

What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Very American’ Artist Now?

Robert Longo was a little nervous about opening a big show in Denmark this year.

By Carl Swanson Photographs by D’Angelo Lovell Williams

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ROBERT LONGO HAS had a studio on the top floor of a 19th-century Italianate building in SoHo since 1984. It’s creaky (and a little bit leaky) but still rather grand, having been built in the 1840s as an Odd Fellows hall: The working-class fraternal organization was at one point larger than Freemasonry. “You’re lucky the elevator worked. I can’t walk up anymore,” he tells me, rubbing his knee, when I meet him in the high-ceilinged, smudgy-walled space this past spring. I ask if there are other artists in the building and he says no. “I eat them,” he adds.

Longo first became prominent in his 20s as one of the main artists of the Pictures Generation, a loose cohort — including Cindy Sherman, David Salle, Richard Prince, Jack Goldstein and Sherrie Levine — that emerged in the late 1970s and dominated in the ’80s. The name came from the title of a show, “Pictures,” curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York in 1977 and featuring artists known for their appropriation of advertising and Hollywood tropes in deadpan, ventriloquizing works that updated the Pop Art of the 1960s for a younger, far more nihilistic generation. They used the language of mass consumption — a language they grew up with, having been born into postwar prosperity during the baby boom — to critique a culture that had become increasingly defined by greed and self-indulgence. Longo’s most famous works of this period were his drawings known as

“Men in the Cities”: photorealistic portraits, rendered in charcoal and graphite, of figures whose bodies twist and recoil, like they are either dancing or dying, all dressed as if they might be off to work at a midcentury office on Madison Avenue.

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Longo himself embodied a certain kind of cocky, brash 1980s New York cool, walking a knife’s edge of co-opter but not co-opted, hip but not sold-out. He found a look — rockabilly mullet, Ray-Bans, black jeans, boots — that he’s stuck with, even as his black hair turned silver. A self-described image thief, he wanted to make art that was so big, so compelling, that nobody would be able to look away. Art that was as big as any ad campaign or movie. Art that would make him a star. “My way of being avant-garde,” he once said, is to “have 30 million people think I’m avant-garde, not just a bunch at some arty cocktail party.” He had no use for boutique intellectual fame and, over time, many of the boutique intellectuals didn’t have much use for him either. Instead he sought to play in the world of popular entertainment, where he could have more impact. He fronted a punk band called Menthol Wars with his fellow artist Richard Prince on second guitar. He directed music videos for “The One I Love” by R.E.M. and New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle.” He made an action movie for a major Hollywood studio. He became so ubiquitous that, as he put it in Interview magazine last year, “I was one of the artists that was blamed for the ’80s.”



“Untitled (Jules),” an entry from Longo’s series “Men in the Cities” (1979-83). Courtesy of Robert Longo Studio © 2025
Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Now, Longo is 72 and has spent the past year working on dueling retrospectives. One originated at the Albertina museum in Vienna last fall, and then traveled, in slightly modified form, to the Louisiana outside of Copenhagen. The second opened, also last fall, at the Milwaukee Art Museum, where he called it, somewhat portentously, “The Acceleration of History” (Longo never undersells his

intentions). A sequel of sorts to that show, including several of the same works, opens over four floors of the Pace Gallery on West 25th Street in Manhattan in September with the title “The Weight of Hope.”

The day we meet at his studio, Longo is about to leave for the Denmark opening, and he’s nervous. It’s only a few months after Donald Trump’s inauguration and, in addition to threatening a trade war and deriding what he sees as the European freeloaders in NATO, the president has vowed to make the Danish protectorate Greenland an American territory, refusing to rule out military force. “I’m a bit worried about being an American over there,” Longo says.

Longo’s career has been varied and expansive, but he’s best known these days for his wall-commanding photorealistic charcoal drawings on paper, often depicting current events, usually based on one or more indelible news photos. They look less like what you’d encounter in a newspaper, though, and more like history paintings in the tradition of Théodore Géricault’s “The Raft of the Medusa” (1819) or Francisco Goya’s “The Third of May 1808” (1814). He depicts refugees fleeing political violence, football players taking the knee and steaming landscapes of protesters against police brutality or the war in Gaza.

