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## The Perfect Image: A Review “Robert Longo: The Acceleration of History” at Milwaukee Art Museum

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An inflection point in culture and politics has emerged as our nation leans deeply rightward and allies itself to capitalist strongmen. Robert Longo may be one of the few and best artists to document this change, since he has reflected on images of power and vulnerability in his photorealist drawings for many years. “The Acceleration of History” at the Milwaukee Art Museum is a testament to the power of images to hold a mirror to ourselves. Monumental drawings offer insight into the velocity at which we negotiate power, capital and violence in our world.

At times Longo’s subject matter seems simplistic, perhaps even a bit cliché. An eight-foot drawing of an ascending American flag is, on its face, quite literal. But the drawing is split evenly in the middle, the flag on the lower half, and an area of deep black space above. We can read the black area as sky, but the color assumes a visual balance to the flag itself. The title reads that the flag is rising, which assumes that it will cover this black expanse. But perhaps the flag has reached its peak, forever exposing the void beyond. The liminal nature of this image is chilling, and Longo uses shadows and darkness throughout the exhibition.

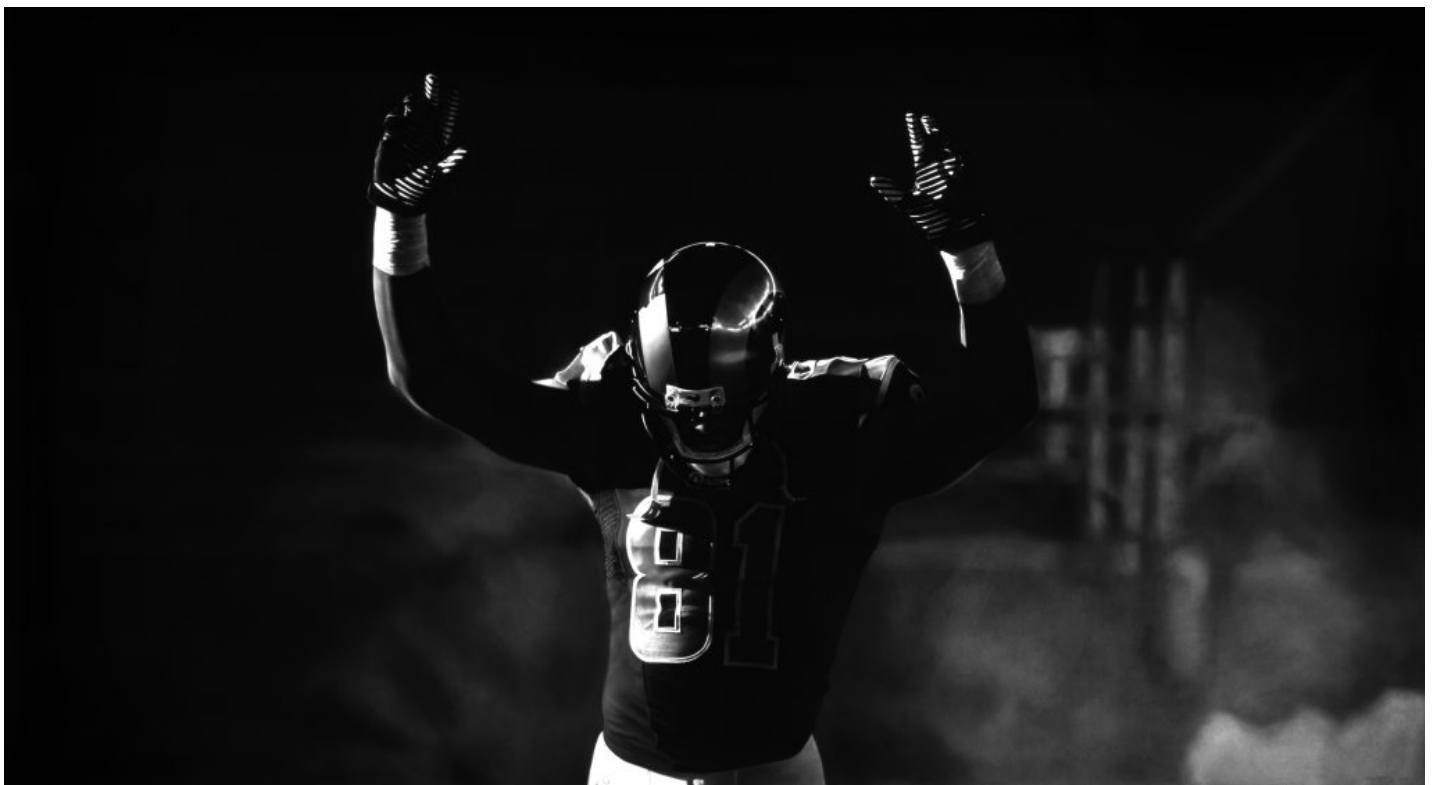


Robert Longo, “Untitled (Ascending Flag),” 2023, charcoal on mounted paper, 100” x 96”/Photo: Robert Longo and Milwaukee Art Museum

Another drawing depicts the towering facade of the Supreme Court building in Washington D.C., rising in sharp perspective against brooding clouds above. The figures of Justice on the sides of the great staircase appear to have been cast into dark shadow. In addition, the drawing has been framed as a diptych, which creates a literal fracturing down the middle of the building itself. Color, perspective and composition combine to create a certainty about Longo’s view of what is happening to and within this hall of justice.

Ambiguity around what appears to be journalistic photography is Longo's strength. The artworks are drawings, removed from the camera and offer the laborious traditions of the handmade. The drawings are also manipulated, and not necessarily faithful to their original sources. Longo's knowledge of art history is also in play as he curates images that expose the Sturm und Drang of experience. The drawing of Kenny Britt of the St. Louis Rams with his hands up in a gesture of supplication to armed police feels visually archetypal, like Greek statuary. A triptych of ghostly wedding dressings displayed behind bullet-riddled storefront windows in Ukraine is titled "The Three Graces."

