The writhing, contorted figures in Robert Longo's series of charcoal-and-graphite drawings *Men in the Cities* have become iconic. Caught mid-fall, head back, arms and legs flailing, the man depicted in *Untitled* captures the Zeitgeist of a jittery period whose unofficial motto might have been, "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space." Longo's images of men and women embody the convulsive energy and poses of punk rock as well as the social strife of the Reagan years. Like Cindy Sherman's self-portrait photographs representing scenes in imaginary B-movies and Jenny Holzer's distillations of vast philosophies into pithy one-liners broadcast on posters and LED signs, they are emblems of early 1980s art.

According to Longo, the idea for *Men in the Cities* came from a clay relief figure he made based on a publicity photograph of a murder scene in the German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *An American Soldier* (1970). Longo was impressed by the way a character in the film, dressed in a hat and tie, is shot in the back and leaps forward, chest arching violently—forming a terrifying yet elegant airborne arabesque. The director Sam Peckinpah and actor-director Clint Eastwood were popularizing graphic, melodramatic death scenes in their movies, and Longo wanted to capture that stylization in his drawings, along with the "hot and fast" new movements developed by singers in bands such as The Contortions and Talking Heads. He invited friends, including Cindy Sherman and his then-girlfriend, artist Gretchen Bender, to model for him on the roof of his New York apartment building, snapping pictures as he threw tennis balls at them to provoke spontaneous, full-body dynamism.

Longo and his assistants transformed the figures through aggressively scraped and worked drawing into stark, high-contrast, nearly life-size images.

The critic Carter Ratcliff referred to the figures in *Men in the Cities* as "failed caryatids," collapsing members of an empty contemporary culture that grants them no legitimate burdens. But Longo himself took a more positive attitude: "My art aspires to freedom and truth and hope," he said. "It tries to mediate between power and peace."  

The ancestors of *Men in the Cities*, Longo recently asserted, include Greek and Roman sculptures and the paintings of Caravaggio, Edward Hopper, and Egon Schiele. Like the heroes and antiheroes in those works, the figures in *Men in the Cities* embody the spirit and struggles of their time.

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*Robert Longo* (American, born 1953)

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Art of Our Time
Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Preface
Donald Beggs

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Patricia McDonnell

Art for All in Wichita: A Brief History of the Ulrich Museum of Art
Patricia McDonnell

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art

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About the Contributors

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Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Loving to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.


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