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Dario Robleto: Best 2011 Art Show NYers Won't See

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The Texas-based artist's solo exhibition at the Des Moines Art Center confronts human-induced extinction.
By **Rebecca Bates**



Images courtesy of the Des Moines Art Center

Dario Robleto is a resurrector of dead things. The Texas-based artist is known for his odd materials—the skeleton of a carrier pigeon, audio tape recordings of supercentenarians.

Robleto's work is an exercise in mourning, whereby the structure of found objects is transformed in an attempt to preserve memory. Mammoth hair plucked from receding glaciers is braided into flowers in the Victorian tradition ("Some Longings Survive Death"); album covers of live performances of dead musicians are used to make stage lights ("Candles Un-burn, Suns Un-shine, Death Un-dies"; cotton and soldiers' letters to their wives become pulp for new paper used in wreaths ("Defiant Gardens"). Robleto turns the original materials into something else, something almost unrecognizable, and in doing so ignites a conversation about how we wrestle with grief, and how turning that grief into something tangible may or may not be a comfort.

The pieces in Robleto's solo exhibition *Survival Does Not Lie in the Heavens* at the Des Moines Art Center have a moral to them as well. In "The Common Denominator of Existence Is Loss," human hand bones are set in a circle with the 50,000-year-old claws of extinct cave bears, suggesting that the struggle for survival for the human species is intricately tied to the demise of another. Ultimately, this dead matter forces us to acknowledge our role in the narrative of death for the planet as a whole.

Below Robleto talks about his fascination with the history of mourning, his use of craft traditions long forgotten, and his Smithsonian Fellowship (which ultimately involves a discussion of Carl Sagan as the ultimate DJ).

—Rebecca Bates for *Guernica*

Guernica: You seem particularly interested in mourning as an act of preservation. What attracts you to the methods of preserving memory that we no longer use, like the braiding and framing of a dead loved one's hair?

Dario Robleto: For me it all comes back to survival. It kind of runs through everything I do. I've researched and studied for many years now, through different times, different cultures, how people have found ways to cope with profound loss or grief. But what I'm most interested in is the creative response to loss. The Victorians in particular really pushed mourning to some interesting craft levels, but there's a real disconnect between the modern understanding of what those things originally meant and the intention behind them for the people who made them. They really were creative responses to loss. They were coping with the loss in a very physical and material way, which I find a very beautiful, hopeful process, not the repressed attitude toward death and loss that we have today. So, the hair braiding is just one of many examples I could rattle off of things I've explored or been influenced by. But it always comes back to that: What's the creative response to loss. How do you grapple with this kind of trauma physically, how do you touch the loss and try to come to terms with it through some process of braiding or stitching or any number of ways.

Guernica: I've always been really fascinated by Victorian death photography, where dead bodies were propped up to make them seem as if they were still alive, because family members wanted to have a permanent representation of their loved one's likeness.

Dario Robleto: They're really fascinating. I always try to point out that when we look at those things today we have to be aware that we're looking at them in a different time and place. And our instincts want to go to the morbid side of things. But it's just not fair to the intentions of the original people who made the stuff. The Victorians were grappling with complicated issues of loss, and the photography was a technology at their disposal that offered a way of preserving their lost loved one that all of us would take for granted today since we can look back at pictures of who we've lost. But at the time, think of how radical that was. So there was this weird phenomenon of dressing them as if they're still alive or peacefully sleeping. The intention was very different back then.

Guernica: Within your tableaus of mourning, like "The Common Denominator of Existence Is Loss," why do you pair relics of human death with parts of extinct animals, like the woolly mammoth or the extinct cave bear?

Dario Robleto: That body of work was provoked by an experience I had several years ago traveling to these glaciers in the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and working with glaciologists. Part of what I was trying to grapple with was loss at the level of mass extinction. One of these weird phenomena that's happening with environmental change and global warming is completely off everyone's radar, just one of these odd side effects. As many glaciers are melting and icy tundras are decaying, there's an unprecedented amount of woolly mammoth material that's becoming dislodged from the ice. Not just mammoth, but all kinds of fossils from the past. What occurred to me was, had anyone tried to pinpoint the first case of human-induced extinction? What was the first time we as species pushed another one to oblivion? I would argue that's probably going to be one of the defining moral problems of the century, human-induced extinction. And I really wanted to know, when did we first cross that barrier? You have to make the assumption that alteration is a constructive act, not a destructive one, and it's the opposite of most of our impulses.