His drawings take him and a team of assistants anywhere from a few months to a year to create. The process, which begins with the application of velvety layers of charcoal, leaves dust in the air. An elaborate ventilation system hangs from the ceiling. He deploys the visual iconography of photojournalism, but blown up so drastically that you can’t just flip (or swipe) past. And while he’s often topical, his work’s ominous tone has remained consistent for the past five decades, creating a long-running rumination on American exceptionalism. “It’s guy stuff, very American,” Longo once told the late artist and writer Walter Robinson. “It’s about how men have found their way in the world.”



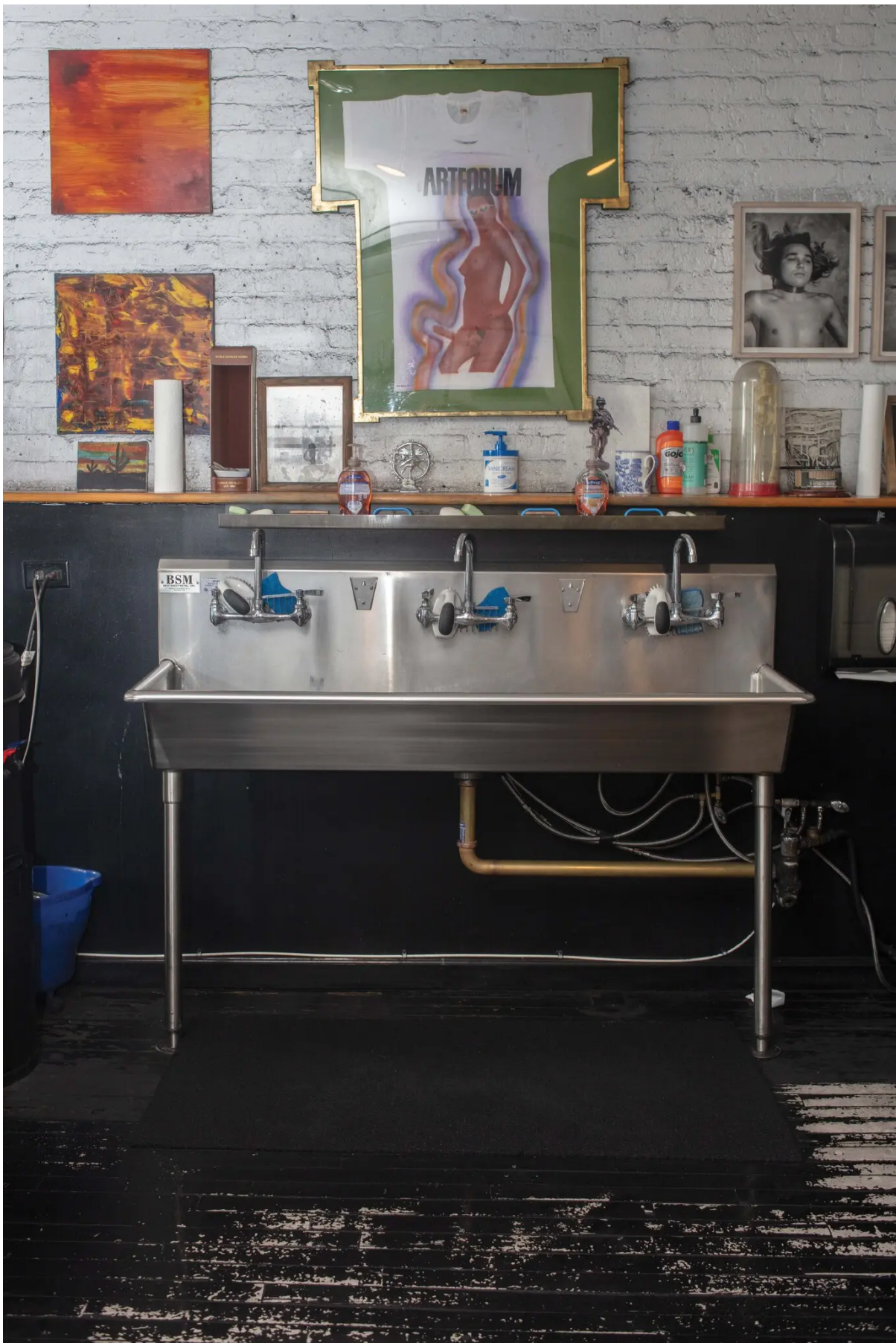
A work in progress in Longo's studio depicting firefighters battling a wildfire in Gorman, Calif., in 2024. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

