

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## High and Low: Robert Longo and Willie Birch and Thinking of Kirk Varnedoe and Spike Lee

Jan Garden Castro – September 20, 2025



Willie Birch, *Two Roofers and a Ladder*, 2022, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 72 x 48 inches.

Robert Longo and Willie Birch are showing black-to-white toned art, or grisaille, at the Pace and Fort Gansevoort galleries respectively. Both use erasure and other techniques. Longo's subjects are chosen from art history and from invented tropes. His large-scale work captures historic moments when consciousness changes, including the 2017 New York Women's March, the 2020 Minneapolis protest for George Floyd, the 2014 St. Louis Ferguson riots following Michael Brown's killing, and Russia's deadly invasions of Donetsk, Ukraine in 2022. Longo frames the

# FORT GANSEVOORT

latter as *The Three Graces*, three charcoal on paper works showing wedding dresses in a shop window riddled with bullet holes. Longo's art about war and protesting war reminds us that we prefer daily life and going to weddings.



Longo, Robert, *Untitled (After Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes, c. 1620)*, 2025, Charcoal on paper, 12.75 x 9.75 inches, image © 2025 Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Longo's told viewers at a preview that his writhing snakes art reminds him of politicians in Washington, D. C. His grisaille of Artemisia Gentileschi's 1593 painting shows Judith beheading Holofernes with her maid's help. In real life, the artist had been raped by her tutor and turned him into Holofernes. Longo reminds today's viewers that, historically, women have been abused by men—and still are being abused. The woman artist fought back by giving her rapist a "virtual" death. Gentileschi and Longo remind us that injustices often go unpunished in real life. Also, as we know, Artemisia's father often took credit for her work—up until my lifetime—for 400 years—and women's "invisibility" still needs to be challenged. *Study of Sunset at Mecca*, 2025 is Longo's view of Mecca. The dramatic sky and massed (all male?) worshipers remind us of the power of Islam in our times.

Longo uses Legion acid-free drawing paper mounted onto a honeycomb aluminum panel, and his framed drawings sometimes weigh 500 pounds and take years to complete. He uses brushes to apply charcoal powder as well as pencils and sticks of charcoal. He also uses various erasers, including electric, so that the white areas of his compositions are uncovered or unmarked vellum. Longo is at Pace through October 25.

# FORT GANSEVOORT



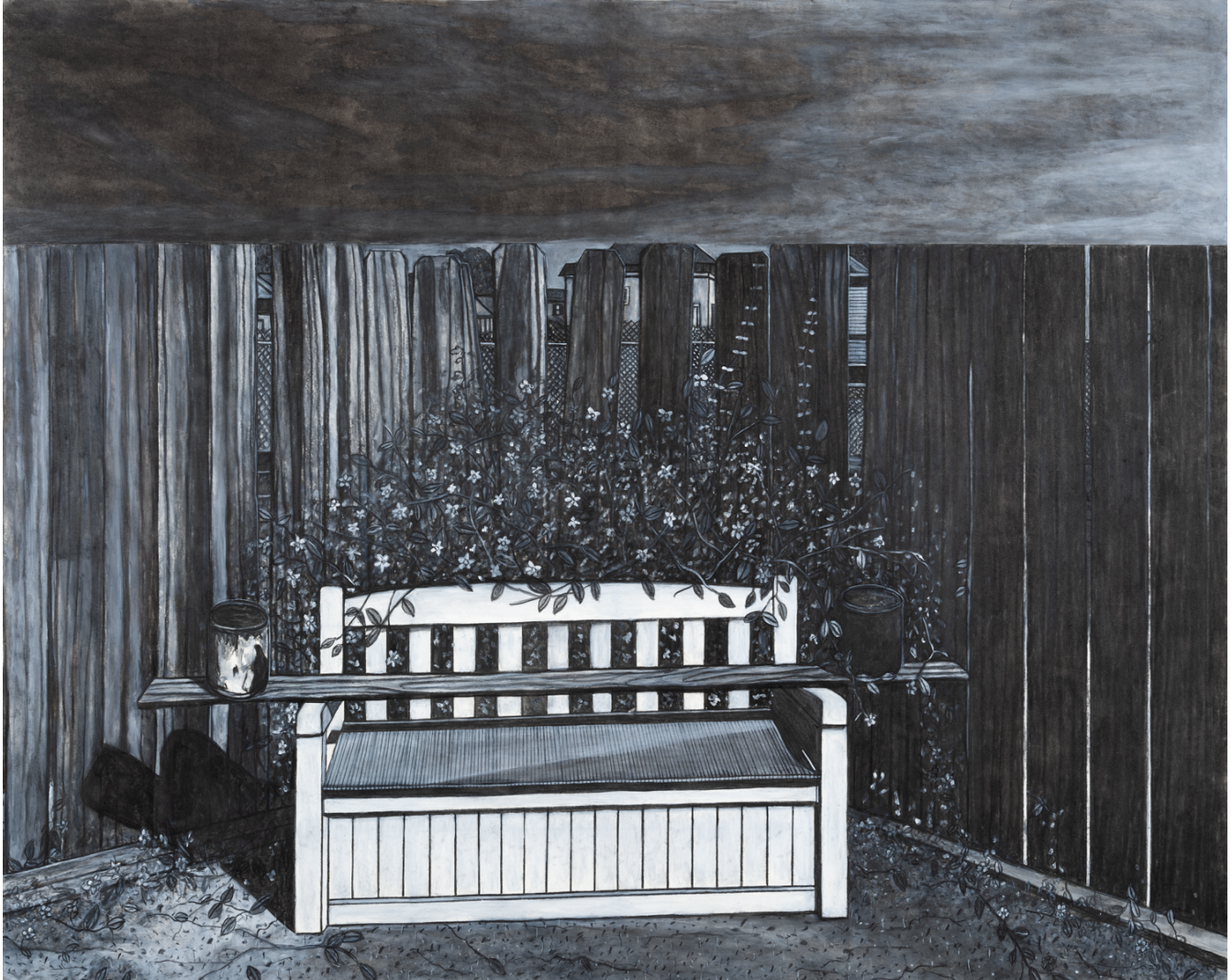
Longo, Robert, *Study of Sunset at Mecca*, 2025, ink and charcoal on vellum, 20 × 33.25 inches, image, image © 2025 Robert Longo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Willie Birch uses charcoal sticks, brushes in different varieties and sizes, a dry clean rag, and Windsor & Newton titanium white on 100% rag paper for his intensive grisaille art that focuses on his neighborhood and New Orleans as a delta that is also a metaphor for the United States and its Black populations. He builds the surface by alternating charcoal and thin layers of white paint. As he goes, Birch uses a dry rag over the surface to rub out the visible strokes of the paint brush. “The layers give the paper a feeling of depth,” Birch explains. “The layers form a body of images.” Each work takes from three to six months to complete.

Birch selects his subjects for their originality, and he imbues them with allusions to history and art history that are important to him. *Two Roofers and a Ladder*, 2022 celebrates manual labor, New Orleans architecture, and the built environment. The roofer’s hat alludes to Gustave Courbet’s 1849 painting *The Stone Breakers*. The roof is also a metaphor for seeing from high up. The ladder refers to Jacob’s Ladder in the bible and to a Southern spiritual that we sang in rounds when we were kids. This work has many references to people of color building American culture and structures.



# FORT GANSEVOORT



Willie Birch, *Landscape: White Bench, Clapboard Siding, Two Cans, and Invasive Wildflowers*, 2023, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, in two parts, 72.25 x 90 inches.

*Landscape: White Bench, Clapboard Siding, Two Cans, and Invasive Wildflowers*, 2023 is a white bench from a neighbor's garden that is loaded with literal and symbolic layers starting with the black and white paint cans balanced on a white bench, which stands for the Supreme Court. The work nods to Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman to serve on the bench. More houses can be seen through the slats in the fence, and the sky is hopeful. *Two Views of a Dismantled White Picket Fence*, 2025 is two versions of a fence, possibly belonging to the artist, that neighborhood kids have deconstructed, or wrecked, yet the artist calls it dismantled. We all recall Tom and Huck getting others to paint the white picket fence. The artist calls this "a metaphor for the destabilization of our nation due to political polarization." He also sees the two views as adding complexity, jazz, counterpoint, and dissonance. One interpretation of this work that occurs to me is that Americans need to figure out which fences to rebuild and which fences to tear down and whether art or sports or culture could possibly come into play to engage neighborhood kids.



# FORT GANSEVOORT



Willie Birch, *Still Standing (I Am Here)*, 2024, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 48 x 59.5 inches.

*Still Standing (I Am Here)*, 2024 is two views of an independent Black neighbor supervising construction. Her body language is maternal and disapproving. She knows who she is. Willie Birch's art is up through November 8, 2025.

These two exhibitions follow in the footsteps of Kirk Varnedoe and Spike Lee. *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, a 1990 MoMA show and book created by Kirk Varnedoe (1946-2003) with Adam Gopnik, was a large, controversial exhibition positing that art, historically, has been directly influenced by various popular cultures, including advertising, pulp magazines, and daily use items like the light bulb in Picasso's *Guernica* — and that even Leonardo da Vinci borrowed from pop caricatures. Spike Lee's 2025 *Highest 2 Lowest* is a version of Akira Kurosawa's 1963 film *High and Low*, which itself is a darker version of the book *King's Ransom* by Ed McBain, a.k.a. Evan Hunter. Lee's film plays with Black stereotypes such as the successful music mogul who collects "high" Black art by established Black contemporaries as contrasted with the ghetto rapper, who fails to secure the mogul's endorsement and instead launches an elaborate kidnapping scheme that backfires. In Lee's film, social class and wealth affect tastes in art and music.

# FORT GANSEVOORT

Longo and Birch, each working in grisaille using differing techniques and subjects, are speaking up about their visions for America and visions of America. Coincidentally, Gabriel Orozco has curated a stunning black and white show at Kurimanzutto Gallery in Chelsea through October 18 that includes three small paintings by Longo. Obviously, these artists are making many points; one is that our world is increasingly divided. Obviously, too, black and white symbolize other things in addition to being a mixture of all pigments or all light and/or an absence of all pigments or all light.

Thank you to Katie Larson and Maggie Dougherty at Fort Gansevoort Gallery and to Talia Trauner at PACE for facilitating the images.

Robert Longo at Pace until October 25 & Willie Birch at Fort Gansevoort until November 8.