

Press release

# Robert Longo Searchers

8 October—20 November 2024

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Ely House, London



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Pilgrim)*, 2024.  
Mixed media, 5 parts, 223.5 x 750 x 15.3 cm (88 x 295 x 6 in).  
Photo: Damian Griffiths.

*We never just look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.*

— John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

*The idea of montage has always been in my vocabulary... When you put images next to each other, what happens? I'm not interested in pastiche or collage. I'm interested in collision.*

— Robert Longo, 2024

Robert Longo re-envisages his Combines of the 1980s in *Searchers*, a two-part exhibition presented at Thaddaeus Ropac and Pace in London. His monumental new multimedia works reflect the breadth of the American artist's career-long experimentation with the visual potential of different media. On view at Thaddaeus Ropac, *Untitled (Pilgrim)* extends to over seven metres in width and is composed of five panels, each executed in a different medium. Comprising a charcoal drawing, a video, a painting, a sculpture and a photograph, in the new works Longo explores the potential of 'making a Combine in every way to see an image' and, as the artist explains, in 'almost every way that I could work.' Conceived as a pair, *Untitled (Pilgrim)* will be presented concurrently with a second new Combine, *Untitled (Hunter)*, on view at Pace, and coincides with Longo's major solo exhibitions at the ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna and Milwaukee Art Museum.

With the new Combines Longo explores the idea of the artist as a 'searcher' as he actively seeks out images from the world around him. Informed by Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage and art critic John Berger's foundational text *Ways of Seeing* (1972), he juxtaposes art-historical images with film stills, advertisements, videos of elemental forces and journalistic photographs of natural and human catastrophes to examine how meaning is made and disseminated in contemporary society. Returning to the format after four decades, Longo offers a re-reading of John Berger in the context of our digital age, particularly the impact of social media on our strategies of interpretation, with each panel of the new works evoking the proportions of a mobile phone screen, recalling the sensation of endless scrolling through social media.

Longo made the first body of works he refers to as Combines between 1982 and 1989, a mixture of relief, photography, drawing, silkscreen, sculpture and painting named after Robert Rauschenberg's earlier pioneering Combines (1954–64). After debuting his celebrated series of drawings *Men in the Cities* (1979–83) at Metro Pictures in 1981, Longo devised the Combine format to extend his investigation into the multiple meanings that might emerge from different images, media and technologies. Just as the *Men in the Cities* drawings were not intended to

be seen as isolated images but rather 'in sequences', the Combines assembled drawings and paintings with sculptural elements made from wood, metal and Plexiglas in what the artist conceptualises as a 'collision' or montage, giving rise to new meanings.

*I think art is my form of an act of civil resistance. I'm very disappointed in what's going on in the world. My work has been a direct response to the pictorial climate that we live in. I'm ripping images out of the image storm. For London I wanted to do something a little bit more metaphorical and poetic.*

— Robert Longo

Reflecting the significance of the Combines within Longo's oeuvre, examples are held in the collections of major museums internationally, including that of The Broad, Los Angeles; Ludwig Museum, Cologne; MAMAC, Nice; The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; Tate, UK; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

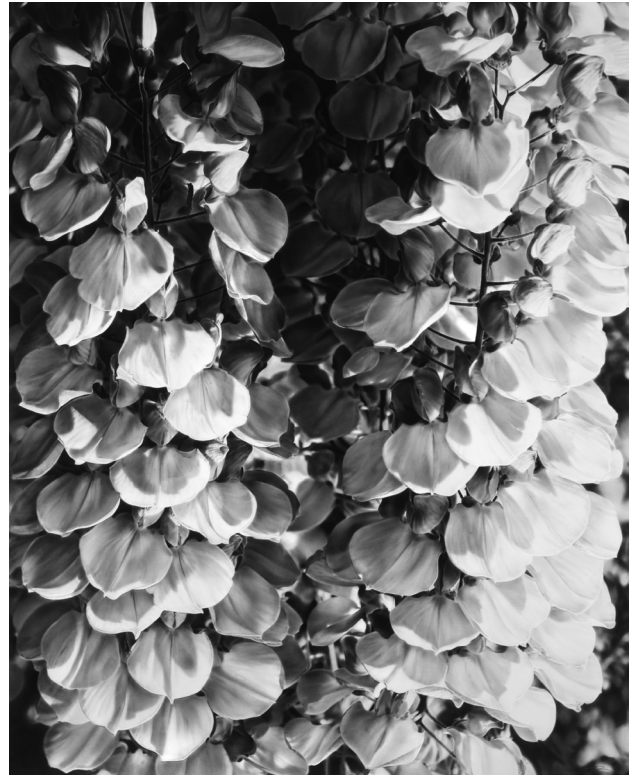
*(Untitled) Pilgrim* resists singular interpretation through the juxtaposition of images, materials and media drawn together across its five panels. A charcoal drawing of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculpture the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52) is cropped tightly to the mystic's face, highlighting her enigmatic expression of exquisite pain and ecstasy. Longo explains that such ambiguity of expression recalls the contorted poses of the suited figures of his *Men in the Cities*, captured either dancing or dying. Finding parallels between the processes of drawing and sculpting, Longo 'carves out the image' of Saint Teresa upon the paper as he translates it across mediums, comparing the saint's ecstasy to his experience of artmaking.

