

## sculpture

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BY GERRY CRAIG

In Dario Robleto's world, nothing is at it seems: bone is vinyl, hair is magnetic tape, flowers are paper, skeletons are filled with a marrow of Sylvia Plath reciting her poetry. His touch is so deft, so light, that many casual viewers mistake the sculptures for found-object collage. It is easy to miss the subtle incongruities of material science and alchemy, to dismiss the work as three-dimensional nostalgic snapshots, but such an approach fails to understand the deep meaning in the reconfigured materials.

Photographs cannot convey the unease that his doubles of historic reliquaries carve out for the patient viewer. This is part of their success. They rely on a simultaneous perception of image and matter, a very contemporary expectation. In an image-saturated society, it is impossible to consider every image thrown in front of us. We count on an image-processing system related to science, documentation, and advertising, in which an image relates only to itself and has an absolute value. Robleto's work demands a different system, one in which images relate to each other and are conditioned by all other images, a consciousness dependent on a personal and bodily perception in perceiving images. His sculptures insist on a return to meaning in art, conveyed through both material and image in a complex duality.

As is now widely accepted, history is never "objective." Robleto exploits this with his own revisionist history, a metafiction of possibility present below the surface of the physical thing. He recognizes how nostalgia for a perfect past can reframe the future. The thing (sculpture) incorporates the afterimage of history with actual material, conflating representation and matter. He expects the viewer to read the work at face or image value—a piece of rib bone, a child's mourning dress, a basket of flowers—then adds layer upon layer of arcane material references. Most viewers access the materials by reading the label copy, a form of concrete poetry that is an essential component of the work. Robleto believes that the viewer will also comprehend or "receive" his materials' subliminal messages on unconscious levels. His elegiac objects embody loss in physical material.

An extensive processing—grinding, casting, shredding—leaves the original form of any given material unrecognizable, but the created object often acknowledges its history. In *She Can't Dream for Us All*, the label reads: "Bone dust from every bone in the body cast and carved into the fossilized remnants of 'Lucy' Australopithecus Afarensis (forerunner of human race), bone cores filled with melted vinyl and audio tape recordings of Sylvia Plath reciting her poems 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus,' homemade paper (pulp made from womens' letters to soldiers in the field from various wars), ground iron, calcium, water extendable resin, pigments, lace, silk, walnut, glass." So Robleto's work asks: What are the residual properties and phantasms of matter?

The meticulous craftsmanship with which Robleto handles these charged materials maintains their potency, and for him, their ethical core. In the center of *Fear And Tenderness In Men/*

## DARIO ROBLETO

### The Phantasm of Matter



*A Color God Never Made*, there lie two military-issue glass eyeballs for wounded soldiers, peg-mounted in a wooden vanity case lined with burgundy velvet and filled with other ephemera. The eyeballs are the most uncanny of this collection of *memento mori*—one ginger brown, the other gray-blue, both coated in ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test, when heat from the blast melted surrounding sand)—as they look up at the viewer from below a cracked battlefield-salvaged mirror. They are surrounded by cast bronze teeth, excavated dog tags, bitter-sweet leaves, the woven hair of a war widow, soldier-made clay marbles, and dice cast and carved from decarbonized bone dust and bone calcium. It is important to Robleto that he gather these materials with historical authenticity: even though he alters them, he has an alchemist's faith in the healing magic released by the erudite combination of specific matter.

Robleto uses an alchemist's material, lead, in a number of works dealing with his fictitious war hero. *No One Has a Monopoly Over Sorrow* centers on men's ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead with various American wars, set among an abundant wax floral display in a wicker-looking basket made of bronze and zinc. While the work would appear to wallow in sentimentality, nostalgia is overridden by a generally morbid, bizarre sense of accuracy in the small details of a world off-kilter. The wedding rings on shrunken lead fingers leave a haunting half-inch of misfit space that says everything about the nature of loss.

Robleto is not unaware of the healing and even joyful potential in loss. *Our Sin Was In Our Hips* re-creates the moment of his own conception, told in the interlocking hip bones of his parents, pelvises recast by melting down vinyl rock-and-roll records from each of their collections after they died. Robleto maintains a resolute faith in art, a hope against all odds that productivity and



Opposite: *She Can't Dream For Us All* (detail), 2005-06. Bone dust from every bone in the body cast and carved into the fossil remains of "Lucy," bone cores filled with melted recordings of Sylvia Plath, paper made from letters to soldiers, ground iron, and mixed media, 42 x 48 x 24 in. This page, top and detail: *No One Has a Monopoly Over Sorrow*, 2005. Male ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead, wedding bands excavated from battlefields, and mixed media, 10 x 8 x 11 in. Center and detail: *Fear and Tenderness in Men / A Color God Never Made*, 2004-05. Cast and carved decarbonized bone dust, military-issue glass eyes coated with ground trinitite, battlefield remains, and mixed media, 51 x 48 x 21 in. Bottom: *Our Sin Was In Our Hips*, 2001-02. Pulverized vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, and mixed media, 12 x 9 x 9 in.



care will ameliorate our grief, even when it is brought on by human folly, such as war. To be this idealistic and sincere about the potential of art is a radical position in the art world, one he holds with great conviction. He offers a way to talk to the dead and leaves us to our own conclusions.

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