

## ROBERT LONGO THE ALCHEMIST

Like an alchemist, the 69-year-old American artist finds his raw material in the work of others, which he then metamorphoses on his own terms, often in large format and in black and white. His recent charcoal works are currently being shown at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in Paris.

By Éric Troncy



Vienna's Albertina Museum will put on a retrospective of his work in 2024, while that same year the Milwaukee Art Museum has invited him for a personal show. In the meantime, Thaddaeus Ropac's Parisian space is currently showing (until 23 December) his new work, which takes the form of very large charcoal pictures that pay homage to the masters of Modernism. In the run-up to his 70th birthday, (he was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1953), Robert Longo is pursuing with rigour and panache an oeuvre he began in the 1970s and that has

travelled through the decades without losing any of its power or acuity.

This spring in Paris, Ropac showed *Dialectic of Distance – Sturtevant Oldenburg Store*, an exceptional exhibition that looked back at a performance by American artist Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014) in which she recreated Claes Oldenburg's 1961 work *The Store*. In particular, Ropac showed little sculptures that Sturtevant had "remade," in every way similar to Oldenburg's originals, in keeping with her modus operandi that led to her to produce "replicas" of artworks by other artists using

those artists' techniques. "The brutal truth is that they're not copies but originals," she declared, thereby seriously slighting artistic notions of the original and the copy (one of the points of tension between artworks and their sale on the market). Because it's being shown at the same place a few months later, Longo's exhibition seems to offer an echo to Sturtevant's as well as a common thread for reflection, since he is displaying charcoal "translations" of paintings by Soulages, De Kooning, Dubuffet and Joan Mitchell (moreover, in a fortuitous calendar

coincidence, Paris gallery-goers can also go to see "real" works by Mitchell at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, where they have been paired with pieces by Claude Monet (until 27 February 2023)).

Longo has called his Paris show *The New Beyond*, a title borrowed from French art critic Michel Tapié, who in 1952 published the essay *Un art autre (A Different Art)* in which he identified a new generation of European artists, like Jean Dubuffet, whose work contained "something so extraordinary, so laden with stupefying magic, so useless with



respect to sordid conceptions of the everyday and at the same time so irreducibly necessary for those who desire, on a day-to-day basis." Longo's exhibition clearly celebrates something more historical in art than the art of the past per se. "At university I liked sport, rock 'n' roll and girls. I smoked tons of cannabis, took a lot of LSD, and ended up dropping out." He could happily have become a surfer or a musician, but eventually took an interest in the restoration of artworks, before coming to the following conclusion: "There was enough old shit. I wanted to make my own stuff. His "own stuff" has taken many forms over the years, among them "reprises" of historic pictures, a strategy he debuted in 2014 and to which he has now returned. In relation to Sturtevant, who uncompromisingly refused the term "copy" in favour of "replicas," we could say that Longo's practice is one of "translation," for what he does is to "translate" paintings into another language, that of charcoal, which also translates them into black and white, in a sort of *retour aux sources* for him. "The first books

about Abstract Expressionism were in black and white, so when I first saw Abstract Expressionist paintings, they were black and white. And in black-and-white photography, a dark red and a dark blue will both look like black," he explains.

"In the 80s, I was doing a lot of films and performances, and I ended up making movies. And then I ran out of money, and realized that drawing had always been this really important thing for me, and that it was a medium that existed between all the high arts. It's kind of this bastard medium, which is always in a brown room in the basements of museums. So, here was something I could actually exploit and make my own, and make drawings as big as Abstract Expressionism, and, using glass, make them objects with a heaviness, a weight. They also have a sculptural element – once a drawing gets to a certain point, I carve it with erasers." At first, in the late 1970s, he used graphite pencils, before switching to charcoal. "I found it profound that charcoal is one of the most archaic mediums in existence, the medium of cave drawings, a

30,000-year-old medium. I like that I'm drawing with dust and powder and burnt material. When I first started working with it, I really hated it. I thought it was incredibly imprecise." His "translations" are always larger than the originals (apart from his version of Picasso's *Guernica*, 12.5 cm smaller than the real thing, but measuring 6.2 m nonetheless): "I'm American – if it's big it's good," he laughs, before continuing in a more serious vein. "I'm going to make this piece really fucking gigantic and see if somebody really wants it. Then you get bitter and you really want to test their love." The size of his pictures and their monochrome palette make his exhibitions rather theatrical, distancing viewers, while at the same time the velvety charcoal and the whole incongruity of the project establish a more complex and intimate relationship with the observer. When he meticulously reproduces, using their own specific touch, a painting by Pollock or Mitchell, it's no longer a question of the gesture of artists who project colours onto the canvas, since he's using black and white. Rather, it's as though the original masterpieces have been X-rayed, and indeed one of Longo's older series, *Hungry Ghosts*, was produced using X-ray images of famous pictures by Manet, Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci.

What particularly stands out is the gigantism of the project (the fact that it takes around six months and the help of several assistants to

– and always bear some relation to ideas of authority and rebellion, order and chaos. The first of his series has, to his great despair, remained the most famous: *Men in the Cities* (1979–81) seems to have left an indelible mark, including on those in the fashion world who have often copied it. "*Men in the Cities* has basically been the curse of my life. I've been running away from it ever since. One is fortunate enough to establish an archetype in their lifetime. The problem always is that it becomes this thing that you have to run away from the rest of your life. You know, people still today say, 'Oh you're the artist that did those yuppie dancing figures.'" In fact they weren't yuppies – "they were basically punk rock guys, they always had skinny ties on" – and they didn't dance. Instead they were dodging objects that Longo threw at them while he photographed them on the roof of his building to prepare figure studies that he wanted to be "sculptural," and they were close friends of his, Cindy Sherman and Gretchen Bender among them. With a mix of amusement and stupefaction, Longo recalls, "A few years ago I was at a show at the Metropolitan and three of my drawings were hanging up in the grand lobby. These are drawings that are 30 years old, and my son's girlfriend asked me if I got the idea for them from the iPod ads," which appeared 25 years later. It stands as a confirmation that *Men in the Cities* expressed, and perhaps tran-

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make one of these works is just one aspect of the equation) and the way it interplays with other Longo projects. He says he uses "dust" (charcoal) to produce "highly aggressive images made with fragile materials." His subjects are also highly contrasted – revolvers, tsunamis, open-mouthed sharks, atomic explosions, places of power (the US Capitol), etc.

scended even, something of their era. Longo is convinced of it: "As artists, we're reporters. Our job is to report what it's like to be alive, now. We're one of the few professions left in the world that has the opportunity to try to tell the truth."

Robert Longo, *The New Beyond*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, until 23 December, www.ropac.net