



IN PRINT



[PURCHASE](#)
[ARCHIVE](#)

- March 2017
- February 2017
- January 2017
- December 2016
- November 2016
- October 2016
- September 2016
- All back issues**

ARTFORUM

now available

Robert Longo
METRO PICTURES

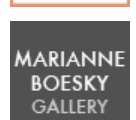
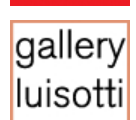
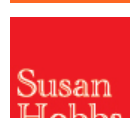
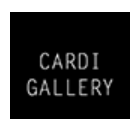
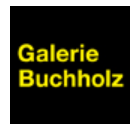


Robert Longo, *After de Kooning (Woman and Bicycle, 1952-1953)*, 2014, charcoal on mounted paper, 90 × 57 5/8".

Conjuring some of the best-known images in American art through a method both meticulous and transformative, Robert Longo's Metro Pictures show this past spring comprised a dozen charcoal drawings of classic works of Abstract Expressionism. Copied not exactly 1:1 but in sizes evoking the grand canvases of Jackson Pollock and the rest, the pictures seem instantly and deliciously familiar but at the same time strange, for while they minutely duplicate every detail of their originals, they of course lose all of those works' color. That's not so disorienting in the case of Franz Kline's black-and-white *New York, N.Y.*, 1953, but it's a weird shift for Willem de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle*, 1952-53, with its reds and greens, creams and pinks—and yet not so weird, for we've all seen these works in black-and-white. At one time, in fact, probably more people nationally and globally knew them that way, through cost-cutting reproductions in books and the press, than knew their true palettes. But whereas those copies could be no larger than a page and had the texture of ink on paper, Longo's hold the walls they hang on and are shown framed but without glass, so that we can see their soft matte surfaces soaking up light. The effect is altogether different from the visual and narrative layering of AbEx paintings, but it has its own kind of visual density.

The work summons the history of appropriation art, from Elaine Sturtevant through Longo's Pictures-generation peer Sherrie Levine and on, but in notes on this show and its companion at Petzel, the artist writes that his project "is not about appropriation—the AbEx show is meant as a love poem at its core." I wouldn't necessarily exclude love from the mimetic motives of an artist such as Levine, but it's true that if on first view Longo's drawings might seem to engage some Benjaminian issue of translation—to explore the changes in meaning embedded in the transfer from color to the gray scale, from pigmented medium to what Longo calls "dust"—I'm not sure that's what's really at stake. Not that those shifts aren't beautifully worked out and handled—they are—and they've involved a translator's extraordinary attention to the source. But a kind of manifest virtuosity has always been Longo's trump, the quality of his art that you can almost take for granted, and that, surely, is part of what he in turn responds to in AbEx. "These paintings represent our Big Bang moment," he writes, and the sentence implies a long Oedipal tale of ingestion and reproduction.

The Petzel show reinforced this sense of the Metro exhibition in a somewhat strange way. There, a seven-panel drawing of the Capitol building in Washington, DC, and a massive steel-and-wood sculpture—a black slab picturing the American flag on its waxed surface—together made a fairly heavy point about the present state of the nation. The drawing, a mere thirty-seven feet wide, set the American seat of government shining ominously against a dark charcoal sky; and the slab, seventeen feet high and set at an angle such that it seemed to be sinking into the floor, was called *Untitled (The Pequod)*, 2014, the *Pequod*, of course,



being the ship that Herman Melville made his doomed symbol of the republic in *Moby-Dick*. A second drawing introduced the funeral of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and another small drawing showed an Ad Reinhardt painting, also from 1963—the latest date for the AbEx paintings Longo chose. So it was as if, for Longo, the end of the heroic AbEx era, the Kennedy assassination, and our dire present-day politics were all interlinked—truly an odd, child’s-eye thought. (Longo would have been around ten in 1963.) Despite the grandeur of the Capitol drawing, the “love poem” at Metro was much the more rewarding of the two exhibitions.

—David Frankel

[f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [v](#) [p](#) [e](#) PERMALINK COMMENTS



[DIARY](#) | [PICKS](#) | [NEWS](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [FILM](#) | [PASSAGES](#) | [SLANT](#) | [ARTGUIDE](#) | [IN PRINT](#) | [500 WORDS](#) | [PREVIEWS](#) | [BOOKFORUM](#) | [A & E](#) | [中文版](#)

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY