SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS | SUNDAY, JULY 27, 2008 Section H

S.A.LIFE AND CULTURAS

mySA.com | Keyword: SA Life

JOHN DAVENPORT/jdavenport@express-news.net

Dario Robleto, shown near his studio in the South Flores Arts District, is a fast-rising artist whose credentials include the 2004 Whitney Biennial and subsequent exhibits from Houston to Seattle.

# THE MIX MASTER

## Artist uses bits of history in his musings on memory, emotion

BY DAN R. GODDARD
*dgoddard@express-news.net*

**mySA.com | Keyword: Entertainment**
Learn more about San Antonio artist Dario Robleto

Like a pop singer in search of a song with an unforgettable hook, San Antonio artist Dario Robleto looks for materials that strike the strongest emotional chord — human bones, an ancient blossom, pulp made from soldiers' letters home, melted bullet lead, glass made by an atomic blast.

"The hook is the part of the pop song that gets you, and that's what I want my materials to do," Robleto said. "Most art is an illusion, but the materials I use are the real things. And a lot of my work depends on the idea that you can transfer memory from life to objects. I believe in a kind of creative alchemy. I use materials with true historical significance, but I'm not using the kinds of things that the National Archives are looking for — most of the materials I use are forgotten, overlooked or not actually all that rare.

"I don't look at transformation as a negative. To get my work, you have to let go of the premise that alteration equals destruction. I think there are a lot of younger artists like myself who are trying to engage with history in a deeper way."

Robleto is at the forefront of a movement to rediscover the country's roots using folk-art forms informed by a contemporary sensibility. Inspired by the 19th-century folk art made by widows to commemorate the Civil War dead, he has created a stirring series of sculptures

See FOLK-ART/7H

COURTESY FRYE MUSEUM, SEATTLE

"Daughters of Wounds and Relics, 2006" is on exhibit at Frye Museum in Seattle.

This pop-music inspired creation by Robleto is from "The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art."


COURTESY PHOTO

# Folk-art forms get contemporary look in the hands of Dario Robleto

CONTINUED FROM 1H

based on the adventures of a time-traveling soldier that are attracting international critical and curatorial acclaim.

San Antonio's fastest-rising artist since he was selected for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Robleto is having an amazing year. He currently has two shows, including a 10-year survey called "Alloy of Love," at Frye Museum in Seattle. Two overlapping exhibits in Houston featured his work. And he's included in exhibits in Toronto, San Diego and Marfa.

Robleto, who cites DJ culture and sampling as some of his strongest influences, began by making tributes to pop music stars ranging from Patsy Cline to Kurt Cobain, often grinding up their vinyl records to use like magic dust in his alchemic creations. But his work took a more serious turn after Sept. 11, 2001.

"For me personally, 9-11 made me change everything I was doing as an artist," Robleto said. "From that day to today, my work has dealt with the American role in various wars. I felt something in the air, a shift on a generational level. My generation is criticized for being apathetic and cynical, and that bothered me.

"I tend to reject the overly ironic approach in making art. In art school, we were told that everything had been done, there was nothing new we could discover. But I never believed that, and DJ culture, sampling and hip-hop offered a way to go beyond the surface of things and re-examine in much deeper detail my world, and how we got here."

Robleto made his remarks in a recent gallery talk about his work in "The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art," which just ended a three-month run at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and will open in August at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Then Robleto gave another talk in the afternoon about his two pieces in "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith," which is on view at the nearby Menil Collection.

PHOTOS BY JOHN DAVENPORT/jdavenport@express-news.net

**"A Homeopathic Treatment for Human Longing," shown behind Robleto, will be part of the "Human/Nature" exhibit in San Diego.**

Robleto's work is so rich in content that it appeals to curators for a variety of reasons. "Old, Weird America," curated by Toby Kamps at the Contemporary Arts Museum, is mainly concerned with folksy social criticism. "NeoHooDoo," curated by Franklin Sirmans at the Menil Collection, primarily examines the spiritual in contemporary art. Robleto is the only link between the two exhibits.

Kamps borrowed the title of "Old, Weird America" from music critic Greil Marcus' book about Bob Dylan's "The Basement Tapes." Kamps' theory is that in times of national stress and crisis, artists tend to revisit the country's oldest stories, myths and folklore — often reworking them to comment on contemporary social issues.

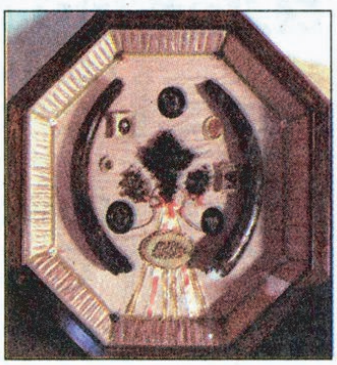
"Dario was the perfect candidate for my exhibit," Kamps said. "He is digging down to the primordial myths of the country. The artists in this exhibition focus on stories and characters from a pre-modern world where rough edges have not been smoothed away by centralized news and entertainment.

"However, although their subjects might be folkish, the artists are not. Without exception, they are academically trained and live in large cities."

