

# Robert Longo's Art of The Now

**Tom Teicholz** Contributor 

*I'm a culture maven and arts enthusiast.*

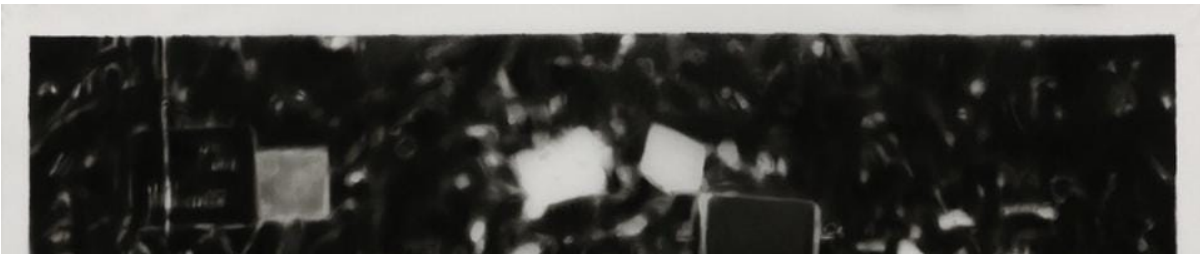
Follow



Dec 23, 2022, 12:53am EST

Listen to article 18 minutes

There is an Ocean wave gathering strength, filled with ominous portent, set to come crashing before us. It began with Ferguson, but it's always been there, only now it's gained the weight and heft of a Death Star, a collection of all the AR-15 bullets fired in a year of mass shootings. It is Albrecht Durer's "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" come to life during the pandemic, with its resisters at the Women's March, at Gun Control protests, at Black Lives Matter Rallies, and in the demonstrations at the Supreme Court regarding the repeal of Roe v. Wade. It is there in the windows of Kiev's stores – the three graces and the sweet dreams of brides everywhere – under attack, besieged by gunfire. It is a whole world turned inside out and a year's worth of New York Times stacked high. And, finally, given what we've seen and been through, there remains nonetheless the hope of Spring, the hope that blossoms in St. Francis of Assisi.





Robert Longo Study of Gun Protest, 2022. ink and charcoal on vellum. © ROBERT LONGO / ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACE LA

It's all there, in the charcoal drawings, the sculptures and film, of *Robert Longo: Sea of Change* which was on view through December 17, 2022, at PACE LA. (Apparently my writing about the show has taken longer than the show itself was on view).

Longo's work has long captured the moment. I can still recall walking into Metro Pictures gallery in New York's Soho in the way-back-when and seeing his *Men in the Cities* series – and how his work, which was even then so technically dexterous, spoke to the Eighties, as a cross between photography, advertising imagery, Wall Street culture and the pull and horror of Reagan America, becoming itself emblematic of the Zeitgeist.

Longo was born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island. He attended college at the University of North Texas, received a grant to study Art in Florence, Italy, and then enrolled at Buffalo State College where he received a Fine Arts degree. At Buffalo he met fellow student Cindy Sherman and was one of the founders of an art gallery that exhibited their work and that of their friends, and that exposed them to many New York artists, before Longo eventually moved to New York City.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, following his *Men in the Cities* series, Longo took his art into new arenas, directing several music videos including R.E.M's *The One I Love*, as well as commercials and even a Hollywood film, *Johnny Mnemonic*, which starred Keanu Reeves. Longo also performed in several bands during this period.

---

MORE FROM [FORBES ADVISOR](#)

## Best Travel Insurance Companies

By **Amy Danise** Editor

## Best Covid-19 Travel Insurance Plans

By **Amy Danise** Editor

---

Returning to drawing, Longo's artistic explorations have included his series of *Blackened-American Flags* (1989-1991); *Freud Drawings* (2002) which captured aspects of Freud's consulting room in Vienna which he was forced to leave in 1938 by the Nazis; *Monster Waves* (2002-2004) – images of massive cresting waves; and *The Sickness of Reason* (2004) where Longo rendered Atomic Bomb blasts.

**Forbes** | Passport

### A first-class guide to luxury travel

Explore the finest destinations and experiences around the world in the Forbes Passport newsletter.

