

# STRAIGHT TALK

*with Dario Robleto*

*Dario Robleto* is a Houston, Texas-based artist. Robleto has exhibited internationally including in solo exhibitions at the Menil Collection, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, and in numerous group exhibits at MASS MoCA, the Centre Pompidou, and the Nasher Museum of Art, among others. He is a visiting artist and lecturer throughout the U.S., has received numerous awards including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant and the USA Rasmuson Fellowship, and recently joined on as the art consultant to the multi-national scientific effort “Breakthrough Message.”



By Julia Buntaine  
*Editor-in-Chief*

**JB:** Your work takes a variety of forms from prints to actions to drawings and writing, but it is your sculpture which I am most intrigued by—while your titles often hint at, or describe, the idea driving the work, it is really the list of materials that comprise each piece which completes the visual and conceptual picture. What is your process like for finding the myriad of materials you work with, and does material or concept come first?

**DR:** I have always had some innate understanding that materials were a portal to past emotions and histories waiting to be remembered by the present. Some of my earliest memories as a child are of my instinctual behavior to quietly gather and save fragments of matter that

somehow seemed important without really being able to say why at the time. Like bottling the inordinate amount of water oozing from the broken stem of an elephant ear plant, or saving the shards and dust from a cracked prism I broke rather than the larger, still functional sections, there was always something in the melancholy of the fragment that seemed like a chance for revelation and discovery. Who knows why we are drawn to such things in our preverbal worlds. But I’m sure, to some extent, mine had something to do with a grandmother who collected all kinds of detritus and a mother who ran a honky tonk before moving on to run a hospice for many years—a potent blend of life’s fragments, the physical weight of music and decay but also love, compassion, empathy and responsibility. As I grew older, this sensibility merged with other passions like poetry, science, music fandom, detective work, storytelling, and the like. I



*Fossilhood is Not Our Forever (2014). 34" x 47.5" x 36.5". Fossilized prehistoric whale ear bones salvaged from the sea (1 to 10 million years), stretched audiotape of three centuries of human heartbeat recordings (1865, 1977, 2014), gold paint, concrete, ocean water, pigments, rust, brass, coral, steel, and Plexiglass. Image courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, TX.*

mention these things because these experiences remain vital to the way I search for and what I expect from, both emotionally and intellectually, the materials I use.

On a practical level there is a lot of basic research and groundwork that goes into finding the materials. Like any good researcher/detective worth their weight, you develop sensitivity to clues or connections that are not always obvious at first glance. And I take pride in developing relationships with collectors or thinkers in other fields who can often lead me on to aspects of a material I was unaware of. At this point, I also receive a number of unsolicited materials from all kinds of people. I consider this one of the most satisfying developments in my practice as people give me these things because they no longer know what to do with them and feel that art may offer them a new life of engagement and love. And I do my best to honor them but they also open doors in my practice that constantly remind me of art's possibilities for empathy and compassion. When a veteran hands you a piece of shrapnel that was once lodged in his body, or a heart transplant recipient gives you the pacemaker that once kept them alive, or, on a more playful note,

a conservator gives you the accumulated dust gathered after cleaning the seashells on a necklace once owned by Jimi Hendrix, there is no way you can remain unchanged as an artist.

But there is also a more poetic and imaginative side to my process that perhaps leads me down different types of paths. I do a lot of writing for the sheer joy of wordplay, or I write stories or scripts for the purpose of material discovery. The media list that for many artists is the thing you tack up at the end of the process is for me what always comes first. The title, material list, date, and dimensions are like a haiku that gives me a structure to investigate language and materials—I call it “materialist poetry.” I may write things like “salt crystals from tears,” “men’s wedding ring finger bones,” “lightning glass,” or “Icelandic lava” for the poetic logic of what I’m writing on the page, but then comes the process of actually figuring out if such things exist, and, if so, how can I acquire them and further transform them into the new form I want.

**JB:** I’d like to talk a bit about *The Heart’s Knowledge Will Decay*. How did this piece come about?





*The Heart's Knowledge Will Decay* (2014). 13.5" x 13.5" x 14". Archival prints of three centuries of various human pulse and heartbeat tracings, glass slides, pine, engraved gold mirror, brass, black tape, and marker. Images courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, TX.