Robleto's "The Pause Became Permanence" is from his post-9/11 series of work dealing with a time-traveling soldier drifting through all the country's wars. It includes "braids" made of stretched and curled audio-tape recordings of the voices of the last known Confederate widow and last known Union soldier, excavated and melted shrapnel from various wars and hair flowers braided by war widows.

"I began thinking about this soldier who could shift through time from the Civil War to Vietnam," Robleto said. "But how would that shift make him feel? Because the politics would no longer match up. He would still be fighting, but for what? I became interested in the materiality of death. I wanted to find that spot in the culture when an event becomes history. I became amazed at how much of the American past is based on murder and chaos. And I began to wonder — what if America was made of mourning as much as anything else?"

"Old, Weird America" also featured one of his most ambitious pop music-inspired creations, a triptych based on albums released by three fictional recording labels. For example, the Christian label Lamb of Man has titles in its catalog such as "Sound Odyssey in Faithology" and "Our Actions



**Mammoth bones are part of "Some Longings Survive Death."**

Are Inconsistent with Heaven." A label owned by scientists, Atom and Eve, has an album called "Logic and Faith" with the tagline, "Believers Will Never Discover They Are Right, Atheists Will Never Discover They Are Wrong." And there's a rootsy label called Americana Materia Medica.

"Obviously, I liked the idea of three music labels with completely conflicting philosophies," Robleto said. "I tend to think of my work as having A sides and B sides. I can make an EP or a whole album. I identify with the whole process of going into the studio, deciding which cuts to use, what vinyl to use and how to promote the album. I always wanted to be in a band, and I used to make up all these names for bands and titles for albums in case I ever got asked to be in a band. But I discovered I'm a much better fan than I am a musician. However, those band names and song titles haven't gone to waste."

Robleto also refers to his titles, captions and lists of materials as "liner notes." Viewers have to read the lengthy, lyrical descriptions to realize what kind of hard-to-find historical materials he incorporates into his work.

For example, "Your Lullaby Will Find a Home in My Head," also in "Old, Weird America," features "hair braids made from a stretched and curled audio-tape recording of Sylvia Plath reciting 'November Graveyard'" as well as a "carved ribcage bone." "Shaker Apothecary" combines healing herbs such as angelica root and devil's shoestring root with ground vinyl from popular '50s and '60s dance-craze records such as "The Watusi," "The Mashed Potato" and "The Funky Chicken."

At the Menil Collection, Sirmans, who was a guest curator for Artpace this spring, has brought together an intergenerational group of artists concerned with ritual in the artistic process as a means of recovering the "lost" spirituality in contemporary art. Included are bottle trees by Gary Simmons, a bronze industrial-size screw penetrating a woven basket by Robert Gober, a miniature sailing ship adrift on a sea of piano keys by Radcliffe Bailey and a cross impaled by swords by Michael Tracy.

"Dario was one of the first artists I wanted in this exhibit," Sirmans said. "I think this language he's developing that's folk-related is a way of reaching out to a larger audience. These artists are all educated artists, but they are working with folk-art forms in new and unique ways. Dario's work appeals to me because of his concern with American history and his meticulous craftsmanship. Dario goes beyond simply using found objects in his work — it's amazing what he can do with his hands."

In "Deep Down I Don't Believe in Hymns," Robleto used hand-ground dust from vinyl recordings of Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer" and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" to "infest" a military-issued blanket — referring to the way the government once gave blankets infested with smallpox to the American Indians, one of the earliest examples of biological warfare.

"It was a very passive-aggressive form of warfare," Robleto said. "I like the idea of the blanket being embedded with history. In my work, I don't have to make up anything. The world is really amazing just as it is."

At the Menil Collection, Robleto's work is placed near that of one of his art-world idols, an empty dance floor lined with light bulbs by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who is perhaps best known for his piles of candy that invited viewers to take what they wanted with them. One of Robleto's early works is made from candy wrappers taken from a Gonzalez-Torres installation.

"In his love and generosity, Gonzalez-Torres has been very influential on my work," Robleto said. "I want my mother and grandmother to get my work as easily as my smartest artist friend. I want to make things that do matter, that do inspire some change."

Robleto is reluctant to say that art can actually heal, but that's the idea behind "A Homeopathic Treatment for Human Longing," which he was wrapping up on a hot July morning recently in his warehouse studio in the South Flores Arts District. It's one of eight works he will have in "Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet," which opens Aug. 17 at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

Building on his interest in folk remedies, Robleto wondered what if, as homeopathic healers believe, a little bit of the disease can cure a sickness? He came up with things that might cause human longing — the sound of glaciers melting, a million-year-old blossom, deceased lovers' heartbeats, recordings of extinct languages. He used these to make homeopathic pills contained in an array of glass vials.

"When I say that it's a million-year-old blossom, that is what it is," Robleto said. "What happened is that a raindrop fell into some tree sap, which was preserved in amber. In a way, it shows that nature has already solved the problem of immortality. You can hold this blossom in your hand that is eternally youthful.

"As an artist, I'm trying to figure out the line between a metaphor and the real world. My idea is that materials retain memory, but now I am on this quest to make art that really works."