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ART/ARCHITECTURE

ART/ARCHITECTURE; Conceptual Artist As Mad ScientistBy **JOE HOLLEY**

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SAN ANTONIO— ACROSS the parking lot from the two-story building on San Antonio's South Side where the conceptual artist Dario Robleto has his loft is the Pig Stand, a venerable restaurant whose front door is built right into a pig -- a giant, pink, stucco pig.

Like the Pig Stand -- though on a more sophisticated level -- Mr. Robleto's work plays with, and cleverly manipulates, our perception of the world around us. A San Antonio native, he is the first artist not based in New York to be selected for a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria (formerly Philip Morris) on East 42nd Street. The exhibition, "Say Goodbye to Substance," features digital prints, photography, painting and sculptural pieces, including a 10-part sculpture titled "Popular Hymns Will Sustain Us All (End It All)." It will be on view from Thursday through July 3.

Growing up in San Antonio in the 1970's and 80's, Mr. Robleto, now 30, dreamed of being a rock star. For years he made up band names and song titles, collecting them for the day when he would hit it big. The only problem was that he never found the time to learn to sing or play an instrument.

But the music didn't die; it transmogrified. As Mr. Robleto discovered hip-hop D.J. culture, he began to see its sampling, mixing and interweaving methods as both metaphor and model for the kind of mixed-media sculptural systems he was beginning to create. As he gradually metamorphosed from would-be musician to high school football star to conceptual artist, D.J. culture showed him ways to filter and reconstruct the world. It allowed him to use floating fragments of the past and the present, pop culture and ancient myth, to make something entirely new.

"Sampling is my backbone philosophy," he said one afternoon in the mostly white loft where he lives. "I would argue it's a world view, not just a technical explanation."

In a 1998 work, "Sometimes Billie Is All That Holds Me Together," Mr. Robleto took old Billie Holiday records into the studio where he does his "toxic" work (on things that might be lethal if ingested) and ground them into a powder. He then reconstituted the records -- and, presumably, the essence of the legendary blues singer -- into buttons.

At a second-hand clothing store, he bought shirts, blouses and other articles of clothing and replaced the buttons with his newly created ones. He took one set of clothes back to the second-hand store, where they were resold to people who had no idea what fastened the garments together. Mr. Robleto said this represented "a gesture that needed no glory, no authorship to be legitimate." It was enough for him to know that someone's pants were being held up by the most important button in the world.

All of Mr. Robleto's work has a lot of back-story, most of it witty and full of multiple meanings. "I'm a poet-slash-artist," he said. "I often don't begin a piece until the text is done. In fact, language directs the object. With most art, materials and objects are the sacred thing, but to me, words are sacred, too."

One work in the show, "Men Are the New Women" ("I had the title for months before I figured out the art," he said), investigates the notion that the Adam and Eve legend may have led us down the garden path. Mr.

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Robleto, who reveres the process as much as the product of art, bought a human female rib bone from a local medical supplier, pulverized it and recast it as a male rib bone. In the finished work, the bone, with lighting that resembles a natural-history display, appears to float in a clear plastic box atop a white wooden pedestal.

"In form it's male; in substance it's 100 percent female," Mr. Robleto said. "It's a reversal of one of the fundamental stories, and it asks the question, 'What if we got it wrong?'"

Holland Cotter, writing in *The New York Times*, said, "Mr. Robleto has a mad-scientist's way of mixing music, technology, art history, philosophy and stand-up comedy to create fresh mutant forms." Among the more interesting and playful of these mixtures is "I Want to Rock My Little Honda Across the Universe," from "Popular Hymns."

The small piece is based on the notion that life began when meteorites impregnated the primordial ooze with amino acids, carbon and other nutrients. Mr. Robleto's broken-open meteorite -- a crystal disco ball at its core -- is an assemblage of homemade crystals, 50,000-year-old meteorite fragments and ground amino acids. It also contains melted vinyl and vinyl fragments from the Beatles' "Across the Universe," the Beach Boys' "My Little Honda" and Twisted Sister's "I Wanna Rock." An antique syringe attached to the meteorite extracts these life essentials.

Is there irony in the work? Deconstructionist cynicism masking as gee-whiz discovery? Mr. Robleto says no, vehemently, and his clean-cut, all-American looks and earnestly articulated theories underscore the denial.

"What I love about art is raising questions," he said. "But you don't often find art that suggests answers. There's a particularly pessimistic strain of postmodernism that I often get hit over the head with; I'm afraid it's done damage to a new generation of artists. What does it say about a culture when to be sincere is a radical position?"

Joe Holley is the editor of *Insight*, a Sunday opinion and news-analysis section, at *The San Antonio Express-News*.

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