ArtReview

Atmospheres of the Image

by Jonathan T.D. Neil

The Haunting, 2005, charcoal on mounted paper, 3 panels, 226 × 366 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf

The Napoleonic Wars, the Russian Revolution and the contemporary climate of terror: a new exhibition seeks to link Robert Longo's post-9/11 work with masterpieces by Goya and Eisenstein. Is it successful?

Untitled (Mike Test/Head of Goya), 2003, charcoal on mounted paper, 183 × 244 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Untitled (Hellion), 2011, charcoal on mounted paper, 176 × 303 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Do Goya, Eisenstein and Longo share a political imaginary, a common approach to conceiving images that channel the acute historical conflicts of their ages? This is the question put forward by the Garage Museum of Art's autumn exhibition, *Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo*, curated by the estimable Kate Fowle in collaboration with Longo himself, and which brings together a handful of Goya's and Eisenstein's most salient works (select etchings from Goya's famed print series; Eisenstein's seven major films, each projected at 1 percent of their original speed) with selections from Longo's prodigious output of the past 15 years.

It hardly seems necessary today to note how Longo was one of the original five artists included in Douglas Crimp's now epochal 1977 *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space in New York, or that he was joined there by Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine and Philip Smith. Cindy Sherman was added to the roster via Crimp's follow-up 1979 essay, also titled 'Pictures', which was published in the then relatively new journal *October*. Crimp self-consciously set out to identify the 'predominant sensibility among the current generation of younger artists' working at the time, and that 'sensibility' was 'postmodernist'. These artists, Crimp pointed out, embraced the photographic and filmic image for its performativity, ambiguity and heterogeneity. The 'Pictures Generation' was born of this postmodernist critique of representation, and vice versa.

Proof would seem to be something of a riposte to the ease with which Longo continues to be so easily identified with the Pictures Generation. The idea of 'proof' is to a great extent exactly what 'pictures' opposed: the notion that images might offer transparent access to some singular truth, beyond ambiguity, beyond doubt. And the joining of Longo with two artists of unquestioned historical significance whose major works are themselves divided by a century of time does away with the generational affiliation and proposes a different genealogy for Longo's now nearly 40-year project.

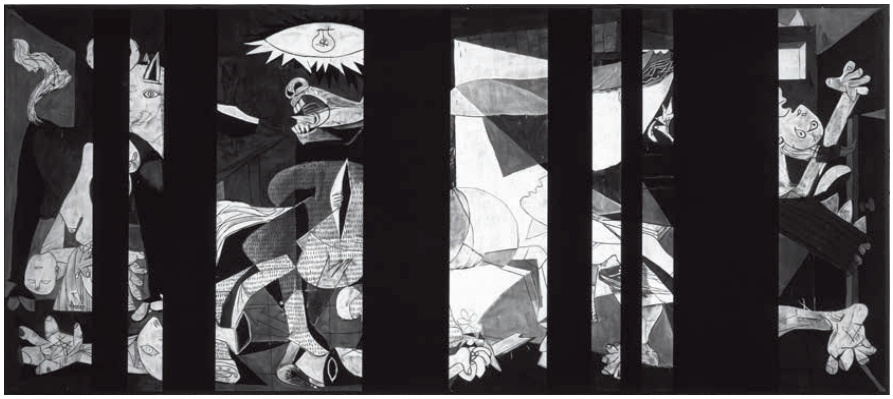
But then what is that genealogy? What political imaginary is at work in all three artists? We know, for example, that the Napoleonic Wars induced Goya to consider the horrors that transpire off the battlefield, the tortures, executions, humiliations and privations of human beings caught up in the follies of military adventurism. We also know that Goya witnessed none of these things himself, that his *Disasters of War* (1810–20), for example, were inventions, informed by others' accounts.

For all of Eisenstein's groundbreaking use and theorisation of montage – from the Odessa steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) to the milk-separator sequence in *The General Line* (1929) – his was a definitively retrospective and so historical, dare one say nostalgic, view – a filmic imagining and reimagining, often in allegorical form, of the one revolution that would change the course of world history.

