

REVIEWS

BALTIMORE

Dario Robleto

Baltimore Museum of Art // November 16, 2014–March 29, 2015

INSPIRED BY THE proximity of Johns Hopkins University's Space Telescope Science Institute to the museum, "Setlists for a Setting Sun" is a collection of Robleto's collections, which cover themes such as music, archaeology, and space exploration. Two eponymous works, subtitled *Crystal Palace* and *Dark Was the Night*, are encased assemblages of objects that would populate 16th-century cabinets of curiosity; they include shells, coral, the skeletal remains of sea animals, precious stones, cave minerals, crystals—found and made—interspersed with cyanotypes and butterfly specimens. The insects' antennae in the two installations have been re-created from stretched audiotape recordings of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* and blues musician Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night." Performed at London's Crystal Palace in 1888, Handel's opera is the oldest recording of music. "Dark Was the Night," recorded in 1927, will perhaps be one of the most wide-reaching: It is included on the Golden Record aboard the Voyager spaceship launched in 1977, chosen to convey human loneliness to the beings who may someday hear it.

In his essay "The Collector"—itself a collection of text snippets—Walter Benjamin writes, "It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired) it turns to stone." Robleto goes one step further: His practice seems driven by a desire to extend the life of objects beyond acquisition, capturing not only music's ephemerality as a medium but the poignancy of the listening experience. Butterflies appear throughout the exhibition as a metaphor for impermanence and vehicles for disseminating music. *American Seabed*, 2014, is a compilation of fossilized whale eardrums that have become resting places for more butterfly specimens. Here, antennae have been replaced with pulled audiotape of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row," 1965, a song of notorious length that intertwines biblical, literary, and historical figures associated with water, like Noah, Ophelia, and the *Titanic's* passengers. Robleto's butterflies whisper these narratives to whale ears in a scene possible only through the collection, as a medium that combines fiction and historical reality with romantic and redemptive impulses.



FROM LEFT:
Dario Robleto
Installation
view of
Setlists for a
Setting Sun
(Dark Was the
Night), 2014.

Stuart Sempie
Oops I Did It
Again, 2014.
Acrylic on
canvas,
29½ x 29½ in.

The artist establishes genealogy as an ordering system for idiosyncratic assemblages. In *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, 2010, Robleto fashions adult, adolescent, and fetal hand bones from his own, his mother's, and his grandmother's record collections. In *Music Has the Right to Children*, 2013, he displays butterfly specimens with antennae made from the stretched audiotape recordings of paired songs by musician parents and their children, such as Frank and Nancy Sinatra and Elvis and Lisa Marie Presley.

For *The Sky, Once Choked with Stars, Will Slowly Darken*, 2011, Robleto removes everything but the stage lights from concert album-cover images by Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix, and others. What remains in the eight digital prints appear to be telescopic views of celestial bodies, a conflation of deceased music stars with illumination in the night sky. Robleto concretizes poignancy on the scale of the universe by appropriating stars as lights that never go out. —RP