With the mammoth piece, I thought, since the culture hadn't formed, there was nothing in place yet to think about extinction as a problem, let alone respond creatively or culturally. Because these glaciers are unlocking all this material, my idea was to retroactively mourn for things that never got mourned for, but to use all the skills and techniques that have since evolved over those thousands of years, Victorian mourning culture being one of them. Could I take, for example, the mammoth hair that's being dislodged from the ice and apply the Victorian mourning customs and traditions to the hair, and sort of just properly acknowledge that moment 50,000 years later. And maybe the value of doing that is you have to acknowledge what's come before you. 50,000 years after the fact, somebody needs to say, "We recognize that we crossed a line in the sand, and we are still grappling with it and we will continue to." That piece, "The Common Denominator of Existence Is Loss," the shape of the piece, the materials, everything — that's the basic premise, to say that that moment wasn't forgotten.

Guernica: Would it be fair to ask then if there's a moral message to your work like that?

Dario Robleto: Absolutely. To me, this is a moral problem, of human-induced extinction. That has to be an ethical, scientific problem, with all the approaches we can apply, but it also has to be a philosophical and moral problem that humans have to ask of themselves, of what right do we have to push something else to oblivion. You can make the argument that we were fighting for caves, morals hadn't even been invented — okay, we're off the hook a little, I guess, but we don't have that excuse now. For me, that's partly why I'm trying to pinpoint that moment back in time, to say, "Look, this when it happened. We didn't have the advantage of moral thinking at the time, and that's fine, that's nature. But not anymore." Things shifted, and we can't fall back on survival of the fittest ideas. It has to be a moral problem.

Guernica: Aside from woolly mammoth hair and tusks, how do you acquire your other materials? Step-by-step, how do you create certain pieces that require soldiers' letters or obscure audio recordings?

Dario Robleto: Part of what I do on any given day is pure detective work. And I root all that in my DJ interests and background, the countless hours of rooting through record bins for some rare, lost sample or an old record. That sort of philosophy never left me, and I still apply it now, just to other materials. You name it, there's a collecting circle for it somewhere out there. Civil War memorabilia societies or metal detecting societies or people who independently search for dinosaur bones or meteorite hunters—I could rattle off a hundred different groups, all who I have at some point encountered or formed friendships with. I'm not an outsider; I'm definitely one of them, the people looking for this stuff. One thing leads to another, like a detective story, so I can find people who are selling... for example there are fisherman who are pulling up fossils in their nets that have become dislodged and fall into the ocean. So there's a number of ways that I can track down this material, it really is pure detective, research work.

Guernica: Once you've gotten materials, and you decide to take, say, old letters and make pulp for new paper out of them, how often do you find yourself relying on skill sets you already have, or do you have to learn new trades to get the kind of piece you want to make?

Dario Robleto: I'm often using material that's literally extinct, it no longer exists except in the ice somewhere. So, if the material's extinct, then I will often use a craft tradition where the knowledge itself is extinct. In the case of the Victorian hair flowers, you could argue that that knowledge went extinct over a hundred years ago, although there are pockets of people who have kept it alive. To me, they're very similar to the fossil hunters themselves, small dens of people. It is important to me to resurrect the knowledge as well as the material. That often means I've got to relearn it. And that becomes a lot of detective work too: Who can teach me? Where's the knowledge stored? So, yes, I often have to learn new things to do this, because I take such pride in being the only one who does this. To this day, I've never had an assistant. I really insist on doing everything myself because I value the role of the artist's hand so much in the process. But that means I have to learn it personally in order to do it.

Guernica: In that way you've become the preserver of these dead techniques and crafts.