Robert Longo has long understood the impact of images on our psyche. As a young man, Longo's classmate and friend Jeffrey Miller was one of the victims of the Kent State massacre of students protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Miller, dying on the ground, is surrounded by a horrified Mary Ann Vecchio, photographed in searing detail by Pulitzer Prize-winner John Filo. The image is often called the "Kent State Pieta." Photography, and the veracity of how it can describe reality while also revealing much beyond its literal meaning, has become Robert Longo's project.



Robert Longo, "Untitled (Kenny Britt, St. Louis Rams; Hands Up)," 2016, charcoal on mounted paper, 65" x 120"/Photo: Robert Longo and Milwaukee Art Museum

The exhibition also includes Longo's sculptures and film. "Death Star; The Year of 2018" is a gargantuan orb hung from an armature, radiating 40,000 bronze metal jacket bullets. Offering a visualization of gun violence, the bullets and overall weightiness of the sculpture ask us to visualize the celestial scale of this issue. Twenty percent of the proceeds from the sale of "Death Star" will be donated to Everytown for Gun Safety, the largest gun violence prevention organization in the United States. While certainly honorable in conviction, and knowing Longo's history in experiencing gun violence, I find this artwork to be far too on the nose. It reads as a one-liner, which is unfortunate given the gravity of its topic.

The exhibition concludes with “Untitled (Sea of Change, A Homage to Winslow Homer)” from 2022. We see an endless sea eternally crashing against the shore, and again Longo leans into black, the waves digitally deepened into darkness. As rolling waves pound the earth’s surface, I was reminded not of change as in Longo’s title, but of history itself, repeating without respite, forever.

“Robert Longo: The Acceleration of History” is on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 North Art Museum Drive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, through February 23.



*Robert Longo, installation view of “Death Star; The Year of 2018,” 2022/Photo: Milwaukee Art Museum*