

Ben Long: Old Ways Made New Again

By MATTHIAS ANDERSON



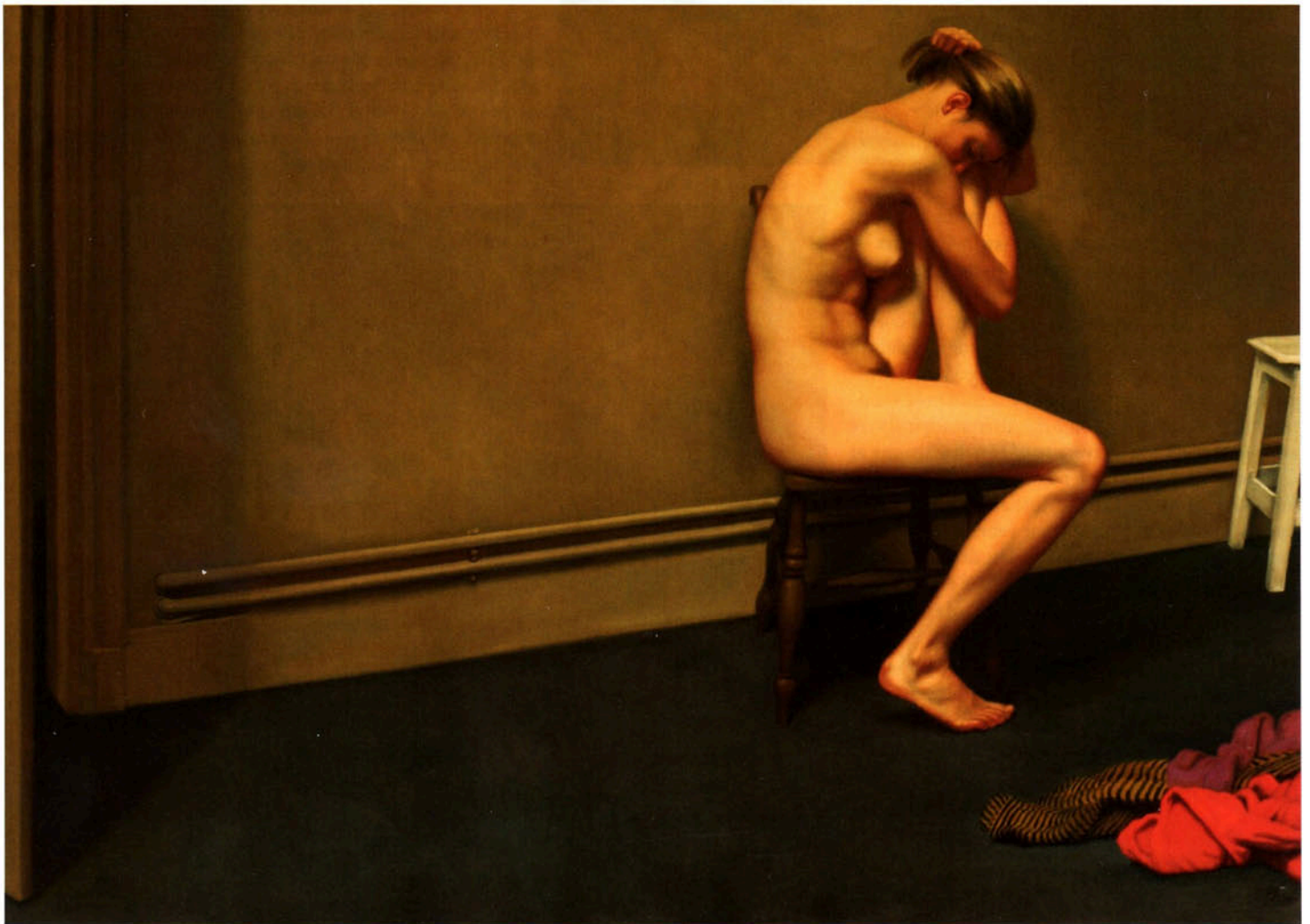
It's not often that two exhibitions about a contemporary artist appear simultaneously, a convergence that makes this the perfect moment to visit South Carolina and explore the work of Ben Long (b. 1945). On view through February 7 at the Greenville County Museum of Art are more than 40 paintings and drawings made throughout Long's career, including several recent paintings not previously exhibited. Located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Greenville is an ideal place to consider Long in the context of the museum's superb permanent collection of American and regional art, including an installation of watercolors by Andrew Wyeth.

Meanwhile, on the Atlantic coast 200 miles to the southeast, Charleston's Ann Long Fine Art is presenting a selling show of 33 drawings by Long. (The artist and his dealer are not related.) On display through January, this project features a range of figure sketches and also large "cartoon" drawings made for Long's much-admired fresco projects. To use so Mediterranean a word as "fresco" in the same sentence as "South Carolina" may seem surprising, but so is Long's artistic journey.

