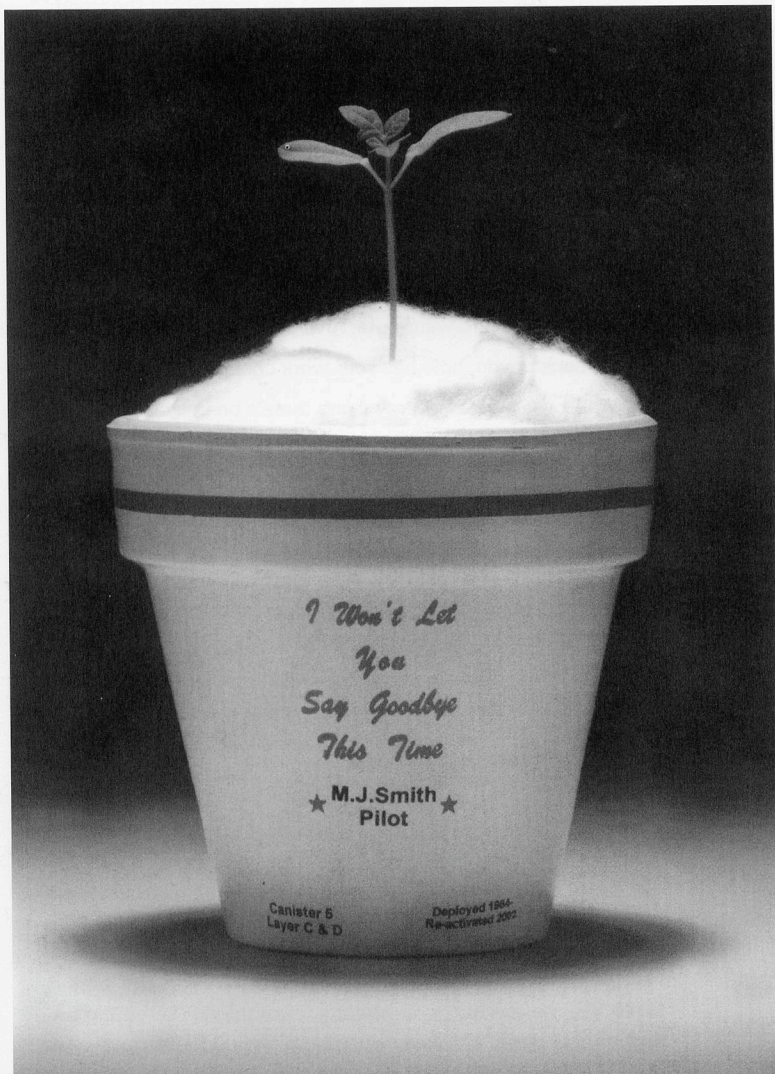


# Conversation with A Resurrectionist: Dario Robleto

Paula Owen



Dario Robleto, *I Won't Let You Say Goodbye This Time*, 2001-03

Pigmented inkjet print of reactivated NASA "Space seeds" (tomato seeds flown in space, launched from on a probe from the Space Shuttle Challenger, 1984, retrieved on the Columbia, 1990). Cotton, dirt, water, custom-made porcelain cups, dust made from fragments of the shuttle heat shields, and transfer type

10 x 12 inches

Collection of the artist

Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston



**Paula Owen** You have achieved a lot of success internationally, yet you choose to stay in San Antonio. Is there a reason for that?

**Dario Robleto** Besides being close to my family, it's very important to me to figure out a different model of being an artist. I just didn't want to go to New York or Los Angeles. I want to unravel this myth of success only lying through certain routes. There is an empowering quality that all artists can use when they decide that their "careers" can be as much a creative act as anything they make.

**PO** Will you explain the role of language in your work?

**DR** It's very important. I have the titles and materials list completely worked out before I ever set foot in the studio. I need a piece to satisfy me poetically on the page before I can ever begin to make it. So I'm giving language a kind of primacy that most object-makers would look down on. Half the time, I don't even know if I can get the materials on the list, but that's where the research comes in and how one thing leads to the next. In the process of the research you make creative leaps like you would in the studio. The point is, I am constantly looking for new ways to make objects.

In the case of my just-completed *Trilogy* project, I approached it like a documentary film. First, I wrote a complete script and storyboarded the whole narrative. Every object I made came to life because the story/language dictated that it exist.

**PO** I know that Part II and Part III of *The Trilogy* opened simultaneously on September 11th in Paris and Los Angeles respectively. Was that just a coincidence?

