

ARTS | REVIEW

## Provocative Visions of Apocalypse

By DAVID GALLOWAY SEPT. 25, 2009

NICE — As the escalator rises to the upper floor of this city’s Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, a drawing of a gigantic revolver heaves into view, tilted toward the sky and seeming to float in space. The long-barreled Magnum can be read as a finger wag to the faint of heart, who may be discomforted by Robert Longo’s apocalyptic themes. But it can also be seen as an exclamation mark for a retrospective that confirms his rank as one of the pre-eminent American artists of our day.

The 100 works on view, selected by the independent curator Caroline Smulders, summarize the last three decades of the artist’s achievements. They represent Mr. Longo’s largest European show since 1991 in Hamburg and his most important retrospective since the one held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1989. For viewers who know only isolated works, the diversity and intensity of Mr. Longo’s oeuvre may well come as a surprise.

From the flow and surfeit of everyday images, Mr. Longo chooses a few (sometimes almost at random, it would seem) to distill and lift out of banality. Nowhere is this process realized with more bravura effect than in “The Magellan Project,” a series of 366 drawings that Mr. Longo produced, one a day, during the leap year of 1996. Fifty of the drawings are exhibited from ceiling to floor on a single wall in one of the gangways connecting the museum’s galleries. These are singularly

awkward spaces, with unsightly banks of radiators running down the center. But here the Magellan ensemble so dominates its surroundings that architectural blunders fade into irrelevance.

Nice is an unexpected but hardly an improbable venue, since MAMAC (as the museum is known) has not only made a policy of integrating Americans into its permanent collection, but has also organized major shows for artists like Jim Dine, Mark di Suvero and Robert Indiana. Like last year's retrospective for Keith Haring in Lyon, this exhibition firmly sets Mr. Longo's work in an international context.

Mr. Longo has also cultivated a European identity. He showed for a first time at the Kassel Documenta in 1982, lived and worked in Paris in the early 1990s, and was deeply influenced by the films of Werner Maria Fassbinder, to whom he dedicated "The American Soldier" in 1976. In addition to what he calls his New York headquarters, Mr. Longo maintains an apartment in Berlin. He is married to the German singer and actress Barbara Sukova.

There is scarcely a medium at which the Brooklyn-born artist has not tried his sleight of hand. The Nice show opens with three of his "combines" that employ drawing, serigraphy and painting on relief-like assemblages of wood, aluminum and Plexiglas to hold jostling images in provocative equilibrium. Even when the artist restricts himself to relatively simple black-and-white drawings, the results span a dramatic range. On the one hand, there are the small, meticulously detailed trompe l'oeil drawings of crumpled and flattened American currency. On the other is a chilling triptych, "The Haunting" (2005), whose side panels show the silhouette of an airplane, racing beneath a smoky sky toward the center panel — a profile of the World Trade Center.

Mr. Longo has also produced provocative free-standing sculptures, including a field of gigantic crosses in translucent wax and "charred" American flags, whose apparent fragility is belied by the bronze in which they are cast. One of these, "Against the Use of Nature" (1990), stands like a forlorn sentinel at the center of the MAMAC presentation.

Mr. Longo's reputation is based on a virtuoso graphic style that elevates drawing from its also-ran status to painting's equal, yet he has never lost interest in

other mediums. At the time he was evolving his visual idiom, he was also playing with his own band, making music videos and eventually venturing into cinema. As director of the cyberpunk classic “Johnny Mnemonic” (1995), he became a close friend of the film’s star, Keanu Reeves.

The experience of working in what he terms “Hollywood color” marked a caesura in his idiom. Before, black and white played a central role in his work, but since then his palate has become strictly limited to shades of black. (The sole exceptions are the luscious, sensuous red roses he executed a few years ago.) The dense layerings of charcoal from which the images are constructed reveal unexpected shades and tonalities of black, running from cold to warm.

Indeed, Mr. Longo first gained major attention on the international art circuit with the iconic series entitled “Men in the Cities,” three of which are on view in Nice. These remarkable black-and-white drawings, based on photographs of friends dervishing on the roof of his atelier, show fashionably dressed young men and women writhing in a danse macabre worthy of Hans Holbein (or Ingmar Bergman).

In recent years, Mr. Longo has worked on series that concentrate on subjects — revolvers, atomic “mushrooms,” eclipses, sharks, tsunami-like waves — that often suggest apocalypse. Each theme is represented by multiple examples in the current show. We are in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” in Herman Melville’s “blackness of darkness,” in Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now.” At the same time, we are in a world full of radiance and hope and transcendence.

Many of these compositions, especially the giant triptychs, show light streaming down from a starry sky, from the mushroom cloud of an atomic explosion, from the foam on the crest of a wave, even glinting from the pointed teeth of a shark. The shining white, of course, is no more than the paper left free of charcoal, but the depth of velvety blackness lends it a startling radiance. Never was this effect more spectacular than in a recent tryptich that shows sunlight pouring through the vast stained-glass window of a side chapel in Westminster Abbey. If there was ever any doubt, this work should banish it: Robert Longo is a deeply moral artist, and if his works are not religious in the usual sense, they are deeply moving exercises in enlightenment.

A version of this article appears in print on September 26, 2009, in The International Herald Tribune.

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