

ROBERT LONGO

A Hidden Talent in a Black and White World



Max, 2002 Lithograph 109 x 76 cm



Men in the Cities Plate II, 1990 Lithograph 66 x 106 cm

It's not often that an artist of grandiose and international stature falls into the category of undervalued, but Robert Longo is one such artist.

Robert Longo is an artist who has exhibited in at least 28 cities, in 12 different countries across 4 continents, yet there are still people in Asia who have yet to be exposed to the sublime brilliance of an artist who focuses mainly in black and white.

Yet perhaps it is this colour preference that may be at the root cause of this enigma in certain parts of Asia. Robert Longo, like many of his peers, has a substantial international body of work to his credit, being exhibited in such exalted locations as the MOMA and the MET in New York, across to the Tate Gallery in London.

Last year, in 2009, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nice held a retrospective of 100 pieces of Longo's artwork covering the last 30 years thus confirming his position as one of the pre-eminent American artists of our day. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nice (or MAMAC as it's known) has held major shows for other American greats such as Jim Dine and Robert Indiana.

In all of Longo's work, both past and present, you can begin to see the sheer genius of the

artist and his ability to obtain and portray so many different levels of shading and depth with simply one colour, black. He uses several different charcoals and techniques to create the surfaces but maintains the importance that the white shown, is only the white of the paper itself.

Black and white images always evoke the notion of photography which Longo views as "culture's collective memory". Longo looks for his work to find a middle ground, that of one between a photograph and a drawing and ultimately wants the viewer to be pulled in close to the piece, to see for themselves, what the medium actually is and to have the question of whether or not it's a photograph in their mind right up until the point at which it becomes clear...that it is not! It is this relationship that inevitably draws the viewer into the piece and captivates them thereafter. This form of artwork is known as Hyper-Realism.

Longo draws parallels between drawing and photography and believes agrees that both have similar qualities. Longo refers to these two media, drawing and photography as "bastard" art forms in as much as firstly there was painting and sculpture and then drawing and photography, the illegitimate offspring.

Longo saw this underworld of art expression as an area to explore and exploit. When



Wave Five, 2000 Lithograph 26 x 61 cm

Longo started with his large scale drawings it was unheard of, for some it is still a difficult concept to grasp today.

At the start Longo wanted his pieces to be as big as possible, reflecting his passion and desire. He also wanted his work to compete against the cultural competition of the time which included movies, television, magazines, newspapers and billboards. Longo now views the size of his work in a different way in that today he wants to play with the size concept rather than compete against and challenge it.

Longo also looks back at his time in Europe as a turning point in both his career and his life. In the late 1980's, at a time when Longo's world was collapsing around him in New York, he journeyed to Europe and in particular, Paris, where in his own words he became a "better person". There the artist learned to channel and direct his passion and anger in a more focused, productive way. In the early 1990's he also met Hans Mayer in Germany who helped him produce some of his biggest monumental pieces, such as the "Wax Crosses" in 1991. It was also here that Longo met his German actress wife, Barbara Sukowa, whom he married in 1994.

Longo is still probably best known for his "Men in the Cities" series in which he portrayed suited men and women in various contorted poses. For these pieces Longo actually took

friends up onto the roof of his house where he was living at the time in South Street and directed and photographed them in various positions. He would throw things at them or pull them with rope in order to try and get just the position he was looking for.

The original inspiration was from a film by Werner Maria Fassbinder, "The American Soldier", where Longo was trying to recapture the state of someone who had just been shot and seemed to be "dancing" just before they died. His intention was that these men and women be abstract rather than put in any kind of surrounding and this is part of the appeal of the series with their ability to entice and captivate the viewer and then hold that attention and interest. Their attire was Longo's idea of a uniform that people were wearing at that time, be they bankers, office workers from Wall Street or the punks and new wave people.

When I look at the "Men in the Cities" series my mind is immediately filled with images from "The Matrix" trilogy where Neo, Trinity, Morpheus and Agent Smith are contorting their bodies in order to miss the stream of oncoming bullets being fired at them. Keanu Reeves is a big Robert Longo fan and it may be that he took some inspiration from the artist when filming these ground breaking scenes in the films.

Robert Longo's body of work is simply impressive ranging from his "Men in the Cities" series, through "Black Flags", "Bodyhammers", "The Freud Cycle", "Monsters", "The Sickness of Reason", "Bodies", "Beginning of the World", "Perfect Gods" to his latest collection of works, "The Mysteries".

For any collector who looks for a progression in an artist's work, Robert Longo is a must have. This is an artist who has dared to take a media, consigned to small and sometimes abstract work, displayed in small and usually dismal venues and propelled it to the meteoric heights that demands a global audience today. Few artists, certainly those still living, can lay hold to that particular claim to fame! ▲