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Robert Longo

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Robert Longo: *Untitled (Raft at Sea)*, 2016–17, charcoal on paper mounted on dibond, three panels, 140 by 281 inches overall; at Metro Pictures.



In this arresting and contemplative show, titled “The Destroyer Cycle,” Robert Longo highlighted the epic quality of contemporary events. The thirteen recent monumentally scaled charcoal drawings on view were based on still shots culled from the daily flow of images across our screens and newspapers. Pictures of refugees, riot cops, and prisoners, all rendered with a heightened realism in velvety gray scale pushed to extremes of light and dark, offered a crepuscular vision of the world at this turbulent political and social moment.

The first gallery presented a beautiful choreography between four works that each portray a lineup of figures. *Untitled (St. Louis Rams, Hands Up)*, 2016, sourced from a photograph taken shortly after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, depicts five African American members of the Saint Louis Rams entering the stadium side by side with their hands up in the “don’t shoot” pose. Adept at creating epochal images since beginning his iconic “Men in the Cities” series in 1979, Longo here casts the football players in vivid relief against a murky backdrop of spectators and captures the racial divisions embroiling the nation. Displayed nearby, *Untitled (Riot Cops)*, 2016, shows a wall of policemen whose faces are obscured by helmets and shields and the charcoal’s nocturnal atmospherics, and *Untitled (Prisoners, Kandahar Airport)*, 2016, based on an infrared telephoto image, depicts suspects being transported to a CIA black site. In the grainy haze of the latter work, only the body language in the line of figures—slumped shoulders, hands behind backs—is clearly legible, the image conveying a timeless sense of people in transit, displaced, abject. The last, and perhaps strangest, of the works showing figural lineups was *Untitled*

(Teletubbies), 2016, with the four Technicolor characters from the British preschool children's television series rendered disconcerting at large scale in black-and-white, their alien faces pressed to the foreground in what seems a futile attempt at communication.

Creating a breathtaking sense of drama in the back gallery, the triptych *Untitled (Raft at Sea)*, 2016–17, is a composite image based in part on a photograph of refugees on an inflatable raft in the Mediterranean. (That Longo stitched together multiple source photographs to create this image attests to the inadequacy of the term "Photorealist," which has been applied to him over the years.) The vast sea consumes the lower two thirds of the triptych—which measures around twelve by twenty-three feet overall—with the charcoal medium well suited to depicting the dark, glinting waves. The vantage point is low in the water, so the viewer looks up to the migrants riding high on the swell of a wave in the center panel. Offering a tonal contrast to this triptych, *Untitled (Justine)* and *Untitled (Juliette)*, both 2017, each use the palest values of gray to white to represent the faceted side of an iceberg that, at once imposing and delicate, fills the entire picture plane apart from a thin strip of water along the bottom edge.

In the upstairs gallery hung *Study of Lights Out* (2017), which portrays the Statue of Liberty in silhouette against a smoky white haze encroached by darkness. A little on the nose, it borders on bathos. Longo didn't need such an overt symbol to create an astute and visceral portrait of our times, as he had achieved that with the rest of the show.

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