



## The alluring alchemy of Dario Robleto

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By **Sheila Farr** Seattle Times art critic



COURTESY OF LACMA "A Defeated Soldier Wishes To Walk His Daughter Down The Wedding Aisle" (2004), a pair of antique military boots slogging through sand and rice, is part of Dario Robleto's work at the Frye.

### Exhibition review Dario Robleto

You've never seen the Frye Art Museum look like this before. With two exhibitions that take over the entire museum (for the first time sweeping clean the usual crush of paintings from the permanent collection in the center galleries), Dario Robleto has transformed the place into a shrine to love and longing. A rising star from San Antonio, Robleto bases his artwork in sympathetic magic, with the energy and symbolic meaning of the raw materials becoming the soul of the objects he creates. You must read the labels to fully "get" the work and the ingredients he cites read like the stuff of a witch's brew, invoking the spirits of the dead. The spiritual center of Robleto's work arouses cultlike admiration among his fans. The meticulously crafted artworks do a kind of voodoo thing, seeping into you viscerally as you take in the sometimes shocking materials Robleto says they're made from: men's wedding ring finger bones coated in melted bullet lead from various American wars. Men's wedding bands excavated from American battlefields. Casts of Civil War-era "pain bullets" the ones soldiers used (in lieu of anesthesia) to bite on during operations. Robleto works with tears, hair, shredded vinyl records (stand-ins for the songs recorded on them), tinctures and vintage apothecary concoctions. Whether those lists are real or pure poetry, it's powerful stuff. Yet at times Robleto's ideas seem

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overwrought and the objects start to feel way too precious giving me the urge to just bury all that minutiae and move on. The first part of the exhibition, "Heaven Is Being a Memory to Others," was assembled specifically for the Frye. This part of the show takes its cue from conceptual artist Fred Wilson, who demonstrated that the objects in museums are themselves an art medium and that new meaning can be constructed by the way they are selected and displayed. With a nod to Wilson, "Heaven" is Robleto's poetic imagining of the inner life of Emma Frye, who founded the museum with her husband to house their art collection. Robleto stirs up Emma's ghost with a spare assortment of paintings and sculptures from the Frye's permanent collection that reflects the inner world he imagines for her. Not much is known about the late Mrs. Frye, so what he chose may tell us as much about Robleto's character as hers. He shows us an Emma who is lovely and passionate but unfulfilled, the paintings she lived with substituting for the children she never had — and who knows what else? One painting the artist chose to spotlight is an odd, little-known jewel of the Frye collection, a small, undated oil by Grigory Gluckmann, called "Young Woman, Head & Shoulders." It depicts only the back of a woman's head and vulnerable-looking nape. Who is she? The image sets the tone of mystery and yearning that is Robleto's hallmark. Adding several of his own emotion-laden assemblages, one a tableau of wedding and mourning gowns, the artist creates a portrait by proxy of the various phases of Emma's life, with a strong resonance of the hereafter. It's brilliantly done. The back galleries house Robleto's big traveling exhibition "Alloy of Love," more of a mixed bag. There are plenty of searing artworks, including the gut-punch of "A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle" — a pair of antique military boots slogging through sand and rice, seemingly resurrected from the grave by sheer force of will. Here, too, you'll see Robleto's iconic assemblage "War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)." It's a fragile pigeon skeleton marked with a WWII-era ID tag that lies toppled on a pile of debris. The long-dead bird still carries a tiny scroll with its never-to-be-delivered message. By itself, the image pulses with a thousand associations, a palpable sense of loss. Yet what the label tells us intensifies the charge. The paper is said to be made from a pulp of human bone dust and a Civil War letter from a wife pleading for the release of her prisoner-of-war husband. The debris under the pigeon includes rubble from the Berlin Wall. On the other hand, the grander, more prominent, glass-case-enclosed "The Diva Surgery" struck me as beautiful, but inflated, the kind of thing that seems designed to be in a museum collection. It brought to mind similar pieces by Josiah McElheny (an obvious progenitor to Robleto's work) and Damien Hirst. A vintage laboratory of glass beakers and porcelain mortars, syringes, mirrors and vials of chemical powders, the assemblage has plenty of glitter and charm but I also found it a bit tiresome. Of course, that could be Robleto's point. It is about divas, after all. "Heaven Is Being a Memory to Others," through Aug. 10, and "Alloy of Love," through Sept. 1, Frye Art Museum, 704 Terry Ave., Seattle; free (206-622-9250 or [www.fryemuseum.org](http://www.fryemuseum.org)).  
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