Next to Saint Teresa, a video of fire is set behind a frame of steel bars, imprisoning the symbol of passion. Conceived as an homage to a steel work by multidisciplinary American artist Gretchen Bender, which revealed a video through a small slit, Longo cultivates the dual status of fire as both beautiful and destructive, as well as its alchemical potential to 'transform matter from one kind to another.' In turn, a panel of densely tangled, horizontal bronze tree branches, cast from branches taken from the artist's own garden, is reminiscent of the stylistic mode of Abstract Expressionism. This is followed

by a photographic image of an iceberg taken from the internet, which acts as a counterpoint to the video of fire, marking a temperature shift from hot to cold. A stripe down the centre of the image marks a former waterline, rendered visible when the iceberg turned in the water. Evoking Longo's drawings of icebergs, which recur as a key motif in his artmaking, the photograph asserts his conviction in the power of images as consciousness-raising tools, here, highlighting the devastating effects of climate change.

At the centre of *Untitled (Pilgrim)*, Longo presents an image of an opulent diamond necklace lifted from a Chanel advertisement that he encountered on the wrapper of an issue of *The New York Times*. Struck by the proximity of the mechanisms of capitalist desire to the contemporary consumption of news, the artist was compelled to use the image in his own work. Printing it on enamelled aluminium, 'so it would feel like a painting', he materialises the alluring quality of the advert within the Combine. Conceiving *Pilgrim and Hunter* as 'reclining figures', he describes the necklace of the former as 'the arms that hold the piece together.'

be derived from the works: in short, 'the medium is the message.' Echoing the way in which we encounter information and images in the contemporary world, with these works, Longo poses a challenge to us, the viewer, our strategies of interpretation and our relationship to digital media today.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Wisteria)*, 2024.  
Charcoal on mounted paper, 224.2 x 177.8 cm (70 x 88.25 in).

At Thaddaeus Ropac *Untitled (Pilgrim)* is accompanied by a large-scale charcoal drawing of wisteria. Longo explains, 'I think of flowers as at once feminine yet masculine; sweet yet venomous; explosive yet temporal events.'

The exhibition also includes a small graphite drawing measuring 17.1 x 20.3 cm, which depicts a 2022 protest sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Iranian woman who died in Iranian police custody. The final element of the exhibition is a black-and-white, ultra- fast-paced, looped film presenting the onslaught of the 'image storm' of a single day of international news: 4 July 2024. The film is presented on two scales across the galleries – as big as the space allows at Pace and as small as visually comprehensive at Thaddaeus Ropac. The rapid flood of images will be interrupted randomly by computer-generated stops. There is no beginning and no end, only different ways of looking and seeing.



Robert Longo, *Untitled (Mahsa Amini)*, 2024.  
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 17.1 x 20.3 cm (6.73 x 7.99 in).

As Longo has said of the new Combines, 'in a sense, they're narratives that refuse to be read. I like the idea that there's work for the viewer involved in them.' Quoting Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, he conceives the medium of each panel to be inherently entwined with the meanings that might





Portrait of Robert Longo. Photo: Sophie Chahinian.

### **About the artist**

Robert Longo was born in New York, where he lives and works today. After graduating from the State University College in Buffalo, he moved to New York with Cindy Sherman in 1977, becoming studio assistant to Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim. That same year, he participated in the formative five-person show *Pictures*. This was followed in 1981 by his first solo exhibition, debuting the *Men in the Cities* drawings that established his early career.

His work has been shown at documenta, Kassel, in 1982 and 1987, the Whitney Biennial, New York, in 1983 and 2004, and the Venice Biennale in 1997. He has been the subject of recent solo exhibitions at the Milwaukee Art Museum, WI (forthcoming, 2024); Albertina Museum, Vienna (forthcoming, 2024); Hall Art Foundation, Reading, VT (2024); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2023); Palm Springs Art Museum (2021–22); and Hall Art Foundation, Derneburg, Germany (2020). His works were also shown alongside those of Francisco Goya and Sergei Eisenstein in *Proof*, which travelled from the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2016) to the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2017) and Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2018).

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