

SUPERIMAGES

 kaleidoscope.media/article/robert-longo



Grown up from an avid consumer of films and TV to taking in most sources from the Internet, American artist ROBERT LONGO is rooted in a generation interested in the notion of pictures of pictures—and how the work makes the image happen again.

INTERVIEW: ROSS SIMONINI

ROBERT LONGO I checked out your work online. So you're into abstract paintings? Sometimes I'm jealous of messy shit.

ROSS SIMONINI What do you mean by "the messy shit?"

RLI have incredible respect for Abstract Expressionism, but I also have great reservations about it. I'm really jealous of the freedom one has in making abstract work. But I also find that a lot of current abstract work looks like it belongs in Ikea. I've always had this fantasy that when I was 70 years old, I'd be making big abstract paintings. However, at this point, I still resist getting too loose. It seems too obvious.

I grew up in the generation in the early 1980s that was split between the so-called Pictures Generation and the Neo-Expressionists. The two groups were like street gangs, very adversarial. At the time, I liked some of the Germans, like Richter, Polke and Kiefer, but other Neo-Expressionist work, like that of Schnabel and Clemente, not so much. Neo-Expressionism seemed to be retro; it was about what art was. I was interested in what art could be.

RS The way you talk about that period—it's as if everyone's motivations were clear. It seems harder to speak that way about art now, when there's so much work, and it's all so diffuse.

RLRight. My generation came up around 1976 and quickly replaced the previous one, the Conceptual artists. It's interesting to see how each new generation takes as its content the formal aspects of the previous one. When you look at Conceptual Art, its form was primarily photography. It had its content—the event—but its formal elements became my generation's content. For the most part, Conceptual art's form was photographic documentation, and that was really fucking boring. My generation was interested in the notion of pictures of pictures—that idea exploded and became a much bigger thing. At that time, generations replaced generations. Subsequently, it's become a big blur—there are just so many more artists now, all competing. When I moved to New York, making money from my art wasn't on the menu. Being an artist was more of a mission than it was a career move.

RSWhen did you start making a living from your work?

RLAround 1980, which was surprisingly fairly quick. I was very lucky. Luck is a really important part of it. As an artist, of course, you have to know what you want to do, you have to work hard and have skills. But you also have to create an environment where luck is more likely to visit you. For me, that was my timing.

You know, when you're young, you think you go into the future. But as you get older, you realize that the future actually comes at you, and it changes the past. The past is always present, and it changes as we talk about it. I'm old enough now where I've seen it happening with my own past. Just recently, someone showed me this book focused on the '80s, and looking through it, I kept saying, "What the fuck? This didn't happen like that!" It gave me a new perspective on history.



RSIs there any particular slant on your own history that feels inaccurate to you?

RLHonestly, I have no idea. I have one gear: forward. I don't like looking backwards. Although, it is a bit fuzzy, and I don't want to turn it into war stories. But to be young and able to make your work without having a job was extraordinary. We'd all had shitty jobs at some point that allowed us to make our work. But then Reagan came into office, and lines were drawn. You had to take a side, and suddenly "greed became good," like in the movie Wall Street. In America, people like Schnabel started to sell, which opened the door for people like me to start selling too. Maybe I didn't make the kind of money Schnabel did, but I made enough to quit my job driving a taxi, and focus on my work. In hindsight, it's interesting to see the ebb and flow of an artist's career. I was lucky enough to have some success early on, but I also experienced an incredible crash. By the beginning of the '90s, I'd really been thrown to the curb. I felt like I was blamed for the '80s. That's when I moved to Europe, which totally saved my life. I was able to get away from New York, and the impending doom. I was out of control.

RSWere you?

RLOh, absolutely. At that time, all I wanted to do was make my work, the scope of which was big and aggressive, and I thought, if the drugs help me do that, then I'll use drugs. So you smoke some pot, and it gives you some imagination. You snort coke, it gives you the energy to make something. Eventually you move on to things like speed and heroin, and

obviously, you can get quite out of control. Once I got to that point, I started making really shitty art, and that freaked me out. So I moved to Paris and ended up making some of my best work in Europe.

RSYour work is often spoken of in terms of photography, but it seems like it also connects to film.

RLA photograph is made in a moment. A drawing, though, is not made in a moment; rather, it requires a process over time. It is durational. I think my work is much closer to film. It's really important to me that, as an artist, you can trace what you do back to that seminal period in your life between the ages of 6 and 13. I grew up dyslexic, so films and TV were how I took in information. Ultimately, TV was hugely important to the development of my work. Television combined cinema with daily events: you could be watching King Kong when suddenly there was breaking news of Kennedy's assassination. Today, because the things I make are so physically fragile, I have to set them all under glass—and at one point I realized that that's how I've always consumed images: through a screen, under glass. So I think if you're able to combine the personal aspects with the socially or globally relevant, you can navigate the possibilities of making effective art.

RSHow do you choose your images?

