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Matters of the Heart

A Menil show searches for beauty in the beat.

ONE DAY IN THE SUMMER OF 1977,

a young woman named Ann Druyan checked herself into New York's Bellevue Hospital and asked the staff to record her heartbeat. Druyan was the creative director of the so-called golden record, an actual LP made of gold that would be bolted to the side of NASA's two *Voyager* space probes and launched into outer space. In case an alien life form ever discovered one of the probes and figured out how to play the record, they would hear greetings in 59 languages, music from around the world, and a miscellany of other sounds Druyan had assembled under the guidance of famed astronomer Carl Sagan.

A few days before they were to send the finished record to NASA, Druyan and Sagan came up with the idea of recording Druyan's heartbeat, as well as her brain's electrical signals. Who knew? Maybe an advanced alien civilization could determine from the brainwaves what had been going through Druyan's mind.

One of those things, speculates Houston-based conceptual artist Dario Robleto, may have been Druyan's recent engagement to Sagan, which had happened just a few days before the recording. "Ann is now the only human whose heartbeat is literally on the other side of

©
Dario
Robleto,
"Man Makes
Heart"
(detail, in
production).
2014,
mixed
media.

the solar system," Robleto recently told me. "And it's not just any heartbeat—it's a 27-year-old woman who just fell in love. That's the electrical signature on board, registered in her EKG and her brainwaves."

Robleto describes his ambitious new Menil Collection exhibition, *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed*—his first solo show in Houston since 2009—as a "hidden history of the human heartbeat." At the beginning of the project, he set himself the challenge of tracking down three landmark recordings: the first-ever recorded heartbeat, Druyan's heartbeat from the golden record, and a recording of the first beat-less heart, which was implanted by the Texas Heart Institute's Dr. O.H. "Bud" Frazer in 2011. ("It's one of the strangest things I've ever heard, and the most haunting," Robleto reports.)

Although it took several years, the artist finally got his hands on all three, and compiled them onto a sort of collector's edition vinyl record—the new exhibition's centerpiece—complete with a box case and liner notes designed by Robleto. Exhibitiongoers can listen to the heartbeats on headphones.

Robleto, 41, a quietly intense man with a passing resemblance to the actor Mark Ruffalo, first became interested in the human heartbeat while a research fellow at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, where he discovered that the artificial heart designed by legendary Houston surgeon Denton Cooley was collecting dust in the archives. It struck Robleto that the race to build the first artificial heart coincided with the race to put a man on the moon, and that both were happening in the 1960s in Houston. The story of Ann Druyan, whom Robleto will interview on Sept. 23 at the Menil, clinched the connection for him. (Druyan's marriage to Sagan lasted until his death in 1996; she was the co-creator of the recent *Cosmos* television series.)

In addition to the recording of human heartbeats, the exhibition includes hundreds of small sculptural assemblages inspired by the connections Robleto began to see between the Apollo program and the quest to build an artificial heart. "I feel like artists can ask questions no one else is asking," he explained. "As wonderful as the beat-less heart is, for instance, this is where I think artists and others have to come in and sift through the philosophical ramifications." —Michael Hardy

DARIO ROBLETO: THE BOUNDARY OF LIFE IS QUIETLY CROSSED

Aug 16–Jan 11. Free. The Menil Collection, 1533 Sul Ross St. 713-525-9400. menil.org

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