

# ART & DEAL

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**K G SUBRAMANYAN:**  
THE BODHI TREE IN INDIAN MODERN  
VISUAL ARTS SCENARIO



## BACK TO BLACK

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LONGO



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Robert Longo, *Untitled (Vatican Bishops)*, 2016  
Charcoal on Mounted Paper,  
236.9 x 355.6 cm, Image Courtesy: The artist  
and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg

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Robert Longo, *Untitled (X-Ray of Bathsheba at  
Her Bath, 1654, After Rembrandt)*, 2015-2016  
Charcoal on Mounted Paper, 177.8 x 177.8  
cm, Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie  
Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg

Burdened by a war of words between two pivotal post-war art historians (Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg), Abstract Expressionism is for American artist Robert Longo the cream that covers the cake. Appetizing over the riches of art history to arrive at artworks that are as much impressive, as they are inventive homages to the saints and spirits of centuries of avant-garde aesthetics; Rembrandt (Harmenszoon van Rijn), (Casper David) Friedrich, (Théodore) ericault, (Pablo) Picasso and (Jackson) Pollock among them. More antagonistic of everything that is real, Longo better engages with art, film and literature, as though the invented proves far more convincing; the light in the room. And when given to explaining his black and white dust drawings as emblems of an advancing art history, Longo revels in the details as though the anatomy for his own works is as a consequence of Édouard Manet foraging into

the forest with his paints and easel, inventing en-plein air painting. Pablo Picasso bullishly swapping the routine of representation, (a still-life made-up of edible and non-edible objects faithfully reproduced, or a seated figure parked in front of the artist); for art as visual energy, Marcel Duchamp for his open invitation to allow for everything as art, and of the verve of Jackson Pollock, throwing paint like water onto canvas. Among these idiosyncratic men, generations apart, Longo appears at home; describing them as 'the flag-bearers for the future of art', at any given moment.

And Longo art (made up of individuals) and literature have a cultural longevity that he appears to want to bring back into the contemporary world. As ideas and information evaporate under the guise of new technologies, Longo sees fit to capture a momentous



moment, and stretch it in time and space, until the original situation becomes the scenery for the rest of our lives. And by labouring to recreate something in charcoal and graphite, Longo seeks to understand it purely for its aesthetic qualities, as an anatomical examination of reality in representational form. Whereby the collateral damage of a mass shooting in central Paris by osmosis becomes an exercise in beauty. After the tragedy and terror are long gone, Longo applies an aesthetic skin to evidence of an event in the real. Professing of the bullet-hole in glass “what is interesting is that I brought the image from a photographer from Paris, and then I fucked with it and made some changes, and made it into what I think is a little bit more beautiful. I extended the cracks and made it more crystallised, and messed with it enough that I forgot what it was and just worked on it as an abstract image.” But in spite of it becoming abstract retaining that “everybody knows it’s a bullet-hole, that’s what is weird. It is like it is not the ‘Charlie Hebdo’ bullet-hole, but it’s a bullet-hole that is in Santa-Barbara or Sippican (Massachusetts);

it becomes the universal bullet-hole.”

And where an audience marvels at the photographic representation of vast and unconquered icebergs, Longo’s lexicon is entirely about the process of applying enough black to white, to create intensities of grey, as the anatomical property of the image. As though his reproduction of Casper David Friedrich’s original work is concentrated in the abstract. Detailing “the icebergs are all done in powder, except for the little black lines where the water reaches the iceberg; that was all (charcoal) stick, which amounted to layers and layers of charcoal. It is almost like when you make a sword and you cast the steel, and you sharpen the blade. The way the Japanese make a sword is by folding the steel and then sharpening it.” Arriving as he does at the preferred image of the ‘icebergs’ once the charcoal powder settles as a creative configuration of multiple gradations of greys and blacks on white.

Crucially of Longo’s work what the audience might understand as photorealist imagery is a mirror opposite of his fantastical approach

of applying charcoal and graphite to paper, as these cinematic drawings of the visual world. And by concentrating entirely on the detail of everything as an abstraction, Longo creates a more convincing version of reality or ‘hyper-reality’ that proves all the more compelling. Seeing an arresting beauty in everything, in black and white.

#### INTERVIEW

**Rajesh Punj:** *Having walked through the show my initial interest is in the physicality of the works, and of their scale and indelible presence within the spaces in relation to the detail and delicacy of the images you construct. How do you deliver both?*

**Robert Longo:** That’s a good question, because I like that I make work out of dust. Making my work out of burnt material. It is really interesting I remember seeing (Werner) Herzog’s 2010 film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* about the Chauvet Caves in Southern France, and I thought, wow these are charcoal drawings. And I realised my ancestry goes back thirty-thousand years. I mean I don’t have to go back to the



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*Robert Longo, Untitled (Iceberg for C.D.F), 2015-2016, Charcoal on Mounted Paper Each panel 304.8 x 510.5 cm, Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg*

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*Robert Longo, Untitled (Bullet Hole in Window, January 7, 2015), 2015-2016, Charcoal on Mounted Paper, 193 x 363.2 cm, Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg*

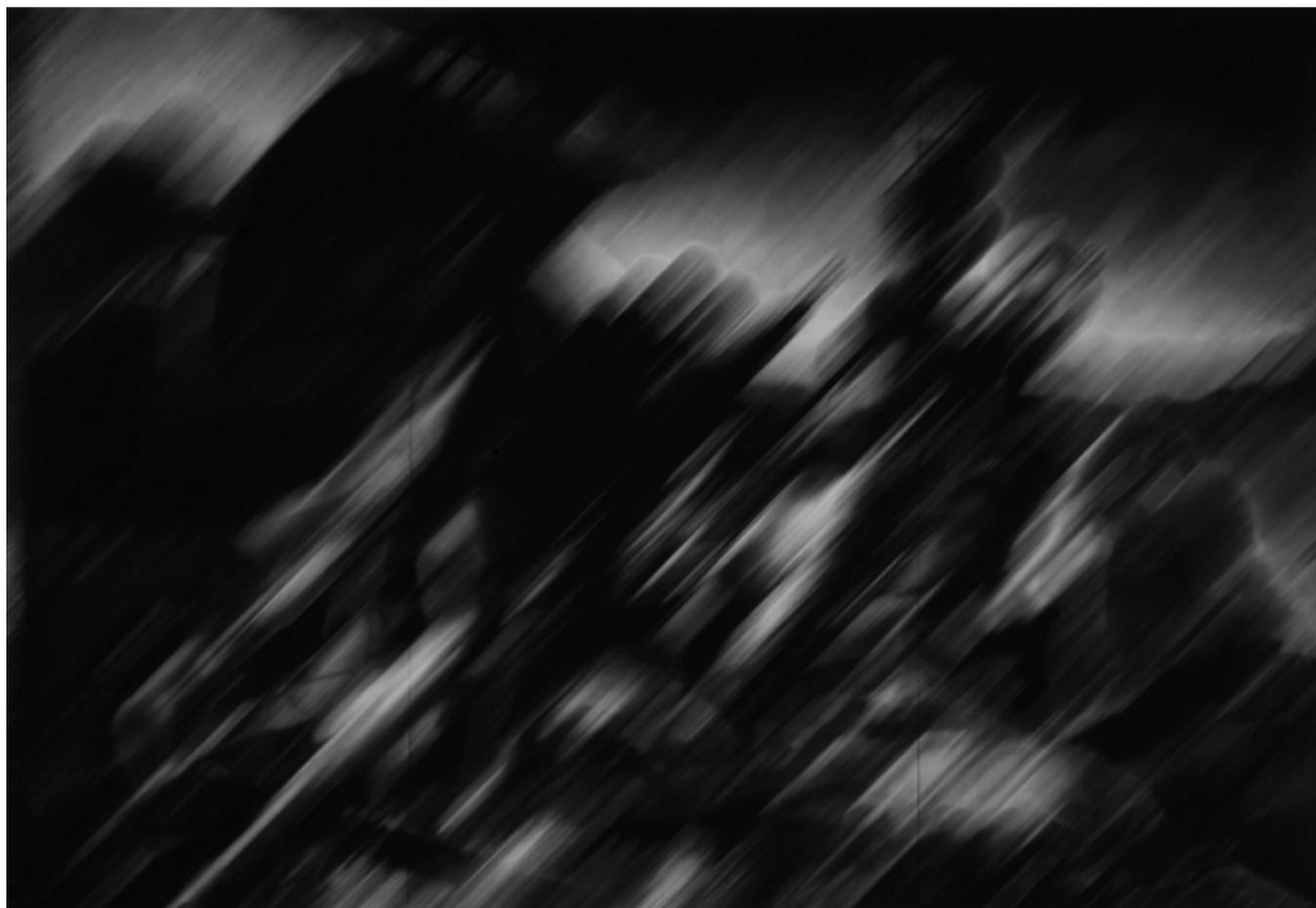
Renaissance, I go back to the guys in the cave. It’s also kind of funny because sometimes my work is criticised for a lack of a better term, its directness. One critic once said my work was like a head-butt, which I took as a compliment because he is somebody who would deserve a head-butt. But yeah I am a caveman in that sense, I am writing on the walls or caves. So I like the fact that they are fragile. The thing is that early on I realised that drawing was this bastardized medium that existed somewhere between sculpture and painting. It was always in the basement of the museum. And there were always these intimate little notations. It was something I could exploit and elevate to the scale of painting and drawing. I am obviously very influenced by American Abstract Expressionism and the scale of their paintings.