For decades, Longo, like his work, has been subject to misunderstandings: Is he critiquing or glorifying? From 2007 to 2018, he made a series of large-scale drawings of sharks with their mouths gaping hungrily; the first was sold to a corporate “big shot,” as Longo described him, who was rumored to have hung the piece over his desk, much to Longo’s chagrin. He considers himself a political artist, but his is a politics of looking and showing, of theatricality and atmospherics. It’s the agitated avant-garde politics of flickering images and dissonant music, the slightly enervated politics of staring at a TV screen for too long. There’s nothing agitprop about it. In 2014, when he made a big drawing of the militarized police in Ferguson, Mo., during the protests following the killing of Michael Brown, his sympathies might have been with the protesters, but there was still an eerie and uncomfortable glamour to the depiction of authoritarian muscle: The cops looked like charismatic villains in a comic book.

If anything, once you get past its scale, Longo's art is humanist: It reminds us to be empathetic despite feeling depleted by overexposure to mass media — or, today, social media. Longo, who has said he's interested in the “consequences of images on the psyche,” wants us to react to something, to not be numb, to find some kind of meaning in the feedback.

STENCILED ON THE door to Longo's studio are the words “Something Wicked This Way Comes.” Next to them is a diamond-shaped yellow sign with a shark on it that reads “Surf at Your Own Risk.” He has a beach house on Long Island and for decades surfed there with the three sons he raised with the German actress Barbara Sukowa. (In 2022, he married the filmmaker Sophie Chahinian, whom he met when she interviewed him for her Artist Profile Archive in 2017.)

The studio itself is stocked with bro-ish knickknacks: There's a taxidermy deer head bolted to the wall and a framed T-shirt depicting the advertisement that ran in a 1974 issue of Artforum in which the sculptor Lynda Benglis appears nude and brandishing a dildo. Next to the sink is a slightly larger than Barbie-size human skeleton under a bell jar.



Above a sink in the studio, a framed Lynda Benglis T-shirt. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

The work area is uncluttered, however, and a selection of his current concerns is hanging on display — a triptych that will be included in the Pace show in September. One 8-by-12-foot panel shows a soldier manning a howitzer in Ukraine. The second portrays a crowd of people in Mecca, seen from above. The third depicts a group of firefighters attempting to put out a 2024 fire in Gorman, Calif. All are based on news photographs, blown up, simplified, streamlined and maybe sometimes merged with details from other photos, then drawn in charcoal on paper. He rattles off their themes from left to right: “War, religion and nature,” he says.

Like many people of his age and demographic, Longo still gets the newspaper in print every morning. He had The New York Times open on his lap when I arrived for my visit to his studio, and he typically scours it, and its photographs, obsessively. (During the pandemic, he collected a year’s worth of papers and ended up with a stack that was nearly 10 feet tall, which he cast in bronze and showed at Pace in 2021.) One of the signal moments of his life involves an iconic photograph: the image from the Kent State Vietnam War protests, when the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four students in May 1970. The body that the 14-year-old Mary Ann Vecchio is kneeling over was a friend of Longo’s from high school: Jeffrey Miller, who was 20 when he died. From that point on, mass media became personal.

Longo grew up in Plainview, in central Long Island, as what he calls a “hippie jock” who played football but had trouble reading and even being able to tell time because of his dyslexia. He liked to draw, though, and watch movies. He wasn’t great at school, but it was important for him to go to college to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War. Eventually, after failing out of a college in Texas and a stint learning how to be an art restorer in Florence, Italy, he ended up at the State University College at Buffalo, studying sculpture. There he met Cindy Sherman, another art major, who’d grown up not far from him in Huntington, Long Island. They dated for a while and have been friends ever since.

Longo and Sherman would go to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum) together. Even then, he liked to hold forth. “I guess he was my introduction to contemporary art,” she tells me. Sometimes there would be a quiz afterward. With some other friends, they started a small but influential nonprofit space in Buffalo called Hallwalls, in part because “nobody else would show our art,” Sherman recalls with a laugh. They invited conceptual artists like Sol LeWitt, Robert Irwin and Jonathan Borofsky to visit. Which is how, when they moved to Manhattan in 1977, to the then-fairly derelict area around what is now South Street Seaport, they already had the beginnings of a network.