Dario Robleto: Yes, I feel that one of the roles of the artist, in the way I define it, is that I need to be not just someone observing these tiny pockets of people on the planet who have devoted their lives to preserving whatever it is they're passionate about. I want to be them. I am one of them. I just have a different outlet and final outcome as an artist than many of them would. For them, the process can just end in holding on to it, just knowing they've got it tucked away in their private collection. I value that so much, but I feel the conversation dies in a way there. Art allows the conversation to be reignited in some way that it couldn't have if the knowledge or material is just tucked away in someone's basement. For example, with that mammoth hair, I'm trying to ignite this conversation of moral issues of human-induced extinction, and the format of art allows me to do that with the material activated and reanimated in a way that pure preservation won't do. So, I do think of myself in that way, but I hope I'm taking it somewhere that collectors wouldn't, that they wouldn't allow themselves to.

Guernica: One thing that image that comes up in your work that I find really interesting is the carrier pigeon skeleton. I've seen that before in a [piece](#) from another exhibition (“War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives The Death Of Cells)”). What about this particular animal, what is it about the lost message that you fixate on?

Dario Robleto: One of my favorite, most beautiful stories I've ever encountered is what that piece is based on. I think about it often, so it's shown up in other projects. It's funny to say that this one pigeon, this real pigeon, is one of my role models as an artist. Her name was Cher Ami. In WWI these American troops got lost in the forest and were in pretty bad shape, didn't know where they were. They finally came out of the forest and came under fire, except it was American soldiers firing on them, but they didn't realize they were American soldiers because they had been lost, so they didn't expect to see them coming out of the forest, and all the communication lines were down. Do you know this tradition of the pigeon and warfare?

Guernica: Yes, but not this particular story.

Dario Robleto: It's something that's died out, but in WWI it really hit its peak. The military trained pigeons for themselves. The pigeons would have special cages special uniforms, and they were part of the battalion.

These lost American troops had three pigeons left, and they had these secret message capsules they would attach to their ankles. Basically they threw the first pigeon in the air, with a message saying, stop firing we're on your side, basically, to the other American troops. Generally if you saw a pigeon in the air, it was a free target because people knew that was how messages would be passed. So the first pigeon goes up, and is shot down. They're becoming more desperate. They send the second pigeon up, the second pigeon gets shot down. They're finally down to their last pigeon. The whole 200 troops, their lives are depending on this pigeon getting there. And this poor pigeon, gets wounded, shot, hit by shrapnel, and his leg that the capsule is attached to is basically blown away from his body, except for one tendon that is still holding on to the ankle. He crawled the rest of the way over the battlefield to deliver that message and save their lives. I just can't think of anything more fragile than a single tendon wiggling, dragging behind her, that's holding onto this capsule with a little tiny rolled up piece of paper. It's just the definition of fragility to me. Everybody immediately realized what she had done, and she's one of the few animals who has ever actually been decorated for bravery in war; he was given a medal of honor designed just for animals. A

sincerely beautiful, remarkable story, that's been lost to time. Nobody remembers her or what he did, but I remember.

That's what the artistic act in many ways is, that tendon barely holding on with that capsule attached to it. The artistic gesture has to be very similar. That piece was my attempt to remember Cher Ami and what he had done. Though the meaning may change depending on the piece, it all goes back to him and what he did. In a digital age, I just find that remarkable, that you can throw this bird into the air and just hope it gets there. It's just jammed with circumstance. The message is so important, it has to get there, and yet, we're just kind of hoping it does. It's a symbol of another time, but it still applies today.

Guernica: The materials you use often take on a new form. For example, you're no longer able to listen to the pulled tape of the earliest audio recording of time, so I'm wondering if you find there's a sense of destruction inherent in the act preservation?

Dario Robleto: I understand that this could be the interpretation. But if you want to really understand what I'm doing, I ask the viewer to make a leap, to not immediately understand alteration as destruction. You have to make the assumption that alteration is a constructive act, not a destructive one, and it's the opposite of most of our impulses. It's like what I was saying about the Victorians and us understanding past ways of thinking through a modern point of view, which we can't help. That's the moment we live in, but it's not the only way. To understand something changing form as a destructive act is a very modern, Western gut reaction to things, and I get it. But what I'm suggesting is nothing radical, this notion of things constantly changing, and that the change is not inherently destructive. Things change, our bodies change, everything's changing, and to me that philosophy's no different with these materials. With audiotape or the paper or any number of things I use, what is initiated by the alteration is the art. The artwork, the discussion around it, the fact that we're talking now—all these things that are set in motion are part of the constructive nature of alteration. It's never a violent destructive act; to me it's always a respectful, constructive, pushing-the-story-forward act.