**Sign Up**

You may opt out any time. By signing up for this newsletter, you agree to the [Terms and Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

In recent years, Longo has taken to investigating the works of American and European painters of the Post-World War II era with faithful recreations of works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Rothko as well as Edouard Manet, Jean Dubuffet and Yves Klein, among others. In each case, Longo uses his signature charcoal in ways that display remarkable mimicry and that create a dialogue between past and present; an investigation of what makes these artworks remarkable – yet these derivative works never feel like a departure for Longo. They remain recognizably his own. And occasionally, these works take on deeper meaning such as Longo’s 2014 “Guernica Redacted” which, like his best work, speaks powerfully to the moment.

AD



At the same time, the content of Longo’s work has become increasingly political, most notably with one of his most staggering and affecting works, *Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)*, now in the permanent collection of the Broad Museum, which conveys the unsettling and pervasive fear instilled by the police presence at the Ferguson, Missouri, protests in 2014.

---



Robert Longo: Sea of Change 1201 South La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90019 November 12 – December ... [+] PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY PACE GALLERY

Recently, Longo spoke with me by phone about the PACE LA show and his work. I am including his commentary interspersed with my description and review of the show. We began by talking about the pandemic and its impact, if any, on his practice and his work.

*LONGO: We live in this culture of impatience and the pandemic caused us to slow down, which helped me. I used the pandemic....*

*During the pandemic, these images have been weighing heavily on me. I'm trying to figure out how in the next three years to make new work. At the same time, I have a group of people that work with me. I have a responsibility {to them}. I didn't lay anyone off. We probably worked less hours and worked smaller, but we didn't miss a beat.*

Longo explained that after doing his 2014 Paris show of works by American Expressionists, he wanted to investigate the European artists of that era.

LONGO: *“The thing I found out that blew me away was that right at the beginning of World War Two [in September 1940] they discovered the cave paintings at Lascaux. As Art is about to die, they are discovering the beginning of painting. The irony is that as I was doing this show about the past during the pandemic, I’m trying to experiment to find a new way of working.”*

*Sea of Change* begins in the courtyard of PACE LA with two sculptures: One is a tall grey column that on closer inspection is revealed to be a stack of newspapers – a year’s collection of the New York Times, looking like a totem pole, or an indigenous rock pile column, or even recalling Giacometti’s post World War II sculptures.

A few feet away in the plaza is a giant ball that upon closer inspection is revealed to be a globe, but the countries on it are inverted upside down and seemingly turned inside out.

These two sculptures are separate works, each speaking to our time. The newspapers address our year of confinement and our obsession with the news during the Trump era as well our disconnect from daily local, national, and international events during the pandemic. The globe is our world gone dark, and the topsy-turvy post-truth Orwellian Trump era we find ourselves in.

At the same time, the two sculptures are situated as if in conversation with each other, offering the possibility of the Tower of Times Newspapers being a bulwark against a world gone dark; or if I’m being a pessimist, of the world steamrolling and knocking down truth and news itself.

LONGO: *I get the New York Times delivered to the studio. And during the course of the pandemic, I saved every newspaper. I just started stacking them and they were sitting there in front of me... Upon looking at Brancusi... I realized that 365 newspapers became 10 feet tall.*

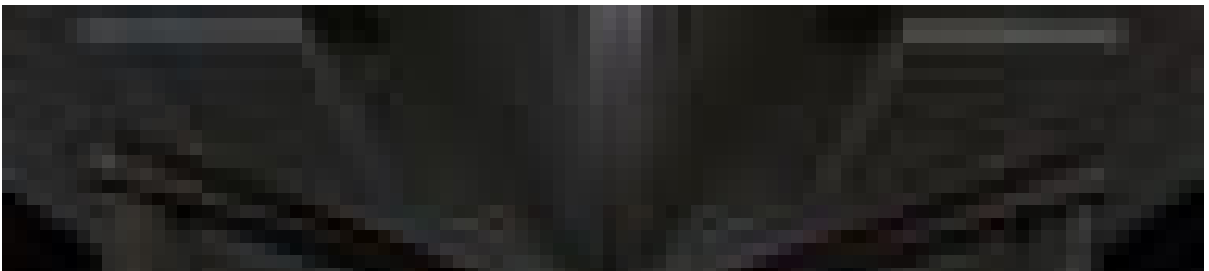
The sculptures serve as prologue to the exhibition which has its own narrative. The exhibition has three parts: a series of works on paper, a massive sculpture, and a film *Untitled (Sea of Change, An Homage to Winslow Homer)*.