A triptych, “Untitled (Raft at Sea)” (2016-17), based on a news image of Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Courtesy of Robert Longo Studio © 2025 Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Longo wasn't shy about his ambitions. The curator and art historian RoseLee Goldberg, who met Longo and Sherman shortly after they moved to New York, recalls Longo telling her in the early '80s that he wanted to be a "household name," to which she responded, "What, like Clorox?" His confidence seemed to match the swaggering energy of the Reagan era, when money and fame came quickly to the young, good-looking and brash (see also: Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat). "I think my art is going to change the world," Longo told *The Times* in 1985. He and Sherman would throw parties, and he'd get annoyed when Andy Warhol showed up. "I remember my immediate reaction was, 'He wasn't invited!'" he once told his friend Keanu Reeves in *Interview* magazine. "Thinking about it now, I'm like, 'Whoa, where was my brain at that time?' But that's how aggressive we were with the idea of trying to replace the people in front of us."

"I was quite full of myself back then," he tells me. "I remember reading about how Pollock wanted to kill Picasso. I basically wanted to kill Warhol."

But whereas Warhol was camp and detached, Longo's version of Pop was earnest and apocalyptic. He once built a spherical sculpture with a three-foot diameter made from 18,000 rounds of live ammunition — the figure approximating the number of people killed by guns in 1993 in America, excluding suicides. When he reprised the sculpture in 2018, it had doubled in size to reflect the increase in gun deaths; now it was made of 44,000 bullets. He called both iterations "Death Star."

"Men in the Cities" was his most Warholian endeavor, iterative and as instantly recognizable as a screen print portrait. Longo made about 40 of them between 1979 and 1983. His friends — Sherman and the art dealers Larry Gagosian and Jeffrey Deitch, among other people in the downtown world — modeled for the photographs that were the drawings' source material. Their poses were inspired by how actors doubled over when they were shot in Sam Peckinpah movies, and by the way people jumped around at punk rock shows, but also by Michelangelo's *Slave* sculptures and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1970 film "The American Soldier," among other high-low references that Longo, a good art talker, reference maker and inveterate salesman of himself and his art, has offered up over the years.

They are some of the most durable artworks of their era, protean images that seem to both be artifacts of a particular time and place but also, in retrospect, to foretell so much, from the images of office workers leaping to their deaths from the World Trade Center to the opening credits of “Mad Men.” Their influence has endured and echoed for decades. Little wonder that the works hang on the walls of the investment banker-serial killer Patrick Bateman’s apartment in the 2000 film adaptation of the 1991 novel “American Psycho,” Bret Easton Ellis’s dark sendup of yuppie rapacity. “Cindy and I were talking about the fact that in the history books, if you’re lucky, you get one picture,” he says. “The one picture I will get in history books will be ‘Men in the Cities.’”



“Untitled (Cindy),” a “Men in the Cities” work for which the artist Cindy Sherman modeled. Courtesy of Robert Longo Studio © 2025 Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

He didn't intend for the works to become totemic in quite the way they have, as depictions of the angst of the young striver. In any case, he says, “they were never yuppies. They were my friends.” They just happened to dress as Longo did, like they were in a Jean-Luc Godard film. He achieved his subjects' ominous poses by throwing objects at them, like film canisters and tennis balls.

By the time the '80s were ending, the art world had begun to lose its patience with Longo. Some of it was just fashion — a man who so effectively inhabited the role of the zeitgeist-surfing, attention-seeking bad boy of one era is always going to seem a bit out of step in the next. But some of it was also what critics often saw as a certain headlong unevenness of his prodigious output, which ranged from video to performance to sculpture to what he called, borrowing the word from Robert Rauschenberg, his Combines: installation pieces that mixed paintings, photography, sculpture and readymades.

It was, to some critics, just too much. His 1989 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was full of sculptures inspired by science fiction and a sense of foreboding doom. This included 1986's "All You Zombies: Truth Before God," an alien with two mutated faces, wearing samurai-like battle armor and raising a tattered flag, either in victory or surrender. The Los Angeles Times said the show was, "by gallery standards, as spectacular as 'The Phantom of the Opera' and as ominous as Darth Vader with its running theme of the Oppressive Society." The critic Roberta Smith wrote in The Times, "If Longo hadn't come along, his art could almost have been plotted on a computer."

In 1990, while also blaming the Persian Gulf war and an art market recession, Longo regrouped and moved to Paris. The art world's rejection seemed only to stoke his desire to reach a larger audience. He directed an episode of "Tales From the Crypt" on HBO. He made some popular music videos. He was living back in the United States when he directed his first film, 1995's "Johnny Mnemonic," based on a William Gibson short story and starring Reeves, Ice-T and Henry Rollins. It shares a dystopian, reference-heavy visual palette with Longo's artwork and, like most of Gibson's writing, it has some prescience: Reeves's character, who has an implant in his brain to enable him to be a sort of walking thumb drive for secure data transport, is being hunted because he carries in his head the cure for the black shakes — defined as "information overload." In 2021, the year the film takes place, there's an epidemic.