Part of the impulse is based in our perceived notion of preciousness, that what I'm destroying is so precious that it can only be interpreted as destruction if you were to alter it. But it's a bit misleading, because, for example with the recording, that's a transfer of a very old recording, that's not the actual recording. My work has nothing to do with vandalism or that kind of disrespect, there are always ways for me to find and transfer the information. Or with the soldiers' letters, a large percentage of the materials are either given to me or people lead me down a path where they know I can have some, people who understand what I do and want that transformation to occur. Like the "Defiant Garden" piece in the show, most of those letters are letters these three veterans personally gave to me, and I even had the great opportunity to show them the work afterwards. The thing is, the stuff really isn't as precious as any of us assume, which I think is this enlightening moment.

[E]ven if the effort is bound to fail you still commit completely. It is the commitment that counts for something.

An example I like to give is the bullet lead in "Defiant Gardens." Every year there are tens of thousands of bullets uncovered from the Civil War alone. It's really a startling fact that none of us think about, that from a war 150 years ago we're still pulling this much lead from the ground. The bullets, shrapnel, cannonballs, all the remnants of war—it's staggering how much is under our feet everyday. And the Civil War was a little blip compared to WWI. The tragedy is that, as modern viewers, we've completely lost touch with what it physically takes to wage a war. I came down to this point where I asked, "Is it worth taking four or five bullets out of, say, 10 million that got fired and using the equivalent of a drop in the ocean? Is it worth it to ignite what I hope the art process will ignite as far as discussion and all the stuff that comes out of that goes?" And I believe so fully in that power of art, that I felt this is a worthwhile exchange, to take four bullets to let this process begin, or take five letters. If every soldier who ever fought sent one letter and got one back, how many letters would that be? It's staggering, considering how many people have been in war. And, of course, nobody sent one letter home. So, we're talking tens of millions of letters tucked away, forgotten, never to be read again in someone's basement. I feel if someone allows me to take 10, 20 of those letters, it's worth it that the art can ignite a conversation that they never would have gathered dust. I really have to think about what I need to do to earn the respect of this material before I can alter it, and it's a very elaborate personal process. I've spent many years worrying about it.

But my own personal ethics wouldn't allow me to use a letter Lincoln wrote because I understand its public, historical purpose. That would outrank my argument for why I would use a totally anonymous, forgotten soldier whose wife gave me this letter wanting me to do something with it. It's very different.

Guernica: In terms of artistic tradition, from whom do you derive?

Dario Robleto: I began as a biology major in college, and my arts education came much later. My DNA was in other fields, which I think show up—science, history, poetry, and the music—those trends are the ones that really ignited me as a creative person. Carl Sagan has to be on that list, and in my mind I would argue with anyone that he was an artist and a creative thinker and I really have to wink a lot to him. In music the big one is Patsy Cline. The reason I point her out is she was my first understanding of how art could actually be life, not just describe it. The art "thing" she made, the song, the pop song, the country song, and the lyrics, the tone of her voice—it wasn't description to me. As a little boy my mother worked at this honky tonk in Texas, and I'll never forget being there as she was working her shifts, watching the

people in the honky tonk and listening to Patsy KCine on the jukebox and just deeply understanding how this art object in the jukebox was life, it really was what I was seeing happening at the bar. Fast forward, I guess I have to say the artist in school who influenced me the most was Felix González-Torres. Although we're very different in our attitudes toward materials and production—Felix rarely made things with his hands—and he was definitely this sort of post-studio artist, it was more of a sensibility. There was this artificial divide between the heart and the brain or the art and the mind that he very much rejected, and I've always felt the same, and I would argue the same with Patsy and Carl. I don't buy this premise in contemporary art that emotion should be viewed suspiciously because it's not an intellectual pursuit. I just don't buy that you can't have intense emotion and intense intellect merging in a single object. And I think during school, my experiences teaching and talking to students, there really is this divide between the heart and the mind. I just saw that Felix seemed to reject that. I needed an example to see that it was okay.