**DR:** For the past several years I have been working on a project called *The Pulse Armed With a Pen: An Unknown History of the Human Heartbeat*. This piece is one of many components (sculptures, performative lectures, writings, prints, rare audio resurrections) that I consider an ongoing artwork-as-gift to two people and moments that deeply shaped me as an artist. The first was my childhood encounter with the famous Golden Record aboard the Voyager probes that NASA launched in the late 70s. Because NASA realized the probes would one day be on a trajectory to exit the solar system, an incredibly rare feat for a human-made object, they had the foresight to ask Carl Sagan to lead a small team to design an “interstellar message” to be placed on board as an act of goodwill greetings meant for any possible intelligence that ever wandered upon it. It is a remarkable accomplishment filled with examples of languages, images, music, and sounds of the natural world, all tucked in the grooves of the technology of the era—literally an LP record made of copper and gold.

As a child, I had by complete coincidence caught a news program on TV that said NASA was releasing a 1-800 number to the public so that we could call in and hear something about “sounds sent to space,” by which they meant the Golden Record. They had done this to re-engage the public with the probe’s planetary mission of exploration as it approached its first stop at Saturn in the early 80s. But my young mind mistook this to mean NASA had made “contact” and we would be able to hear the first communications from another intelligence in the universe. Of course, this was not what they had said at all, and although one day I would come to understand its beauty and magic for what it was—possibly the final compendium of what we once were, now sailing past the edge of the solar system, safely free from whatever physical fate may lie ahead for our planet—it stung me with a disappointment I never forgot and which set me on an investigation I am still in the midst of. It turns out that what I had heard—along with earthquakes, ocean waves, Navajo night chants and Chuck Berry—were the electrical signatures from the heart and brain of a 27-year-old woman, Ann Druyan, who had just secretly fallen in love with and became engaged to Carl Sagan.

Many years later another moment in life would give this memory the proper context it needed—I had the honor of sitting next to my grandmother as she passed away. In that moment I did something I could not explain at the time—I reached out for her heart and placed my hand softly on her chest. In an instance no one could ever plan for, I happened to feel her final few heartbeats, the reverberations of the final one lingering in my palm and body like striking the heaviest iron bell. As my grandmother’s heart made its final beat, as all of ours will, I took some solace in knowing there was another heartbeat racing to the edge of the Solar System that had been preserved for as close to “eternity” as humans can perhaps hope for. The stated goal of the Golden Record

is a one billion year life span and, in 2013, NASA confirmed it had exited our solar “bubble” and was entering interstellar space.

This project, *The Pulse Armed With a Pen*, and this piece *The Heart’s Knowledge Will Decay* are part of my quest to understand why humans, across time and place, locate so much of their identity, their being (from the emotional to the intellectual, the philosophical to the spiritual), at the site of the heart. We take it for granted today that we can record the sound and image of our living, beating hearts and preserve them through time. But in the grand arch of scientific history, this is very recent, meaning the vast majority of the world’s population never had such a relationship to their hearts. Of course, for centuries art and religion addressed this desire to intimately know one’s own and another’s heart in incredibly inventive ways. But to preserve and access a living heart for medical purposes (and for storing on billion year space probes), science had to figure out how to image and record it in real time without cutting into the body. This was no small task as accessing the living human heart was one of the longest held cultural and religious taboos—besides that glaring physical problem of probably killing someone to do so, the heart was considered the literal embodiment of the immaterial soul and therefore off limits to human investigation.

A turning point came in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when German and French physiologists first figured out how to image the beating heart outside the body by registering its movements through another material—think of a modern day stethoscope if it were attached to a stylus and recording medium. In the process they invented something truly rare: a new, close to universally understood visual representation of life, the pulse wave. They also invented its opposite: a visual language of death through the image of the flatline. This sculpture gathers the earliest historical experiments of capturing this now iconic image as the heart and pulse are recorded under various activities. Included are the first images of a diseased heart but also the heart after a long walk, listening to music, and a number of other firsts. The piece is a portrait of the heart simply living life through the misleadingly simple measure of a drawn line over time. How these groundbreaking physiologists made these recordings is a whole other beautiful story for another time. In these images is the beginning of the technology and a radical new way of relating to the past actions of our hearts—a relationship to our hearts, and all internal physiological recordings, including brain waves, that Ann would call on one day when contemplating how to eternally preserve her brain and heart-in-love on the Golden Record.

**JB:** Much of your work also has to do with extinction and fossils, mixed in with physical recordings of voices, heartbeats, and music. In your examination of “things recorded,” what have you discovered?