Longo's allegorical imagery is of a different sort entirely. Drawn from photographs (today mostly found online), Longo's major painting- and mural-size charcoal drawings invest their popular (and sometimes populist) imagery with an impossible scale and substance, as if to suggest that each and every image he treats is of world-historical importance. In some instances the equation is direct, as with his series of atomic explosions; in others it is more oblique, at turns ecclesiastical, in *Untitled (Gabriel's Wing)* (2015), and fantastical, in *Untitled (Pentecost)* (2016).

If not the image, then politics: every work of Longo's selected for *Proof* was made after September 11, 2001. Though the terrorism of that day only appears as the explicit subject of one work, *The Hunting (Triptych)* (2005), other instances of terror are rendered both explicitly, as with the Charlie Hebdo murders in *Untitled (Bullet Hole in Window, January 7, 2015)* (2015–16), and implicitly, as with the line of riot police in *Untitled (Baltimore Cops No. 3)* (2016). But not every work would seem to address our contemporary climate of terror so directly. How to understand, for example, *Untitled (Wall of Ice)* (2016) or *Untitled (Rippling Water)* (2015)?

'Atmosphere' is the key term here. Writing on the first militarised use of poison gas in 1915, Peter Sloterdijk observes that 'The 20th century will be remembered as the age whose essential thought



Untitled (Guernica Redacted, After Picasso's Guernica, 1937), 2014,
charcoal on mounted paper, 4 panels, 283 × 620 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris & Salzburg

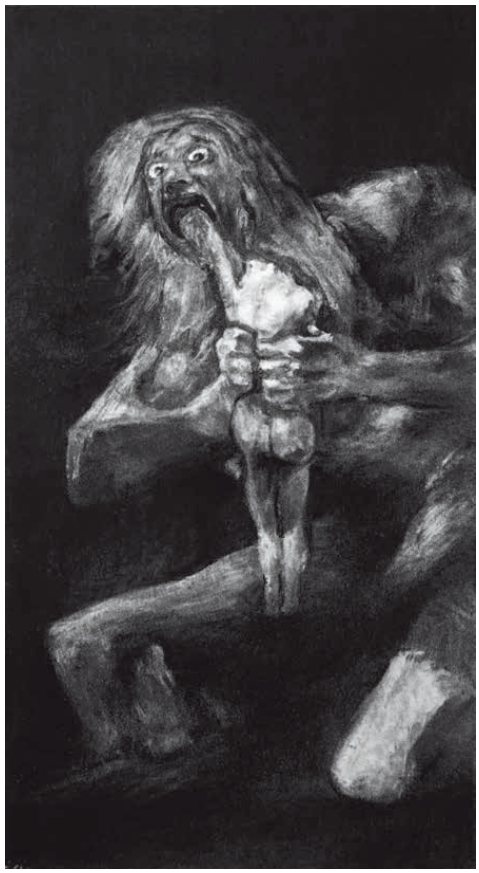
consisted in targeting no longer the body but the enemy's environment. This is the basic idea of terrorism in the more explicit sense.' The use of gas involved 'bringing the climatic and atmospheric conditions pertaining to human life to a new level of explication', a new level of explicitness, a new actuality.

Longo's work of the past 15 years is nothing if not an 'explication' of this more general sense of terror, now understood as a new kind of pervasive and impinging background, an explicitly atmospheric condition. Begin with Longo's earliest work in *Proof*, *Untitled (View of Study Room with Books, Desk and Window, 1938)* (2002), which is part of the artist's *Freud Drawings* (2000–03), and in which the illumination of the title's books, desk and window is countered by the deep black of a physical space that we cannot see or access – a metaphor for the unconscious and its troublesome weather, no doubt, but then 1938 was a dark year as well. In 2003 Longo produced *Mike Test (Head of Goya)*, a drawing of a nuclear mushroom cloud that takes atmospheric dynamics (turbulence, convection, etc) as its explicit subject matter, just as much as it acknowledges how the dawn of the bomb introduced a whole new front to geopolitics.