The film takes up the entire wall of a darkened room where we watch on a loop the images of a wave gathering strength and then crashing on the shore. The film is in black and white and has been painstakingly color-corrected to make the blacks blacker (or, really, to make the blacks a Longo Black). We hear the roar of the wave and its impact. The effect of watching the film is trance-inducing yet also conveys a sense of impending doom as if the wave were a harbinger of what is coming for us all.

*LONGO: The film was literally finished the day before I came to LA... When I was working on the LA show, I realized I needed one other part for the show.*

*I [had] stumbled upon a Winslow Homer show in London which was so spectacular. I didn't realize how loaded his... images of oceans and seas [are] and at the same time, he was dealing with America after Reconstruction.*

*[During the pandemic in Easthampton at the beach], I remember looking at the ocean and going: You gave me answers before with the wave drawings. I said, help me. And then — I don't know why— I took my phone out and started videoing the waves... [Longo then made it into a film in] black and white and [adjusted] the black and white contrast — The audio is completely made up — it's basically earthquakes collapsing buildings and cannon fire."*







Robert Longo, *Death Star; The Year of 2018*, 2022, © ROBERT LONGO/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACE LA

Emerging from watching the film, you are confronted with a sculpture that takes up a whole room, a giant spiky golden orb, 77 inches in diameter, called *Death Star, The Year of 2018* that is suspended from girders. On closer inspection the spikes are in fact bullets – bullets from an AR-15 automatic rifle – and the total number of bullets (around 40,000) represents the total bullets fired in mass shootings in the U.S. in 2018.

LONGO: *The Death Star was originally meant for an exhibition two years ago but was derailed by the pandemic and there were problems in shipping it to LA. It almost fell out of the crate. I had this image of this thing rolling down the street.*

This reckoning with the weight of violence prepares us for the next room which contains the drawings of *Sea of Change*.

In a corner is a Longo reproduction of a Durer print, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The print is positioned so it is looking at the gallery which contains the drawings.

LONGO: *When I was making it [The Durer print], I was thinking about the mid-terms. I didn't know who was going to be in that picture [in terms*

