procession.

The Metro Pictures show consists of a dozen large, charcoal-on-paper copies of paintings from the 1950s by Pollock, de Kooning, Krasner, Frankenthaler and eight others. By itself the series comes off as a stunningly overproduced instance of 1980s-type appropriation art. Related to the works at Petzel, however, it assumes a more expansive import: It represents what has routinely been viewed as a triumphal time for American art and for the United States as a whole.

There’s an affecting autobiographical — not to say narcissistic — dimension to Mr. Longo’s visual funeral march. He was born in 1953, so the time he’s meditating on is that of his own childhood. He’s mourning promises of transcendent greatness undelivered for his country and himself.

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