Guernica: Where do you see the artistry in Sagan's work?

Dario Robleto: What I felt Carl always did so wonderfully was take incredibly abstract and difficult information from physics, astronomy, mathematics, etc., and not just convey it to an audience, but activate the imagination in the process. The metaphors he came up with in order to do this were a real act of artistry. When I reflect back on my artistic life, I can now see how he set the standard for how I approach art. Inherent in his approach was the belief that everyone can understand and have access to the wonders of the world. He was a populist at heart in a field that can become as esoteric, if not more so, than art. This idea also deeply affected me. Populism in contemporary art can become a dirty word. There is this notion that to not be understood is a reflection of depth. I'm sure this is true in some cases, but on the whole I can't accept this as a vision of art. There's something so cynical about assuming your audience is unintelligent or that artists shouldn't care about their viewers. I want the strangeness and weirdness and incomprehensibility of life that art can reflect so well, but I want it to feel like a mystery that is inviting us in. Sagan's great art lesson for me was generosity of wonder and making curiosity contagious.

Guernica: So your Smithsonian Fellowship, is that a continuation of the study of mourning?

Dario Robleto: My themes are all still there, especially survival. I have three things I'm pursuing: the history of the artificial heart, the story of the boy in the bubble—it's another one of those stories I feel everyone once knew, and now it's kind of eroding over the years. It's this truly remarkable story of this little boy named David Vetter who, from birth, lived in a bubble until the day he died 12 years later. His mother donated a huge archive of his personal belongings from the family to the Smithsonian, and I have gone through absolutely everything. Every paper. Every object. I feel really connected to him right now. The final one is related to Carl Sagan who had been involved with this project called the Golden Record. With the artificial heart, I wondered, could I talk historians into putting on a table, just lining up in chronological order, every artificial heart ever made? The Smithsonian Museum of American History has the actual hearts that were used in the patients, and these were true milestones. It's a rare case where design and life intermingle, in this fascinating way. Every small incremental design adjustment was hinging on life itself, and I'm fascinated by the moments when design or art can actually have life or death consequences. And the Smithsonian was able to make this happen. I got to hold the very first heart ever implanted in my hands. It's just an amazing story of hope and life and death and human ingenuity and tons of failure and mistakes. Fifty years later they still haven't quite mastered it, and yet, they're not giving up.

Guernica: What interests you about the Golden Record? You talked about the fragility of sending messages when we discussed Cher Ami. Do you see the same trope of fragility here, in sending out a message that may never be intercepted?

Dario Robleto: Carl Sagan and his team of scientists designed and selected the content for the Golden Record that was launched aboard Voyager 1 and 2 in 1977. Because of my passion for music and DJ culture, I can't help but to understand this as the greatest mixtape of humankind ever compiled. Carl, for me, is the ultimate DJ. What DJ has ever been asked to make the mix that will outlive us all, that must try to tell our tale of love and struggle on the very off chance an alien civilization discovers it millions of years from now? It boggles the mind to consider the astronomical odds working against such a gesture. And yet he and his team approached the problem with the poetic seriousness and rigor of a scientist/artist that should make us all proud. There's another great art lesson here: even if the effort is bound to fail you still commit completely. It is the commitment that counts for something. The Golden Record is ultimately for us—the comfort it brings in knowing we tried. With nothing to risk, love can't exist.

Dario Robleto was born in 1972 and received a BFA from the University of Texas San Antonio in 1997. His most recent solo exhibitions have been held at the Des Moines Art Center, D'Amelio Terras (NY), ACME (Los Angeles), among others. He received a Smithsonian Fellowship in 2011. Rebecca Bates is an editor of the Guernica Daily and an editorial assistant at Random House. She received an MA in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2011. She's on [Twitter](#).