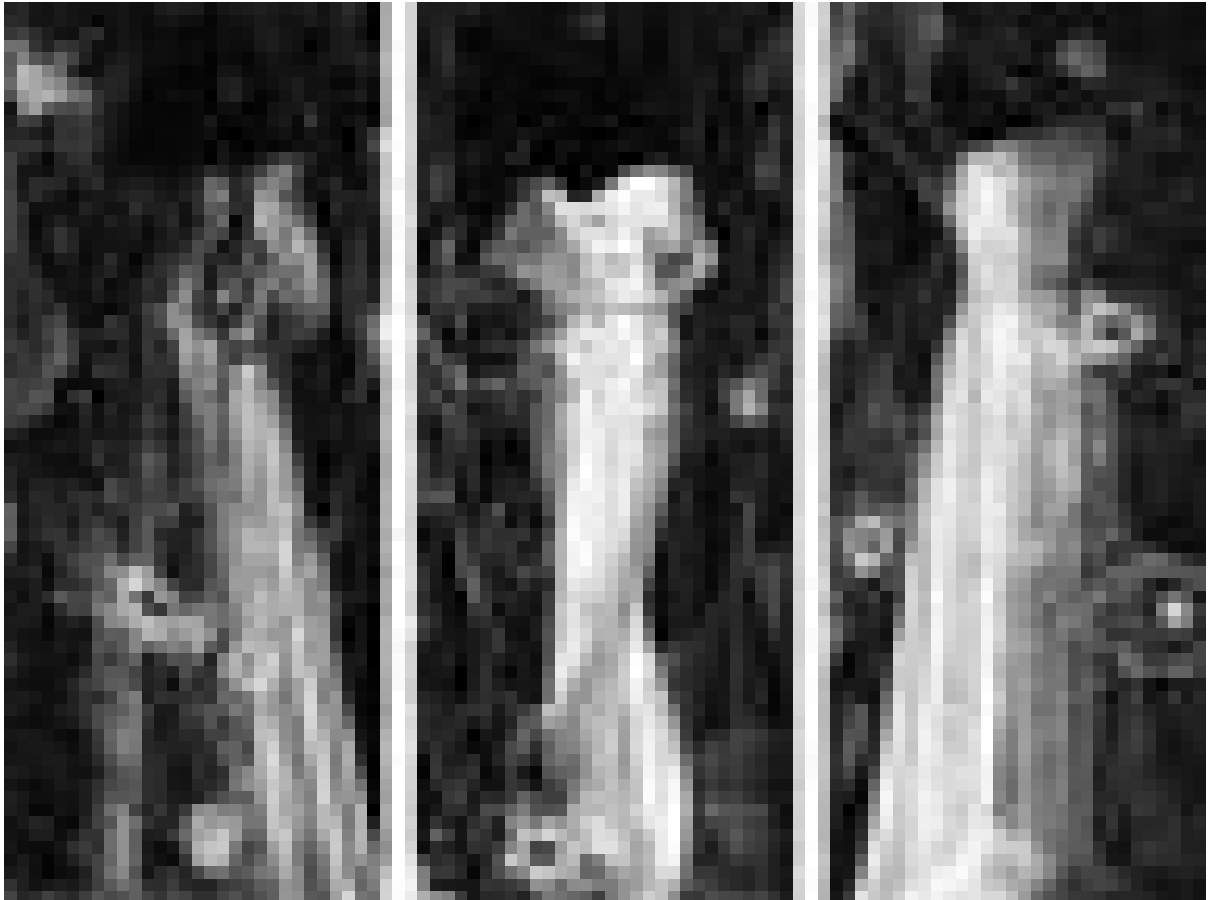


*of the election's outcome].*

*LONGO: I'm a big fan of Durer. I think of him as the first really modern artist who dealt with the mass production of his images...*

Which I pointed out was somewhat ironic given that Longo's works which often look like photographs or are often inspired by mass produced images but are one-of-a-kind artworks.

*LONGO: That's the irony that exists in the digital age. Musicians no longer make money from their mass-produced recordings; they live from their live performances. In that way, your artworks need to be one-of-a-kind recordings or performances.*



Robert Longo, Untitled (The Three Graces; Donetsk, Ukraine; March 14, 2022), 2022, charcoal on ...  
[+] © ROBERT LONGO/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACE LA

Along the far wall, there are three giant renderings of different bridal dresses in a store window display where the glass is shattered by bullet

holes (which refract the light and the image), named *Untitled (The Three Graces, Donetsk, Ukraine)*. In the images the dresses do not appear to be on mannequins, they are headless, standing in front of a black background, with what look like a series of cracks and bullet holes in the glass window display. The dresses are beautiful, and the cracks and holes appear as a defiling of beauty, innocence, and allegorically, reference the death of normal life, of happy events, and the human cost of war.

LONGO: *The images coming out of Ukraine were endless. I wanted to make a film from them, but I couldn't do it... It was too much.*

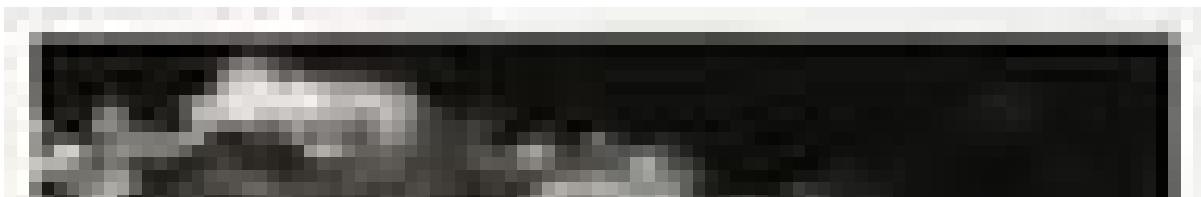
LONGO: *The three graces, the women in the three dresses was finished a week before it was shipped there [to PACE LA] ...While doing this show, I was thinking about whether representational art can be metaphorical...*

*Then I came across the image of the wedding dresses in the store window with bullet holes...It was like a trifecta. It had women, guns, Ukraine.*

*[When] I work on the compositions, I think in terms of ancient archetypes and make references to some art historical work that I use to help me figure out how to make that that picture.*

*[In this case, one reference was Winslow Homer]. Homer had even done a painting of the three graces as Black women getting dressed up [Dressing for the Carnival, 1877, National Gallery].*

The bullet holes also have specific reference to earlier Longo work including his *Bullet Hole in Window*, a 2015 work made in response to the murders at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. As well as a reference to one of Longo's earliest series, the 1982-1983 *Pressure* in which the study drawings contain a large rendering of what looks like a bullet hole.