*Above, opposite: Setlists for a Setting Sun (Dark Was the Night) (2014). 60" x 45.5" x 45.5". Cyanotypes, prints, water-color paper, butterflies, butterfly antennae made from stretched audiotape of Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night" (Recorded 1927, launched on Voyager I probe in 1977), various cave minerals and crystals, homemade crystals, coral, nickel plated sea urchin shells, sea urchin teeth, various seashells, beetle wings, ocean water, pigments, cut paper, mica flakes, feathers, mirrors, plastic and glass domes, audio recording, digital player, headphones, wood, and polyurethane. Images courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, TX.*





**DR:** I have had the great creative pleasure of working with the audio and media historian Patrick Feaster for the past several years. Patrick and his colleagues made an incredible discovery in 2008 that not only completely expanded our access to recorded sound history, but reshaped what we even mean by a sound “recording.” Through their exploration of the work of French inventor Édouard Léon Scott de Martinville and his invention of the “phonautograph” in 1857—a device that was the first to inscribe sound waves over time as a visual waveform, and in soot-covered paper no less—they were able to “playback” these embedded tracings through both a “digital stylus” technique and through Feaster’s technique of “eduction.” What is so remarkable about this is that not only did they resurrect (I say “resurrect” as “restore” does not capture the poetic wonder of the achievement) legible audio of the singing human voice from a tracing in soot, but this tracing dates from 1860—a full 17 years before Edison’s invention of playback technology! We can now hear things the creators themselves could never have known would one day be played back—sound unlocked from 19<sup>th</sup> century smoke.

I have always believed that one of the cultural responsibilities of the artist is to be monitoring and observing across all fields of inquiry, especially for those types of breakthroughs that are so significant that they transcend their field of origin and need the arts to fully sift through their implications. I believe what Patrick accomplished is one of these moments and I have set off on a new line of investigation with him. Besides the immediate material draw of the fragility of lost sound hiding in plain sight in the residue of a flame, conceptually I am drawn to the challenge of just how far back in time we can access our sound history. I feel adding artists to this quest can take us down unexpected avenues by asking the question from a slightly different angle. We have already made some groundbreaking discoveries; we will reveal more in an upcoming book, but one creative “workaround” to the problem of how far back in time we can think about recorded sound is if we consider when the first people ever recorded were born.

It turns out that the history of recording the heart and pulse parallels the early history of acoustic scientists and they were both using similar techniques to capture what had always been thought to be the inherent transience and ephemerality of the sensory experience of sound. Today, in our era of constant recording, we have lost sight with the true radical nature of this idea, but at one time it was simply unheard of to think one could hear the same “live” sound experience after the initial experience. Musical notation or sheet music of past events is not the same, as it had to be reproduced each time, often with different people and instruments. But, it’s important to remember, before the era of Edison, the quest was to visually record sound waves over time—Edison’s genius was to figure out how to play a live audible experience back as sound.

There are many visual “recordings”—pulse waves as sound and movement over time—by the earliest cardiologists (although they were not yet called that as the field was yet to form) that we can consider anew in this way. One of our most fascinating discoveries is of a rare recording of a centenarian made by a French physiologist, Charles Ozanam, in 1870. This centenarian was born in 1769. Stated another way, locked away in silence for over 150 years, lies the earliest visual evidence of the movement of a pulse and heart born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, frozen and preserved in the residue of a candle flame that burned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly forgotten about in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now audible for the first time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Using Patrick’s methods, we have been able to bring this heart back to audible life and open up a new way of remembering the distant past through sensory experiences.

**JB:** What do you have coming up next—where can we see your work?

**DR:** My work is currently on view at MASS MoCA in a wonderful show curated by Denise Markonish exploring the idea of wonder, “Explode Everyday: An Inquiry Into the Phenomena of Wonder.” I have also just installed an older piece in the show “Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art” at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. The curators, Miranda Lash and Trevor Schoonmaker, should also be applauded for addressing such a complex subject in such a sensitive and nuanced way. Also, a show called “The Sun Placed in the Abyss” opens soon at the Columbus Museum of Art that I think will be fascinating. It deals with the rich history of artists grappling with photography and the sun.

Beyond that, I am continuing my work with the SETI Institute as one of their artists-in-residence and with what are known as the “Breakthrough Initiatives.” These overlap a great deal as they are both ambitious endeavors about searching for life elsewhere in the universe. Often, that conversation gets undermined by pop cultural understandings of little green men and conspiracy theories. This is such an injustice to the brilliant and ingenious work done by serious scientists for decades. We are living in a revolutionary moment in that hard sciences can actually address perhaps the most profound question we can ask: Are we alone? Artists simply must be at the table when asking such questions and witnessing the ramifications of the answer, no matter where it leads.