**DR** No—because of what it is about it was very important to me. I was given the rare opportunity to have shows on this date in Europe and the U.S. More specifically, being a young Texan artist having a show in France and L.A. gave me a chance to remark on the strange relationships between us all today. It almost broke me trying to maneuver all this but how could one not take such an opportunity? In fact, Part I, *Roses in the Hospital / Men Are the New Women* opened in Houston on the day of the largest protest march in history—February 15, 2003—an extremely important moment that has, unfortunately, been too quickly forgotten. I'd been contemplating the idea of how a show itself could "march" alongside, in a sense, the streams of culture. So it was only natural that the next stages continue this idea. Part II is called *Southern Bacteria* and Part III is called *Diary of a Resurrectionist*.

**PO** *The Trilogy* is such a complex project, but can you try to summarize it?

**DR** I've been thinking about whether art can comment in any meaningful way on what's going on in the world—and, more specifically, can it aid in its healing. I made a huge commitment to this project and worked on it for almost four years. It encompasses close to fifty works that revolve around a fictional American soldier. I began by meditating on the problem of what would happen if he started out in one war very gung ho and sure of what he was fighting for, and then if I could pluck him through time and deposit him on various American battlefields. What happens is that nothing is clear anymore. His aggression, when removed from a specific moment, becomes just aggression. There is no more clarity to his violence, if there ever is such a thing. In the *Trilogy*, every American war—from the Revolutionary War to the last Gulf War—is accounted for in actual war materials. Many of the objects are things that he would have been carrying through the wars as he tries to document and come to terms with his situation.

Part I is about damage inflicted on his body. A big theme in the show is the fact that the soldier's body, through time, has always had to bear the brunt of other people's politics. And we witness an actual grinding to dust in this part. The second theme of this show is about his ability to rebuild that body with some significant changes, taking into account the horror he has seen. Part II asks the question of whether art has the power to repair the past—not metaphorically, but in actuality, with medicines that I am making by sampling different ways of medicine production through time. It also focuses on the

legacy of the American South and how it may be fueling current trends in our politics. In Part III, I imagine the soldier completely rebuilt but as quite a different person. He is now a traveling medicine man and musician who takes on the role that I am trying to take on—that of going back through time with the possibility of fixing things.

**PO** Can you describe some of the more arcane materials that are central to the story in *The Trilogy*?

**DR** Well, there are so many, but the cassette in Part I, for instance, is made of bone dust from every bone in the body combined with trinitite—glass that formed at the site of the first atomic bomb blast in New Mexico when the heat melted the surrounding sand. The remnants of this explosion that really changed the world are now integrated with the soldier's body. The tape unspooling from it contains six distinct tracks I made with war sounds of many eras obtained from paranormal archives—literally, ghost soldiers.

*Balm of a 1,000 Foreign Fields* is a basket cast from bullet lead from various wars, with a box carved from bone containing a balm I made from medicinal plants. The key piece in Part III is the violin I made for him because the creative gesture of the soldier and the redemptive power of music are of immense importance to the show. The violin, *Nihilist with a Dream*, is made of decarbonized bone—a chemical process applied to the bone to remove the carbon—the humanness in a sense—and is completely functional. The strings are made of bullet and shrapnel lead from every American War.

**PO** I see you as a kind of modern day shaman or sorcerer, and you have said that issues of faith and belief are important in your work. How important?

**DR** Issues of faith direct almost every project I pour myself into. This is one of those broad art questions that preoccupies me almost daily. I want to understand what faith is—what it says about being human, how it holds us together. What are the advantages of faith and, more importantly, its dangers and can art contribute in any meaningful way to this discussion? The interconnectedness of all things runs through many belief systems. I certainly think one of the beautiful things art can do is emphasize this humbling point, but without all the dogma of religion.

I recently told myself to stop using alchemy as a metaphor and just make the commitment to actually BEING one—an alchemist that is. If I am going to invest all my life into the notion that art can work for us in a very real sense, then I better believe it myself. And that can only come with my complete investment in my practices. Shamanism, alchemy, voodoo and root doctors, catholic transubstantiation—they all have a common ground. That is, faith interacting with the real world or, more specifically, with matter, material, substance. Faith or the spiritual must find its way into real, everyday substances for them to work on us. This interface between material and faith is where I devote most of my waking hours.

**PO** What are you working on now?

**DR** The new work will pick up on some of the themes from the trilogy; specifically, warfare, empire and race, which I didn't really touch upon here. It is called *Salvation Cocktails* and is referencing any ingestible substance that is meant to be a test or act of faith. Southern tent revival religious sects or Jim Jones and his cyanide and Kool-Aid, for example. I'm also working on another vehicle for *The Trilogy* narrative in book form.