Robert Longo Study of Supreme Court Abortion Rights Protest, 2022 WORK ON PAPER ink and charcoal on ... [+] © ROBERT LONGO STUDIO, COURTESY ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACE LA

On the opposite wall are images drawn from protests of the last several years, from gun control demonstrations, the women's march, the Black Lives Matters protests, and the recent protests before the Supreme Court regarding the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade. However, Longo has used the charcoal to abstract the news events in ways that are as much artistic as narrative and emotional. The images provoke a variety of feelings, from anger to strength, from fear to righteous indignation. They are hopeful and yet dark (both literally and figuratively). At the same time, they transcend the individual event, the moment, to become Art.

*LONGO: What I've been doing, it started with Ferguson... My work has always been very political. I think making art is political by nature. But these last [few years] since the drawing of Ferguson, the work has just gotten much more overtly dealing with an engagement of the present – [of] a real nowness. I feel this moral imperative to deal with images like these phantom images that come at us every day. How many more dead people [do we} need to see?*

These images, however, are not academic or merely artistic explorations of weighted current events. Longo is clearly passionate about these causes and as a result, he has made a practice of donating 20% of the sale of his political work to protest-related causes.

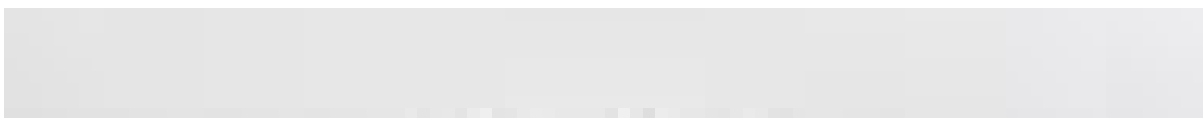
*LONGO: My political stand is more like ripping images out of the culture and putting them in front of you, saying: What do you think?*

Unlike the abstract expressionist works, the protest drawings, like the Ferguson work, are not literal renderings of press images but do recall images that we have all seen over the last few years. Longo has through his charcoal medium, given these works a haunting quality that makes the artwork transcend the specific event it is chronicling. If Ronald Reagan wanted to bring us “Morning in America,” Longo has brought us the dark night of the American soul, the twilight of the American experiment.

*LONGO: I had my mission with these works for sure... It's [about] dealing with this image storm that we live in and, somehow through this archaic medium of charcoal drawing... to slow things down to a point where people actually get to look at the pictures. [Although] I try to buy the images I use...there's a lot of altering... I'm really involved in the composition of the picture... I am trying to make a perfect version of that picture.*

*I like the democracy of art that, that you can look at it, you can read it whatever way you want. The pictures are constructed with mechanisms of how to make your eyes move around the picture. So, they have a lot of traditional values in that sense.*

*Barnett Newman said that he thought that abstract expressionists were representational. I think I'm an abstract artist [making] representational works.*





Robert Longo, *Untitled (Rise Above)*, 2017, cast polyester resin, black lacquer. © ROBERT LONGO/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACE LA

The final work of the exhibition is a statue of St Francis – and instead of his head there is a bouquet of fresh flowers. If we see the entire *Sea of Change*

exhibit as a narrative, then we go from the ominous portent of the wave to the deadly beauty of *Death Star*, the darkness of the US protests and the dashed hopes and siege of the Ukrainians. However, at the end of all this, at the vanishing point of the exhibition, is the Statue of St. Francis with fresh flowers, an end note of hope.

*LONGO: Absolutely. That's my hopeful piece... The Franciscans settled Los Angeles ... and St. Francis was a guy who talked to wolves.*

Talking to wolves may be the perfect metaphor for Longo's recent work, with it Longo confronts the howling in our times.

*Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#) or some of my other work [here](#).*



Tom Teicholz

Follow

I am an award-winning journalist and best-selling author, most recently of "Ivan of the Extermination Camp," and "9/12: The Epic Battle of the Ground..." **Read More**

[Editorial Standards](#)

[Reprints & Permissions](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

## Join Our Conversation

One Community. Many Voices. Create a free account to share your thoughts. Read our community guidelines [here](#)

Commenting as **Guest**  [Log in](#) [Sign up](#)

Be the first to comment...