RLGood question. I choose my images based on what moves me, what activates what is both conscious and subconscious in me. My images come from a lot of different sources. And I always try to buy the rights to use them. I am an image thief. I find most of my images on the Internet, but I still find some in magazines, books, and newspapers. Others came from my cell phone, shot while riding the Fire Island Ferry, or on a vacation with my wife to Iceberg Alley.



RS Is it important that the viewer knows that the works reference these specific places or events?

RLAs I said, I do think of myself as a chronicler. I'm basically taking the images that surround us and utilizing them. But I also think the specifics are secondary to the image. The thing needs to be fucking great to look at. The work activates the image; the work makes the image happen again.

My art exists somewhere between traditional representation and modernist abstraction. I may be translating photographs, but my pieces can never actually be photographs, just because of how much I alter and distort them. Photography inadvertently ushered in what became Modern Art. In *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* by Manet, the gun appears very close to Maximilian's head, while in *The Third of May* by Goya, the guns are being shot from a distance. The difference is that Manet was working from photographs, which had compressed the sense of space. That's really the advent of modern art. You have this compression of space, and then you get *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and eventually the space gets so compressed that it flattens, and you get *Ab Ex*, where the surface is the image. I'm constantly thinking about this as I make my work—I'm fucking with the sense of space, but it's totally an illusion. I try very hard to make things that couldn't have existed as photographs. Especially with these newer pieces, which combine different source materials into a single image—a photo made up of other photos.

RS Like a collage?

RLNo, don't ever use that word around me. (laughs) Even Photoshop—I work with someone who uses it for mockups, but I really don't want the work to look Photoshopped. It'd be a disaster. The final thing should look like one picture; the technique shouldn't be an issue.

Growing up in the '60s, some of the highest impact things at that time were epic movies like Ben-Hur and Spartacus. Subject-wise, I feel like the work I make is similarly epic: it kind of puts some pressure on your diaphragm, takes your breath away.

RSSo how do you know when you're finished? Once it has that epic feeling?

RLIt's more about getting to where I don't remember making it—where it becomes autonomous.



RSLooking closely, it seems like you're actually working with black alone—there's no white being applied.

RL I never apply white. The white in my work is always the white of the virgin paper. There are so many different shades and colors of black—brown-blacks, blue-blacks, purple-blacks. They're like separate colors to me, with each one serving a different purpose. This is where the technique becomes important. In traditional painting, you work from dark to light, shadow to highlight. I do the opposite. The ground, which is done in powder, is actually the lighter elements; as I work, the drawing gets darker and darker. These first layers are very delicate, and it can take days or weeks to build them up. But eventually, it gets to the point where the process becomes like carving, molding, modeling, and erasing, finding the image through the layers.. It's interesting, because once a drawing is framed, it becomes a five-hundred-pound object. But the piece itself is just charcoal on paper, mounted paper. I make the most delicate kind of art you can make. It's so fundamental—just dirt, burnt matter, like the Chauvet cave paintings. You know, some schmo at the New York Times once said that my work was like a headbutt—meaning it was not mysterious, an equation to be figured out. I thought about that when I saw those cave drawings: “You know, maybe I'm just a fucking caveman!” (laughs)

RS In finishing the work, is it important that you erase evidence of the hand?

RL The hand is very present, and also abstract. For the viewer, accessing the hand in the surface becomes an intimate experience. I really don't feel like my finished works are refined at all. When you get up close, it's actually quite raw. I feel like I have to exist somewhere between these polarities of photorealism and illustration. The work isn't photographic, but it plays with the way we think photographically.

RS (pointing to a nearby piece) Where's this image from?

RL I'm currently making a body of work based on X-rays of paintings. This image is a small portrait of Jesus by Rembrandt. Next to it is one of St. John the Baptist by Da Vinci; that one is Rembrandt's Bathsheba. The X-ray shows what's beneath the paintings—all the decisions and corrections, the ghosts behind the final image. They're really interesting; they almost look like Francis Bacons.

RS How did you get these X-rays?

RL I saw a show a couple years ago at the Louvre of all of these small paintings of Jesus. The museum included X-Rays alongside them. I ended up getting in touch with the conservator there, which then opened up connections to other museums. I requested X-rays of the work of several artists I was interested in. If I could get the rights, the conservators generously sent me these X-rays. I was thinking of doing a show of all X-Rays, but I'm still not 100% sure where they are conceptually. This series has caused me to revisit Walter Benjamin's *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and to consider how to reinstate an “aura” into an artwork which has been filtered through technology. The thing is, I have such great love for old art. It's what I aspire to, that level of magic. I also think of it in terms of religion. Art is my religion, it's what I believe in. And where religion is about believing in the invisible, these X-Rays are a bit like seeing the invisible.

Robert Longo (American, b. 1953) is an artist who lives and works in New York.

Ross Simonini is an American artist, writer and musician.

All images courtesy of the artist; Metro Pictures, New York; and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg.