

Q&A

with Dario Robleto



Houston-based artist Dario Robleto has won national recognition for his thoughtful investigation of the ways in which music forms an essential connection between art and life. Among his upcoming projects are several books and exhibitions, as well as two university residencies, one at Northwestern's McCormick School of Engineering, the other at Harvard. He also contributed a story to the television series *Cosmos* this past spring. In this issue of *h Magazine*, Robleto takes time out of his busy schedule to discuss aspects of his work with Alison de Lima Greene, the Isabel Brown Wilson Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Museum.

Many artists and writers before you have discovered ties between art and music: Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1749–1832) wrote about the “frozen music” of architecture, and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) stressed the symphonic nature of his first radical abstractions. You place emphasis on the importance of recorded music in your work, in some instances making sculptures out of vinyl records or magnetic tapes. How did this come about?

Those are great examples of artists feeling a deep connection between the visual, material, and audible. However, I have searched for something different in these connections; instead of using music as a metaphorical connection to the material, I wanted the very music itself to become the sculptural material, which using vinyl records allowed for. I root this interest in the audible and material back to a childhood experience most of us have had—listening inside a seashell. As silly or clichéd as that may sound, I never let go of the elemental magic: How is the incomprehensible vastness, the physical and emotional awe of the ocean “contained” through its sound in such a small vessel? It’s a fascinating sculptural question of scale, material, and meaning. Similarly, with records, it confounded me how the sorrow of Patsy Cline was “in” the microscopic carvings of a record and made me wonder if I could feel that sorrow by running my finger along the grooves. These questions still drive much of my work today.



Left to right:
8 1/8 x 3 7/8 x 2"
12 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 3 3/4"
11 x 3 x 3"

The Museum is fortunate to own three of your early trophy sculptures from 1998–99. You are very specific about the materials you used to make these. Can you describe your studio process? Is it a kind of alchemy?

I am particular in the materials I use because I am counting on the meaning embedded in a material in one state (a vinyl record, a love letter, a fossil, etc.) to be entirely transported into a new physical state (the sculpture). The disjointedness a viewer often feels between holding the idea of what the original material was (in these examples, vinyl records that were melted) and what it has now turned into (a series of trophies) is an exciting moment of wonder and of new possibilities crucial to my philosophies of art. In this moment, one does not only have to ponder what is gained or lost through alteration, but also reflect on where meaning resides between physical and metaphysical states. There is an inherent hopefulness in this approach by demonstrating that everything around us, even the things we discard, are little universes waiting to be unlocked, added on to, or overturned. In this sense, it is like alchemy in its historical quest to turn lead into gold or to turn something with lesser value into something with more spiritual value through the act of transformation.



Tribute Trophies

Dario Robleto's trophies, made from melted vinyl records, pay tribute to some of his musical heroes—Aretha Franklin, Kraftwerk, and Maria Callas. Shown from left to right: *I Wish I Could Give Aretha All the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. She Will Ever Need*, *I Wish I Could Give Kraftwerk All the Soul They Will Ever Need*, and *I Wish I Could Give Maria All the Love She Will Ever Need* (1998–99).

Discussing how a DJ puts together a playlist, you once stated: “A sampler is not just to make music with but a way to understand the world, a way to creatively filter and reconfigure it.” How does this apply to your work?

When I first discovered DJ culture and its core technique of sampling, I knew that I had found a worldview, a philosophy of life. With deejaying and sampling, there is a subversive element that nothing is ever trash or the final say on a matter but rather calls that attitude out as a failure of the creative imagination. Although sampling is rooted in a technical skill of the manipulation of fragments of sound or music, as a way to move through life it can also increase one's sensitivity of observation, challenge assumed limits of empathetic behavior, and build a relationship to history that is more depth than surface.

In 1996, as part of your *Oh, Those Mirrors with Memory* series, you described the sounds in your head: “Helen Keller singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to herself, Patsy’s voice as her plane descends, . . . the heartbeat recording currently aboard *Voyager I*.” Since then, your research has taken you into the essential nature of the human heart and the grand expanse of stars around us. Does music unite the microcosm and macrocosm of our existence?

I have always been fascinated by the question if anything is truly universally communicable. And by universal, I mean all intelligent life in the cosmos. Unfortunately, when we bring up the topic of life elsewhere in the universe, we have to wade through pop culture's understanding of aliens and abductions, which quickly shuts down the possibility of serious discussion of arguably the most profound question we can ask: Are we alone in the cosmos? Either way you answer it, yes or no, it is a game changer in how we view ourselves and others. To ask if we are alone in the cosmos is to ask another question that artists should embrace and have much to say about: How do we create signs and symbols, invest them with meaning, and communicate them to unknown viewers across vast times and distance? This is literally what I ask myself all day. Math and physics are often raised as the possibilities of universal communication. But, of course, we are more than math, and it is essential to communicate something about the specific emotional experience of our species in this time and place. Music does both—it has a mathematical underpinning that is understood as beautiful and emotionally rich. Now, which music do we choose?