

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Robert Longo at Metro Pictures

"Irritating," "overbearing," "spiritually cheap": such are the salvos critics have launched in recent years when describing Robert Longo's work—enough to send any artist to the couch. Why is he picked on more than most other artists, good or bad? Whatever the reason, it may explain the fact that the focus of Longo's recent Metro Pictures show was Sigmund Freud and his Vienna psychoanalytic consulting room. And perhaps because he found the topic consoling, Longo seemed inspired to fill the spacious Chelsea gallery with works that are his best in years, returning to the large-scale charcoal- and-graphite format which first brought him notice with his "Men in the Cities," those angst-ridden, gyrating yuppies of two decades ago. But instead of the loose, stylized postmodern figures that became his hallmark, the "Freud Drawings" are nuanced and brooding, and resonate with history. Like Longo's earlier works, these are based on photographs, but they are so meticulously executed that at first view they appear to be photos themselves.

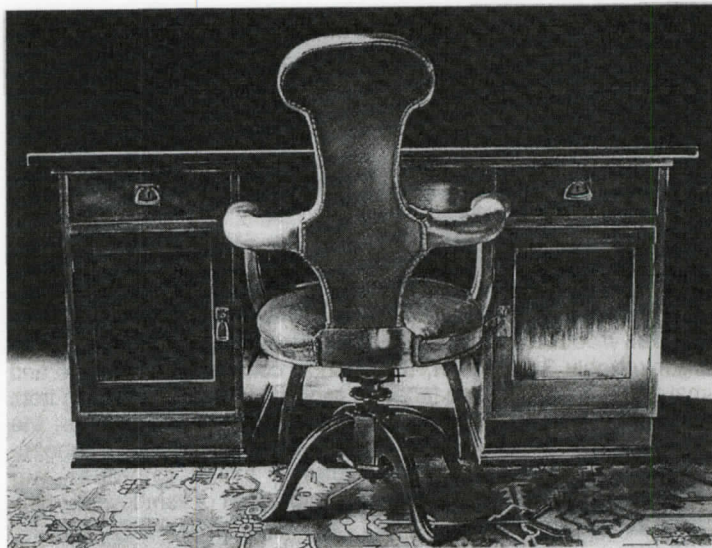
Longo has cropped off edges, selected details and heightened effects from 1938 documentation shots by Edmund Engelman, done shortly before the Austrian *Anschluss* forced Freud to flee to London. (The originals can be seen on the Sigmund Freud Museum Vienna Web site.) Under the artist's hand, unpopulated rooms become laden with an ambience reminiscent of expressionistic German films of the 1920s. An open doorway, framed by an ancient bas-relief featuring a kneeling Egyptian,

offers a partial view into the analyst's chamber; a leather chair faces away from the viewer as if toward a patient in the room's unseen center. A glowing area of brightness seems to promise enlightenment. In another work, a humanoid chair with its back toward the viewer presides confidently over a massive desk.

Particularly engaging were works focusing on enlarged details: the brass head of a standing lamp displays mottled reflections of the consulting room; three companion drawings that depict folds of an Oriental rug are extreme close-ups of edges of the famed analyst's couch. This Romantic photo-realism offered a provocative twist on the current gallery trend in which large-scale photographs aspire to

the status of individually crafted paintings; here, in contrast, the hand-done masquerades as the mechanically produced. The drawing/photography double entendre seemed underscored by what first appeared to be a rendering of an old-fashioned camera lens staring frontally outward over the gallery desk: in fact it depicted a greatly enlarged peephole from Freud's front door. Longo nowhere fully acknowledges the relationship of his works to their source material, and this is unfortunate. Nonetheless, a new introspection by the artist is in evidence.

-Carey Lovelace



Robert Longo: *Untitled (desk and chair, study room, 1938)*, 2000, graphite and charcoal on mounted paper, 68 by 93 inches; at Metro Pictures.