

For over a decade, art rebel Robert Longo has fought the powers that be.

The first major retrospective of this heavy hitter's work promises to be a knockout.

pop provocateur

by Hunter Drohojowska

Each generation spawns an artist who captures its zeitgeist. In the '60s, it was Warhol; in the '80s, it could be Robert Longo. He was the power surge that blew the circuits of the system, and while the lights were out, changed all the rules. Now, from October 1-December 31, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will illuminate a decade of the 36-year-old artist's work in a traveling retrospective.

In the late '70s, Longo was living near Wall Street where he observed its inhabitants hustling the bull market dressed in dark suits, white shirts and ties. It was an era of punk rock and new-found aggression, and he represented them

nearly life-sized in his first series of drawings based on photographs, Men In The Cities (1979).

The figures appeared convulsed, as if they had just been shot, had had a seizure of pain or had been dancing in ecstasy. Occasionally, he featured women in black cocktail dresses and high heels, adding a hint of repressed sexuality.

It is no accident that these drawings look like film stills—Longo produces art in the collaborative manner more often associated with the movies. His friends posed for the photographs, which were then enlarged by a commercial illustrator, eliminating all evidence of the artist's own hand. Along with a few creative contemporaries, Longo became one of the innovators who derived images primarily from the media and pop culture.

As galleries began to accept the new work, the gap between art and commerce that had been a benchmark of the '70s narrowed. The figures in Longo's drawings are yuppies, which he calls "fallen angels" or "doomed souls." In 1982, he began to add sculptural reliefs in works like Corporate Wars: Walls of Influence, which

depicts a battle for power and money that is clearly Faustian—no fun in getting there, no guarantee of arrival—and all the more tragic for Longo because, to him, these lonely characters figured prominently into the SoHo scene. "It had a lot to do with the condition of the art world," he says. "Under Reagan, it was okay to be rich and it was okay for chauvinism, sexism and racism, too. Buying art was a part of this moral free-for-all, an index of desire."

As Longo's work became larger and technically more complicated, it seemed he was trying to transfer the most dramatic possibilities of cinema into the gallery, literally creating "showstoppers" that measured nearly 12-by-18 feet. "I never felt I was going out of my way to be bombastic," he says. "But sometimes the work calls for it." The New York Telephone Building is seen crushing the image of Pierrot in Longo's most autobiographical picture Pressure.

Coincidentally, another telephone company, AT&T, wound up sponsoring the L.A. exhibition.

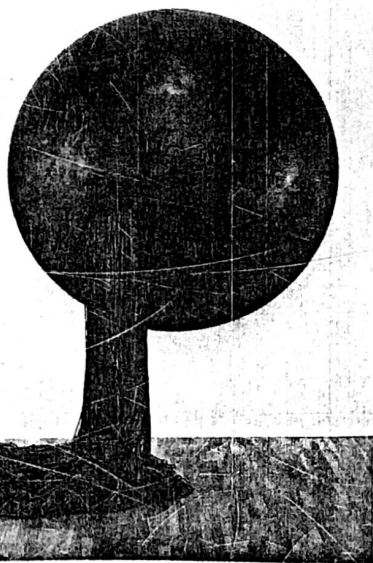
Longo himself admits that by 1986 some of his more grandiose work had reached "ridiculous" scale and appeared more mannered than incisive. "When an artist has the opportunity to be successful, it can be dangerous," he



explains. "There are no guidelines. You think every piece you make could be great. You get to the point where you really know how to make things, and then you run the risk of forgetting why you made them in the first place."

Longo took a detour from the artworld in 1987 and 1988 to make rock videos for bands he admired—"acts of love," he calls them—as well as a 30-minute film called Arena Brains. For five years, he has tried to break into Hollywood to make a feature film. Much to his chagrin, the project remains in limbo. "I thought it would be like college. I had some success in art so I thought I could transfer it to film. Then I found out they wouldn't accept my credits."

As we approach the '90s, Longo views his retrospective with a certain resignation and a new humility. "I've regenerated something that takes me back to the beginning again. I'm not hot-wiring culture as much as I used to. I may be a little slower now, but I'm here to stay."



A PIECE FROM THE MONUMENTAL MEN IN THE CITIES SERIES OF 1979 (TOP, RIGHT), WHICH HELPED LAUNCH LONGO'S CAREER; BLACK PLANET (FOR A. Z.) OF 1988 (ABOVE), WITH ITS MASSIVE SPHERE EXUDING RUBBER CABLES, IS BOTH GRIM AND GRAND; CULTURE CULTURE OF 1982-83 (CENTER) COMPARES THE RICH AND POWERFUL OVER TIME; RED PLEXIGLAS SHARDS GIVE THE FIRE NEXT TIME (FOR G. B.) OF 1988 (RIGHT) AN EDGE OF VIOLENCE.