So I thought it would be interesting to take drawing to that scale. I was very fascinated. I also have an incredible reference to painting. I love great masters, and I realised I could never paint like that. To paint like Rembrandt would take years of

study. Painting is like the original time-based performance art. To make a painting requires an enormous amount of planning and time. I mean my drawings take nowhere near as long.

**RP:** *But as drawings they appear incredibly labour intensive.*

**RL:** They are very labour intensive, and I think it is really important that they are very labour intensive, making art like that, taking a work on an almost molecular level you have to process it. You have to process it inside so it can come out. It is really important, but I have assistances who work for me, if I didn’t have them I would make one drawing a year; which I am not interested in. I am not so interested in the craft, what I am interested in is that I finish all the drawings. So that there is a feeling of one hand, and that is really important to me. That you believe that all of these works are made by one person. But I think the medium of charcoal when I first started using it for these big drawings ten years ago, actually more than that now, fifteen years ago,



I hated charcoal. It seemed so clumsy.

**RP: If I think of charcoal I think of it as a really difficult medium, yet with dust and ash you manage to create these pin perfect images that are as detailed as anything a camera is capable of.**

**RL:** What it is is that my process is inherently opposite to traditional painting. With traditional painting you work from dark to light. If you paint a tree you do the dark greens first and then the light greens, and the last thing you do is the white highlights. In the drawings I work from white paper, in which the white of the drawings is the white of the paper. So I essentially work backwards. And the other thing is that my original degree was in sculpture and so the drawings are very sculptural. Because the last stages of the drawing is of my carving them out with razors, and different kinds

of tools. It becomes very physical in that sense. The process of bringing it together. I also use the same paper I have used for twenty-five years. It is a paper that has a very fine tooth to it so it doesn't get in the way, but also it has the capacity to evoke the grain of old black and white photographs. I like that a lot about it. So I know how the paper works, and with the charcoals I have maybe six different (I call it) colours of charcoal. There is 'black black', there is 'regular black', and there is 'medium black', 'blue black', 'brown black'. And with some of these sticks of charcoal I grind them up into powder and then I put them on with brushes.

