

Art



In the Trenches

Dario Robleto makes art of war

BY JOHN DEVINE

Imagine a young man, vigorous, patriotic, full of high ideals. His country calls him to war in defense of those ideals — say, freedom, or equality, or homeland security — and he answers the call. But then, like Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, he comes unstuck in time. He finds himself on different battlefields, in different wars — 1812, Civil War, WWI and II — with different countrymen, fighting for different causes, though always for the same country. It all becomes very confusing for our young everyman: Why is he fighting? Meanwhile, the machines of war grow more efficient in each successive conflict.

This, roughly, is the overarching narrative that connects the discrete sculptures in Dario Robleto's "Roses in the Hospital," the first part (or A-side) of an ambitious installation at Inman@Lawing. It runs until close of business on March 14; the B-side, "Men Are the New Women," opens the following day, with the 30-year-old San Antonio artist giving a noontime gallery talk.

Robleto is something of a frustrated musician. All of his sculptures begin as "song" titles, and his working methods are akin to the "sampling" of hip-hop. His work is heavily invested in popular culture; in his sculptures, he frequently uses the vinyl from records, ground to dust or melted down and recast. But he also has an eye on history — after all, what is popular culture but the history of everyday life? Robleto's work is

richly conceived, thoroughly researched and meticulously detailed. And this integrity in his enterprise has been noticed. While he may be frustrated as a musician, he's on a roll as an artist, with shows coming up next month at the Whitney Museum's Altria (formerly Philip Morris) space in New York and this summer at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

The first piece that greets you in the Inman@Lawing foyer is *I Never Took the Hippocratic Oath* (2002), a white vase containing roses, with the title written on it in red. Simple enough. But grab a copy of the show's "liner notes" and the complexities begin. The vase is an example of "trench art," works made by soldiers during downtime; it's a 105-millimeter tank shell with the tip cut off and the open end flanged outward (and it's the real deal, not something the artist copied). The roses are lightly dusted with mortician's makeup powder, and they are described as "fresh-dying" — turns out there's hemlock bark at the bottom of the vase, leaching its poison into the water. Robleto says he's fascinated by trench art, the idea that, in the midst of destruction, soldiers can still feel the need to create. The other elements of this sculpture suggest that the urge to turn an armament into a flower receptacle is, at best, quixotic. And the hemlock recalls Socrates, who agreed to death at the hands of the society that had nurtured him rather than flout the law when it suddenly turned against him. The philosophical ramifications of the oath not taken grow troubling.

Still, that sculpture is pretty simple when compared with *War Pigeon with a Message* (*Love Survives the Death of Cells*) (2002). The skeleton of a pigeon lies on a bed of rubble, one claw extended behind it, clutching a scroll of paper. The scroll is homemade, its pulp composed of bone dust from a human rib cage and a shredded let-



War Pigeon with a Message lies in rubble from the Berlin Wall.

ter from the Civil War. In the rubble, which is from the Berlin Wall, lies a WWI bullet, and a WWII-era pigeon ID band encircles the bird's extended leg. The Civil War letter was a plea from a Union soldier's wife to a Confederate general, asking for the release of her POW husband. Robleto has described the letter as heartbreaking, with its misspellings and fractured grammar, and the writer's naive hope and simple logic (who'll farm the land, who'll care for and provide for his children, she loves him and the children will miss him — all very good reasons to release a man from war). For 150 years this pigeon has been trying to deliver his humble, eloquent message and, with that pathetically outstretched leg, is trying still.

The most compelling piece of this installation is a simple audiotape cassette called *At War with the Entropy of Nature / Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back* (2002). On the tape is an original composition of military drums and soldiers' voices from various wars, sampled from electronic voice phenomena recordings. EVPers (a fringe element even in paranormal circles, reports Robleto) are convinced that with the right equipment and the patience of a Houston Metro rider, it's possible to record every sound ever made. What does the tape sound like? We'll never know. Made of dust from

every bone in the human body and trinitite (glass created by the first atomic test), the cassette for this soundtrack to 200 years of death and destruction is smashed and mangled, with a bullet hole through it and the tape spooling out like guts. It doesn't need to be heard to make its point.

Robleto's sculptures are like three-dimensional poems; all the elements combine to produce a harmony of expression and meaning. And this installation is like a poem sequence, with echoes and allusions throughout. The trinitite of the cassette shows up in the custom-made kaleidoscope of *Nowadays I Only Look Up to Pray* (2001-2002), and bonemeal paper also appears in a suite called *Thoughts On Us* (2001-2002).

"Roses in the Hospital/Men Are the New Women" is subtitled "meditations on the absurdity of war," and meditations don't provide answers — they merely create a space for new ways of seeing and understanding. The reason for the A-side/B-side changeover is that Robleto is enough of a Romantic to feel the need to propose a resolution to his darker meditations. With "Men Are the New Women," he hopes to take advantage of the space that side A may have created in our media-dulled sensibilities. He's enough of a Romantic to believe art can change the world. ●

**"Roses in the Hospital/
Men Are the New
Women"**

Through March 22 at
Inman@Lawing Gallery,
214 Travis, 713-222-0844.