Another work based on a news image, this one of Syrian and Iraqi refugees at a processing center in Serbia in 2015. Courtesy of Robert Longo Studio © 2025 Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The movie, like the LACMA retrospective, was met with withering reviews. He felt the studio forced actors on him — like the action star Dolph Lundgren, a popular draw in international markets — and whittled down the script into incoherence. He again took stock of where he was and re-devoted himself to drawing. Longo would become newly relevant in the 21st century by doing what he always did, wading through the daily assault of images, which had moved from newspapers and television screens to the internet and had only become more desensitizing. He pulled out the ones that spoke to his own experience of being American and rendered them in meticulously refined detail. He simplified and reverted to his strengths, but the experience with his Hollywood debut was so traumatizing that he never made another movie. Today an enormous poster for “Johnny Mnemonic” presides over the door inside his studio — the last thing you see before you leave — like the pelt of a great animal he once slew.

COPENHAGEN IS A polite city, but the atmosphere at the opening of Longo's show in April at the Louisiana feels a little charged. Posters of "Men in the Cities" images are hung up around the capital, as if advertising the launch of a new store. (In 2010, Longo restaged a version of them for an advertising campaign for Bottega Veneta.) But the anxiety they convey is now palpable.

At the dinner for the exhibition, I'm continually confronted by Danish incredulousness, most of which boils down to: "Just what is going on with your country? We thought we were friends." People want to know if this show, with its images of handguns aimed right at the viewer — titled "Bodyhammers" (1993-94) — and Marines folding a gigantic rippling American flag — 2022's "Untitled (End of the Empire)" — would somehow be "a problem" in America now.

Earlier that day, at the press preview, Longo himself is on the edge of apology. "This is all I can do. I wish I could do more," he says, assuring the Danes that he, personally, has no interest in taking over Greenland. Longo has a joke he keeps making. Recently, he told his ex-wife, who was born in postwar Germany, that he was ashamed of having an American passport. "And she said, 'I've felt that my entire life.'"



Some of the artist's brushes. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

Over dinner, the curator of the show, Anders Kold, quotes the opening lines of Dante's "Inferno" in his speech: " 'In the midway of this our mortal life, I found myself in a gloomy wood, astray,' " adding that "the sense of danger is imminent."

He's speaking about Longo's small charcoal drawing of Goya's "The Colossus" — a painting, dating to around 1808, of a giant who towers over a hillside town. But he's also referring to what is on the minds of almost everyone in the room: the uneasy feeling that the world is changing in abrupt and uncontrollable ways.

Kold later tells me that there have been two notable additions to the show since it moved from the Albertina. The first is a wall sculpture from 1986 called "In Civil War" that consists of a steel rod outline of the United States affixed to a blown-up silk-screen of Andrew J. Russell's 1863 photograph of the Second Battle of Fredericksburg, with 18 baseball bats dangling beneath it. (One of Longo's

recurring big ideas is how much our politics have become like sports, where we must pick a team.) The second is a 2024 drawing of student protests against the war in Gaza.

As the dinner winds down, I find Longo walking through the show alone. The galleries are otherwise empty. “I don’t really even remember making some of these,” he says quietly.

We stop in front of one of the most famous of his more recent pictures, “Untitled (Raft at Sea)” (2016-17), depicting a group of Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean, a composite of news images from 2016 and pictures Longo took of the ocean. That year, the Syrian civil war displaced nearly a million people, and many of them drowned trying to get to Europe. The work is so huge that you must look up at the refugees on the raft; the viewer’s perspective is from the water, as if you’re bobbing in the waves.

Longo pauses before the work. “How miserable must your life be to get on an inflatable raft and try to escape? What became of them?” he asks. He’s captured something dire about the state of our world, and its implications weigh on him. But he also points out a man on the edge of the raft, and how there’s a beam of light shining off his life jacket. “Like there is some hope,” he says.

A correction was made on Aug. 12, 2025: A picture caption with an earlier version of this article, relying on information from a publicist, misstated the materials used in a Robert Longo artwork. It is a charcoal drawing of a pit of snakes, not an ink-and-charcoal drawing.

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