The icebergs are all done in powder, except for the little black lines where the water reaches the iceberg that was all stick, which amounted to layers and layers of charcoal. It is almost like when you make a sword and you cast the steel

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Robert Longo, *Untitled (Shipwreck, Redux)*, 2016, Charcoal on Mounted Paper  
267.3 x 384.2 x 15.6 cm, Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg

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Robert Longo, *Installation View*, Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg  
Photo Courtesy: Charles Duprat



and sharpen the blade. The way the Japanese make a sword is by folding the steel and then sharpening it. And with the drawing the iceberg was made of layers and layers and layers of grey, and because this was the first I was reproducing the icebergs I didn't know how to do them. I wanted to have flexibility with the drawings, so the icebergs started off very dark and looked too much like mountains, and then I made them really really light, which was quite beautiful. But the problem was it was an old iceberg and the bottom had melted, and it had come up. Looking at the iceberg the drawing needed to become dark again so that the bottom would still appear, which lead to my making three drawings, based on three different version of that same drawing. And because I had enough layers of grey I could go backwards and forwards between those layers, which was really important to me.

**RP: So you have an incredible amount of malleability to the surface and substance of the works that we might consider impossible of a drawing. Whereby you can as much apply charcoal as you can withdraw it.**

**RL:** To a certain extent there is a point of no return. While you can put something that is really black and get it back almost to the original white, with grey when it enters too much into the paper, the paper can almost give up. It says 'I can't do anything more'.

**RP: Are you therefore incredibly methodical about the point to which you go to with a work?**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah; each drawing requires a very different strategy. The X-rays are much more brutal. There is much more (charcoal) stick and they are more aggressive. Requiring many

more sticks and craving, whereas the other works are much more powder based. I mean the iceberg is powder, the bullet-hole is powder, and even 'The Raft of the Medusa' was (made up of) a lot of dust and powder. And the other two drawings (in the show), were more like X-rays. But the really smalls drawings including *Untitled (After Rembrandt, Bathsheba at Her Bath, 1654)* 2016, and *Untitled (After de Vinci, St. John the Baptist, 1513)* 2016, are graphite and charcoal. Because with charcoal I could never get to a point like that. And I see the drawings as therapy.

**RP: They read as beautiful historical documents.**

**RL:** What is interesting about them is that they are ways of me paying homage to my hero's, and at the same time learning about their composition. And when you draw something on that scale, something



so small you really have to see how it is built. Which requires a strategy as to how to do it. And what is interesting is that everytime I make a show I gear up for going to war. I have to get everything ready, and then I go at it, and then it's over. It is also that this show has taken me a really long time. I am really happy that I planned it out. I made a model and I planned everything for over a year. Thaddaeus (Ropac) would come to visit me in New York and I would have one plan, and then he would come back two or three months later and there would be big changes, and he was getting a little nervous. Originally the show (at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris), was only going to be X-rays, but the last big show I did in New York had these big drawings of Abstract Expressionist drawings in them. And I did a two part show in New York which was basically about the loss of American dream. In the show there were ten seminal Abstract Expressionist

works, but they were all in black and white charcoal. Which was really weird because black and white photography is very arbitrary, based on chemical decisions about how it chooses values. And I remember all those abstract paintings I saw as a kid, they were always black and white in the beginning, like (Jackson) Pollock. So I made these black and white drawings as translations of them. But they were also about this time in America when we all thought we had hope. (John F.) Kennedy was elected president.

**RP: I always think of Abstract Expressionism as an intensely coloured experience at art college.**

**RL:** Well the first time I saw any of those works as reproductions they were always in black and white, so it was kind of strange. And what is interesting too is that each time I do a different work I have to dive into the researching of it. Like I

learnt about icebergs, I learnt about bullet holes, and of 'The Raft of the Medusa'. I learnt about all these kinds of things there. What is interesting about the Abstract Expressionist works, was that the other show that was happening at the same time that had these big drawings about the capital. An American show about the capital with a big American flag that was sinking into the ground. But we have to remember that Abstract Expressionism was used by the CIA (central intelligence agency), as propaganda for how much freedom we had in the United States. Whereby they produced a catalogue in which everything was in black and white, which was kind of interesting.

**RP: And at the time in the Soviet Union you had Social Realism.**

**RL:** They (the CIA) had three shows in Germany and one show in England, and one in Holland.

**RP: I am always troubled by (Clement) Greenberg's original premise of his wanting to prompt Abstract Expressionism as a vehicle for freedom, and of whether those artists attached to the movement were ever as interested in his new found political ideals of their paintings. And I always see (Jackson) Pollock and (Mark) Rothko as entirely reluctant flag bearers for such a critical debate around the cold war.**

**RL:** Yes of course, Pollock was totally like the clichéd Clint Eastwood kind of American, and apparently (Robert) Motherwell would write interview questions for Pollock, because Pollock really didn't want to talk about anything. He really couldn't care less. But I became really interested in (Herman Melville's) Moby Dick for other reasons. And I realised that (Harold) Rosenberg wrote an article about Abstract Expressionism, in which he called

the movement the crew on the boat going after Moby Dick. Did you read Moby Dick?

**RP: Not as yet.**

**RL:** Moby Dick is like America's genetic code. It is quite an amazing book. What (Leo Tolstoy's) War and Peace is to Russia, Moby Dick is to America. When Melville wrote that book America was the original oil empire. Because all of the oil in the world, from table lamps, to the grease on your wheels and perfume, all the oil came from whales. And at the time whales were the living oil field of the world. And the United States had, of the eighteen hundred whaling boats in the world, they had sixteen hundred of them. So the United States controlled the oil market in the world. We were the original Arabs and the ocean was a living oil field. And when he wrote this book the boat was named after a tribe that was exterminated by the pilgrimages,

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Robert Longo, Display View,  
Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie  
Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg,  
Photo Courtesy: Charles Duprat

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Robert Longo, Display View,  
Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie  
Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg,  
Photo Courtesy: Charles Duprat



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Robert Longo, *Untitled (Rippling Water)*, 2015  
Charcoal on mounted paper  
241.9 x 195.6 x 10.2 cm, Image Courtesy: The  
artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/  
Salzburg

'the pequods.' And the crew I think were thirty-six people, when there were thirty-six states in the union. So it reads very much as a reflection of the United States, with this leader who is losing his mind and becomes obsessed with the white whale. It is a pretty amazing book because it also set up the structure for a lot of American novels, whereby it is balanced between the story of these guys going after this whale, with the story of whaling. Part of the book is kind of boring, and also they (the community of characters in Melville's book) think that whales are fish; they don't yet know that whales are mammals. But there are points in the book that are so incredibly poignant, because the guy that cuts up the whale,

cooks it and gets oil from it, he wears a black hooded jacket. And the jacket he is wearing with a hood is made from the skin of the whale's penis. So the whale is really getting fucked, he is being cocked by his own cock. In parts the book is so brilliant, it is so great.

**RP:** *Not just great literature, Melville's book appears to act as a mode of operation for you; whereby you take literature and language, acquire photographs and facts, as the basis for your interpreting fictional and fact as art. Are you a cultural flâneur in that sense?*

**RL:** To begin with cinema was a bigger reference point. I was dyslexic growing up so I didn't read very much. I have since then figured out how to read, and I have become a voracious reader. I am very very slow but I really retain what I read. So I try and read two or three books at the same time, because I like to confuse their plots sometimes. And I find the magic of books incredible. When you have an idea about making a work, for me it is like having a dream. I had a dream about sitting at a table looking out of the window, and so the big issue became if somebody said 'turn your dream into an image', okay so 'what kind of table was I sitting at?', 'what was the thickness of the legs?', 'what was on the table?' I was looking out of the window, 'so what was outside the window?' and 'what kind of window was it?' So the idea is that having these dreams is like having an idea for a work, and of how you have to fill the details in. Like with my making the iceberg work, I had an idea about how to produce the work (the iceberg), and I really had no idea how it would look when it was done. And as a consequence I find literary sources always really helpful, and reading more and more has been very interesting. I have just finished reading (Leo Tolstoy's) *War and Peace*, because I am doing a show in Moscow at the Garage, and I thought finally that am I going to Russia so I should read 'War and Peace'.