QUIET AFTERNOON

1990, OIL ON CANVAS, 37 X 57 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION





BROOK'S APPLE

2004, OIL ON CANVAS, 29 1/2 X 21 1/2 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Institution and National Museum of the Marine Corps.) As soon as he was discharged in 1971, Long moved to Florence, where he spent nearly eight years as apprentice to the master painter, portraitist, and frescoist Pietro Annigoni (1910-1988). The young American absorbed everything around him, becoming especially adept at the difficult fresco technique, which entails painting directly on wet plaster. Among Long's achievements during this fruitful period was the only fresco ever made by a non-Italian at the Benedictine abbey of Montecassino, which has been under reconstruction since its near-destruction in 1944.

Long left Italy in 1979, eager to make frescoes in the U.S. that depict the religious themes celebrated by the fresco masters of the Italian Renaissance, as well as modern allegories about the human condition.

Happily, his objective has been fulfilled, and then some: Long has already created 14 major frescoes on these shores, including the nation's largest secular fresco at the Bank of America Corporate Center in Charlotte. On view at the Greenville Museum this season, for example, is one of Long's cartoons for the *Crossroads* fresco at Statesville's Civic Center. Here, too, is an array of easel paintings, including penetrating likenesses of commissioned sitters and favorite models, the latter often nude or partially draped. All reflect the technical and stylistic lessons of the Old Masters that Long learned well, yet all are staged in contemporary milieus that do not deny or discount the present.

WORLDS OF EXPERIENCE

Born in Victoria, Texas, Benjamin Franklin Long IV grew up in Statesville, North Carolina — about 40 miles north of Charlotte — near his grandfather, Rev. McKendree Robbins Long (1888-1976). Renowned for his revivalist preaching and colorful, highly detailed canvases envisioning Revelation and the Apocalypse, Rev. Long painted large, complex compositions informed by his academic training in New York and London. After studying creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the younger Long enrolled at New York's Art Students League, just as his grandfather had. The influence of his two years there can be seen in Long's work today: His deft draftsmanship points to the instruction of Robert Beverly Hale, and his rich, sober coloring to Frank Mason (who died last June at age 88).

Long then enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and served two tours of duty in Vietnam. During the second of these, the young painter headed the team of artists in uniform charged with depicting their fellow Marines in action. (The team's works from this period are now in the Smithsonian



GULLY

2005, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 10 X 12 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



SHEPHERD (CARTOON FOR **23RD PSALM** FRESCO AT PEACE CHAPEL, MT. PLEASANT, SC)
 2006-2007, CHARCOAL, CONTÉ CRAYON, AND CHALK ON PAPER, 60 X 100 IN.
 ANN LONG FINE ART, CHARLESTON

PASSING IT ON

Having resided in France for some of the 1980s, Long now travels between his homes in Tuscany, Charleston, and Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville is where, in 2002, he established The Fine Arts League of the Carolinas, a nonprofit institution that guides students through a demanding, three-year *beaux-arts* curriculum. Working for six hours every day, students learn human anatomy, refer directly to the live model, and learn all the techniques and strategies that Long himself gained from Annigoni. Although he is understandably protective of his own studio time, Long recognizes that teaching is crucial to the survival of the traditions he cherishes: “Teaching is the idea of passing it on. You have the information — what makes you so privileged to take it to your grave? What kind of arrogance is that?”

Quite logically, Long involves students in his own fresco commissions, just as Annigoni did. Because the scale of these projects is large, many hands are needed, and there is no better way to test one’s powers than by drawing and painting *in situ*. For this reason, western North Carolina has inadvertently become the center of fresco painting in this hemisphere. Indeed, the only frustrating aspect of Long’s exhibitions in South Carolina this season is the impossibility of presenting there his most important creations — the frescoes.

In recognition of this challenge, a “Fresco Trail” website (benlongfrescotrail.com/locations.htm) has been created to help readers learn about — and ideally experience in person — 11 sites in western North

HEAD STUDY FOR **THE GOOD SAMARITAN** FRESCO (FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHARLOTTE)
 2001, CHARCOAL AND PENCIL ON PAPER, 14 1/2 X 10 1/2 IN.
 PRIVATE COLLECTION





MAN LOOKING UPWARD
(STUDY FOR *CONTINUUM*
FRESCO INSIDE DOME AT
TRANSAMERICA SQUARE,
CHARLOTTE)
1997, CONTÉ CRAYON
AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER,
24 1/4 X 18 IN.
ANN LONG FINE ART,
CHARLESTON

Carolina. It's a lucky region to have so much fine art in public spaces, and one can only hope that at least some of Long's well-trained students will find their own fresco commissions for many years to come. ■

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Information: Greenville County Museum of Art, 420 College Street, Greenville, SC 29601, 864.271.7570, greenvillemuseum.org; Ann Long Fine Art, 54 Broad Street, Charleston, SC 29401, 843.577.0447, annlongfineart.com; The Fine Arts League of the Carolinas, 362 Depot Street, Asheville, NC 28801, 828.252.5050, fineartsleague.org