

ROBERT LONGO: THE OUTWARD AND VISIBLE SIGNS OF AN INWARD AND INVISIBLE GRACE

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Guns. Waves. Mushroom clouds. And now, celestial bodies: planets, stars and nebulae. These are the subjects of Robert Longo's continued mining of the sublime. Though his large-scale charcoal drawings on paper have become familiar – signature, even – the immensity of the work and their exacting facility never fail to seduce, which is no doubt a necessary part of Longo's art. As with his previous show at Metro Pictures, which showcased magnificent nuclear explosions rendered in velvety black and the brilliant, seemingly impossible white of unmarked paper, seduction is integral to the discomfort. One stands in awe in front of these images, and then, slowly at first, but with fair acceleration, that once-unadulterated aesthetic enjoyment runs up against the Idea: here we have the weed of science, physical forces propagating where they were never meant to, a sun on the surface of the earth.

This fits Edmund Burke's equation for the sublime quite nicely: beauty + dread. Kant, however, required further specificity. Knowing we are safe from such forces, that we occupy a position at a remove from any of their direct effects, allows for an experience of the 'dynamical sublime'. Recognising, in our capacity to reason, that we surpass our own ability to imagine offers up an experience of the 'mathematical sublime'. ('Infinity' provides the favoured test case here: easily conceived, difficult to imagine.) We should note, however, that the former involves a confrontation with the world, while the latter issues from a confrontation with ourselves, and Longo's lush images of atomic explosions would seem to produce both experiences simultaneously: a 'Look at that!' crossed with a hushed 'Look at that'.

This most recent series of drawings withdraws from such ambivalence. Longo has a story to tell here. Included in the show are two quite small works, *Untitled (Dante, after J.P.)* (2006), which reproduces Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30* (1950), and *Untitled (Virgil, after H.B.)* (2006), which shows the back panels of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1504). Each is a picture of a universe: Bosch's profane sphere, Pollock's existential web. To these Longo adds his own – or rather our shared – planets and stars, as if to suggest that these are now the figures with which our imaginations and our reason must contend. They are the stuff of reality as much as the stuff of dreams, to which the two pictures of Longo's sleeping children, also included in the show, attest, at least as much as the two small drawings attest to the contingency of our knowledge and our fallible desire for enlightenment.

Longo's drawings are elaborate constructions after all: highly mediated pictures of objects in space and time, rendered from photographs, themselves the products of complex technologies and material histories. 'Simulations' was a term once used to describe his productions, and the word still rings true, just as the sentimentality of some 'inward and invisible grace' does not ring at all, particularly given the vacuum of space. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

Untitled (Dante, after J.P.), 2006, graphite on paper, 13 x 26 cm. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York