**RP:** *And for Moscow will you be showing many more works?*



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Robert Longo, *Display View*,  
Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie  
Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg,  
Photo Courtesy: Charles Duprat

**RL:** Forty pieces of mine, six of (Sergei) Eisenstein's films, and forty-five (Francisco) Goya etchings. So I curated this idea of 'witness', about people who are dealing with art of their time. So it is Eisenstein, Goya and me, together.

**RP:** *With Eisenstein's films do you plan to slice them up into individual frames?*

**RL:** No, no, the curator (Kate Fowle) asked me 'how would I see these works presented?' and 'how can we present these three different artists?' Well I said 'the one thing we have in common is that we all worked in black and white.' Goya's etchings are all black and white, and Russia happens to have many of his original etchings. Before the Second World War Spain give permission for Russia to acquire some of their best Goya etchings, before they outlawed any more from leaving the country. So they have these black and white etchings. And

then Eisenstein's films are in black and white. So we talked about the idea of presenting all of us together. Goya is pretty straight forward, we just get a lot of them together and present them in such a way that we don't even see the frames. Because the problem is that the museums in Russia don't want us to take the Goya prints out of their original frames. So we are planning to build a wall, whereby the works are just windows in order none of the frames appear in the exhibition. While they are going to have (Eisenstein's) films showing at theatres in the city with orchestras. But at the Garage space I said 'why don't we project the film slowed down', because I grew up working with a projectionist/filmmaker. I said 'why don't we project the films in a room a frame at a time?' so you really begin to see the film as a set of images.

Because Eisenstein's films are all lock-down shots there are no really



complicated camera moves, and every picture is very deliberately composed. For that there will be a room (in Moscow) where you will see each movie on an adjoining wall, and each wall will show a frame at a time. So through the course of the exhibition the individual movies will eventually complete themselves. It may take several hours to see the whole of (Battleship) 'Potemkin' or 'October', as they will be seen literally a frame at a time.

**RP:** So contextually you intend to deconstruct Eisenstein's films as a series of still images that read as these cinematic black and white drawings, which in situ as you suggest are closer to your own works, and to those of (Francisco) Goya's.

**RL:** Yes (Eisenstein's) films look a lot like drawings when you freeze them a frame at a time, as they appear as these beautiful black and white drawings.

**RP:** So you have since seen the films broken down into a series of still images?

**RL:** The idea for Eisenstein's film came from my originally taking the American movie of 'Moby Dick', slowing it down by five hundred percent and delivering it as a black and white artwork. Because I saw it as a kid in black and white but it was actually in colour. As a work I intentionally turned it back into a black and white movie and slowed it down. But the problem with slowing down video is that you create morphing between hard-cuts, and I don't know if you recall the pop videos that Michael Jackson did with people's faces morphing into one another, that is done by creating space between hard-cuts. So they will take a picture of you and take a picture of me, create a hard-cut and then allow for a certain amount of time between them. Letting the computer figure out how to fill that in. So what happens when you slow a movie down is that you have a hard-cut with these weird morphs, which I don't want to happen with Eisenstein's films. There are these projectors that project a

frame at a time, but the problem is they (Garage), don't know if they can get hold of one of those, and because the people that control Eisenstein's films in Russia, they are old-school Soviets essentially.

**RP:** And they won't commit to anything?

**RL:** We are trying to figure out the algorithms to find out how to do what I want with the films. So it will seem like its video but it appears a frame at a time.

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Robert Longo, *Display View*,  
Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg,  
Photo Courtesy: Charles Duprat

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Robert Longo, *Untitled (Reflect Trees)*, 2015-2016, Charcoal on Mounted Paper  
224.2 x 177.8 cm,  
Image Courtesy: The artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/ Salzburg