Over and over again – subtly in *Untitled (May 23, No. 2, Brooklyn)* (2013), overtly in *Untitled (Leaving Iraq)* (2012) – Longo's air is rendered uncanny and menacing. In the monster wave curl of *Untitled (Hellion)* (2011), or the wall of ice in *Untitled (Iceberg for C. D. F.)* (2015–16), the atmosphere is condensed, quite literally, but also reduced in an attempt to capture its inhuman force. When that force is given technological form, as it is in *Untitled (F-22 Raptor)* (2016) and *Untitled (Russian SU-30 Jet Fighter)* (2012) (but where, one might ask, are the drones?), its condition of possibility is present in the clouds below (wings don't work in the vacuum of space). And when that technology is brought back down to earth, as it is in *Untitled (Pentecost)*, that movie's science-fictional robot 'Jaeger' is transformed, by the drawing's background solar corona, from techno-saviour into an acephalic monstrosity, an AI minotaur wandering the labyrinth of a decimated urban maze.

Longo's Jaeger stands as a twenty-first-century update of Goya's 'The dream of reason produces monsters' from *Los Caprichos* (1797–98). Though that series was aimed at the Spanish clergy and nobility, a satirical political commentary fuelled by the more liberal consciousness that had emerged with the Bourbons in eighteenth-century Spain, it has come down to us as a talisman of the Enlightenment's more profane illuminations. Goya's caprices pale in comparison to his *Los Disparates* (*The Follies*), however. These were etched between 1815 and 1823, and imagine an even darker kaleidoscope of human derangements, ones that Goya would carry forward into the late *Black Paintings* (c. 1819–23), one of which Longo commemorates in *Untitled (After Goya, Saturn Devouring His Son, 1819) B* (2016). In *Los Disparates*, importantly, faces and figures emerge from, or sometimes merge with, the etched ground. While never the main focus of the composition, these late images show Goya's early attention to how graphic atmospherics can effectively channel political and social unease, even dread.

For Eisenstein, a similar attention to the atmospherics of the image emerges from his own evolving understanding of montage itself. From a basic juxtaposition of images that implies movement or emotion (what he called 'montage according to the foreground'), Eisenstein articulated a theory of montage as 'overtones' in his 1929 essay 'The Filmic Fourth Dimension'. Through what the filmmaker called the 'visual overtonal complex of the shot', one is confronted with a host of 'collateral vibrations' and 'secondary stimuli', a constellation of connotative visual material that does not fully resolve into the denotative content of the image. As an example, one could point to the climax of the milk-separator sequence in *The General Line*, which is anticipated by a liquid shimmer reflected on the faces of the machine's attending peasants. Then there is the ensuing spray of milk itself, which echoes the spray of sparks that Longo depicts in *Untitled (After Eisenstein, Strike, 1925)* (2016).



Untitled (After Goya, Saturn Devouring His Son, 1819) B, 2016, graphite and charcoal on paper, 18 × 10 cm. Courtesy the artist

The curatorial decision in *Proof* to slow the projection speed of Eisenstein's films privileges this 'overtonal complex', foregrounding viewers' access to the 'physiological' dimension (Eisenstein's term) of each shot, of each image, which he intended as accompaniment to the films' narrative lessons in revolution, sacrifice and class consciousness.

Goya, Eisenstein, Longo. On the evidence, or at least on this reading, all three artists share a similar atmospherics of the image, a distinctly modern political imaginary that attempts to make manifest, or rather explicit, the background conditions of their, and our, contemporary experience. From Goya's nightmares, to Eisenstein's overtones, to Longo's air – each renders explicit the climate of our time. **ar**

Proof: Francisco Goya, Sergei Eisenstein, Robert Longo *is at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, on view through 5 February; Longo's work is also included in* Good Dreams, Bad Dreams: American Mythologies, *curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, through April*

Untitled (View of Study Room with Books, Desk and Window, 1938), 2002,
charcoal on mounted paper, 168 × 274 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf