

S.A. artist's work draws acclaim in N.Y.

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Inspired by DJ culture, San Antonio artist Dario Robleto takes samples of historical artifacts, vinyl albums and human bones and then mixes them into narrative-driven sculpture that is being hailed as the vanguard of a new generation.

Robleto, 30, is the first artist outside New York City to be selected for a one-man show at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria. "Dario Robleto: Say Goodbye to Substance" will run April 16 to July 3 in the 5,000-square-foot gallery space in the former Philip Morris building near Grand Central Station.

"This is an important moment in contemporary art," said Whitney curator Shamim Momin. "Usually, this space is used to introduce emerging artists from the New York area, but I've picked Dario because we want to broaden our mission to show that there is good work being made in other parts of the country.

"There are layers of narrative in Dario's work that creates a fascinating web of information and culture. He makes discrete objects that work on a number of conceptual levels. There's a romantic quality and a sense of hopefulness that is missing from much contemporary art. I think Dario is one of the best artists of his generation."

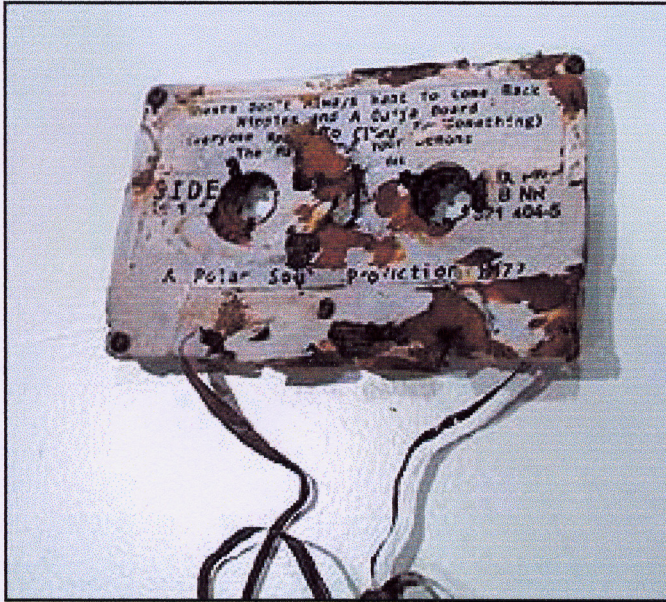


War Pigeon With A Message (Love Survives The Death Of Cells)

Pigeon skeleton, W.W.II era pigeon i.d. tag, homemade paper (pulp made from human ribcage bonedust and a civil war era letter that a Union soldier's wife wrote to a Confederate General pleading for the release and return of her P.O.W. husband), W.W.I bullet, ribbon, rose petals, rust, dirt, rubble from the Berlin Wall

11 x 8 x 5 1/2 in.

2002



At War With The Entropy Of Nature/ Ghosts Don't Always Want To Come Back

Cassette: carved bone and bone dust from every bone in the body, trinitite,
 Audio tape: an original composition of military drum marches and soldiers' voices from battlefields of various wars made from E.V.P. recordings (Electronic Voice Phenomena: voices and sounds of the dead or past, detected through magnetic audio tape), metal, screws, rust, letaset
 3 3/4 x 5/8 x 2 1/2 in.
 2002

Robleto's New York show will combine old and new work, including pieces from his current show, "Roses In the Hospital/Men Are the New Women," on view through Saturday at the Inman Gallery in Houston.

In his earlier work, Robleto melded powdered vinyl records and prehistoric artifacts into pieces that gave new meaning to "dinosaur rock," "heavy metal" and "rock history." Using imaginary bands, albums and song titles, he charted an alternate history of 20th century pop music while investigating deeper emotions of love, tragedy, desire and hope.

But in his latest work at the Inman Gallery, Robleto has expanded his repertoire to consider larger political issues, such as war and peace and the roles of men and women.

"Roses in the Hospital," the first of the two-part exhibit, was a meditation on the absurdity of war through the eyes of a young, universal soldier time-tripping through battlefields from the Civil War to World War II.

"I came up with a complete narrative for the show, almost storyboarding what I wanted to do, about this young soldier traveling through time, never quite knowing where he's at or why he's fighting," Robleto said. "Each sculpture is about some particular problem that I thought he would encounter."

The first piece he made is called "Deep Down I Don't Believe in Hymns," which looks like an old folded blanket covered with black specks. But like almost all his work, you have to read the label to fully understand.

The blanket is an actual 1862 military-issued blanket from the U.S.-Indian Wars that has been sprinkled with "hand-ground vinyl record dust" from Neil Young and Crazy Horse's "Cortez the Killer" and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love."



Not All Dead Rather Be Living (detail)

Casts of Civil War era "pain bullets" (bullets used by soldiers to bite on during surgery) made from melted vinyl records, nickel and silver, painted porcelain and mdf shelf

Bob Marley-"I Shot The Sheriff"

Marvin Gaye-"Sexual Healing"

Kurt Cobain-"Lithium"

Tupac Shakur-"Hit 'em Up"

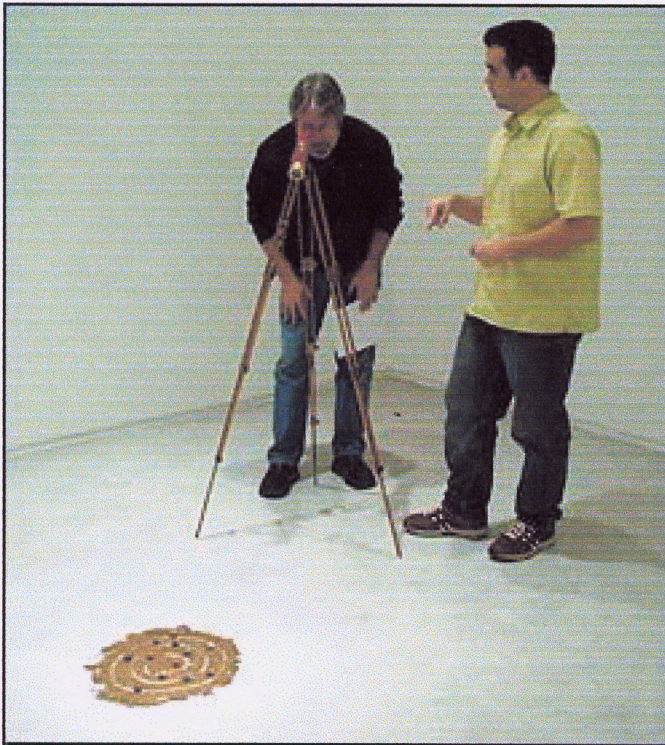
Sam Cooke-"Someone Have Mercy"

Del Shannon-"Runaway"

John Lennon-"Happiness Is A Warm Gun"

12 x 3 x 3 in.

2001-2002



Nowadays I Only Look Up To Pray

Custom made kaleidoscope, wood, brass, mirrors, hand-ground trinitite (glass produced during the first nuclear test explosion, c

irca 1945 from Trinity test site, when heat from blast melted surrounding sand), antique wood and brass tripod

28 x 28 x 55 in.

2001-2002

The Abstractness Of A Blown Off Limb

Handmade clay and lead marbles used by soldiers from the Civil War, American-Indian Wars and Mexican-American War, human and dinosaur dust from femur bones

14 in. diameter

2002

Overtly, it refers to the U.S. military's practice of handing out free blankets infected with smallpox to the Indians, yet the hidden pop culture reference is to the war between '70s guitar rock and '80s electronic dance tunes.

"Blankets infested with smallpox is one of the earliest examples of biological warfare," Robleto said. "I started working on this piece long before 9/11, but I'm amazed by how events have overtaken my art. How many artists get the chance to come out with an exhibit like this when the country is preparing for war?"

"I have a lot invested in the idea that art can do something. That art can change things. I know that sounds corny and idealistic, but there's something to be said for trying. Maybe the protestors won't be able to stop the war, but does that mean they shouldn't try?"

For "Not All Dead Rather Be Living," he made casts of Civil War "pain bullets" — used by soldiers to bite on during surgery — from melted vinyl records of Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff," Kurt Cobain's "Lithium" and John Lennon's "Happiness Is a Warm Gun."

The title piece, "Roses in the Hospital," is a take-off on cheap hospital gift flowers and popcorn boxes decorated with labels for imaginary albums of the greatest war songs, such as "Radio Baghdad: Our '60s Radicals Forgot to Stay Suspicious."

"I'm interested in the whole idea of war as entertainment, the way soldiers talk about the theater of war," Robleto said.

"War Pieces with a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)" links all the country's major wars, involving a pigeon skeleton with a World War II ID tag, a World War I bullet, rubble from the Berlin Wall and a letter from a Union soldier's wife to a Confederate general pleading for her husband's life.

"The pigeon is the stand-in for my soldier," Robleto said. "You can see he's holding up the message like he's still trying to get through. It's based on the story of a pigeon during World War I who saved the lives of 200 soldiers and was awarded a Medal of Honor. The letter is incredibly poignant, and I was struck by how this woman countered war with the only thing she could — love."

One of the key pieces from the show that will be going to New York is "Nowadays I Only Look Up to Pray," a custom-made kaleidoscope made from the glass, trinitite, produced during the country's first nuclear test explosion about 1945 at the Trinity test site.

The device appears to be looking down at "The Abstractness of a Blown Off Limb," a circle of what appears to be handmade clay and lead marbles used by soldiers during the Civil War that actually are made from human bones and dinosaur dust.

Robleto said he is able to buy human bones from medical supply houses. He's learned that India is the chief source of these bones. While using human and dinosaur bones might be controversial, it's not far removed from artists who use blood or urine in their work. Or scientists who use the bones for research.

"I'm sure that many of these bones come from poor flood victims or something like that," Robleto said. "But it was important for me to use bones because this work is concerned with war's effect on the human body. I realized that if this is what I'm trying to do, I shouldn't avoid it, I should go toward it."

"I'm not trying to shock or gross people out, but the work is about the horror of war. The only real power that an artist has is to invest things with meaning."

Robleto finds his unusual materials on the Internet, exploring online trading sites devoted to such things as dinosaurs and NASA artifacts. While it's not unusual to experience a jolt while reading his labels (Can he *do* that?), his work is imbued with a respectful gravitas, a sense that his art ought to be considered sacred.

"I've always been interested in writing and I wanted to explore the writing that artists are usually limited to — title, list of materials, dimensions," Robleto said. "I don't think art labels have ever been used before for artistic expression."

"Generally, I have everything written down before I start looking for the materials. I have to imagine it before I can find it. What's amazing is that just about anything I can imagine, I can find."

Perhaps the most unusual things he has found during his extensive research are Electronic Voice Phenomena recordings.

"This is based on the idea that voices and sounds of the dead or the past can be detected through magnetic audio tape," Robleto said. "Even the paranormal community considers EVP recorders to be a fringe group so you can imagine how far out they are."

"But what I liked is that they have democratized our access to the dead. Before, you needed a psychic to contact the dead. With EVP recordings, all you need is the right equipment and anyone can do it. Like most efforts to contact the dead, I think this is based on missing a lost love one — which appeals to my romantic side. I love the idea that love is willing to be so blind."

Robleto purchased several EVP recordings made at the battlefields of various wars, filled with military drum marches, explosions and soldiers' voices, which he then combined into a "soundtrack for the war of all wars." Then he made a cassette case by carving a solid block made from the bone dust from every bone in the body.

"At War With the Entropy of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back" represents the end of the universal soldier, his body completely ground into dust. It looks like a smashed, rusted cassette, the magnetic tape tangled beyond repair.

But this end suggested the second half of Robleto's Houston show, "Men Are the New Women," which he put up Saturday night. What if instead of making woman from man's rib, God had done the reverse?

"This simple shift could change the whole world," Robleto said. "If men have screwed up everything, maybe we need to start over."

"Men Are the New Women" is a female ribcage bone that has been ground to dust and then recast and carved as a male ribcage bone.

"If some archaeologist pulled that out of the ground, it would change the world," Robleto said. "The reaction to the piece has been surprising. Men consider it an attack on masculinity; they take it very personally. Women tend to see it as an affirmation. I don't think this change would necessarily be better, but it would be different."

Other recent pieces also have biblical connotations. "Our Sin Was In Our Hips" is a pair of male and female pelvic bones that are obviously engaged in a sex act. The female pelvis is made from his mother's 45 rpm rock 'n' roll albums and the male pelvis is made from his father's 33 rpm rock 'n' roll albums.

Kerry Inman, owner of the Inman Gallery, said Robleto's positive attitude should help his art reach an audience beyond the art world.

"There's no cynicism or irony in his work, but he's working with fundamental issues," Inman said. "He's creating something from the ashes of the past. He's so positive that he's willing to risk being corny. He's more Generation Y than Generation X."

Along with the new works from the Houston show and pieces specially commissioned by the Whitney, Robleto will be showing his cycle of 10 sculptures, "Popular Hymns Will Sustain All (And End It All)," which was featured in his one-man show at Houston's Contemporary Art Museum in 2001.

Robleto first received national attention after his work in the Blue Star Art Space's 1998 "Inside the Loop" show was reviewed by Michael Duncan in *Art In America*. He was an artist in residence at ArtPace, where he befriended a national artist in residence, Glenn Ligon. The Brooklyn-based painter has championed his work and introduced him to New York curators, who have included him in several group shows.

He has had shows at the Galerie Praz-Delavallde in Paris, and following his Whitney show, he is scheduled to have a one-man show at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art that will open in mid-June and run through the summer.

Though New York galleries are knocking on his door in anticipation of his Whitney debut, Robleto has no plans to leave San Antonio. He recently moved into a studio/apartment in the same complex as the Bower.

"Everything that I've done pales in comparison to this Whitney show," Robleto said. "I am really trying to seize the moment. This is a great opportunity to show New Yorkers that there are a lot of good artists in the rest of the country. I want to do a good job of representing the San Antonio art community. I want to make us proud."

*"Men Are the New Women" runs through Saturday at the Inman Gallery in Houston, 214 Travis St., (713) 222-0844 or www.inmangallery.com.
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