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Remixing the Past

Melting down or pulverizing an eccentric array of materials, Dario Robleto then fashions them into relic-like objects with the sheen of historical authenticity.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

A deep personal engagement with history is rare in the trend-obsessed world of contemporary art. The recycling of art ideas and styles from the 1970s by the young and oblivious has become an occasion for shrugs, or is even embraced by some observers as evidence of an acceptable kind of cultural entropy. In the Bush era, mainstream America also seems content with amnesia in regard to politics and foreign policy. Acknowledgment of the past can now be seen as a sign of weakness or self-indulgence.

In the mass media, one of the few ways Americans still seem to take history to heart is by listening to oldies radio stations, where "blasts from the past" rekindle memories of youth. Indeed, the continual references on these stations to dates—often incorporated as part of a song's lead-in—provide the most precise historical referents for many. As the songs trigger memories, they conjure up whole eras while defining generational styles.

Over the past decade, San Antonio-born and -based artist Dario Robleto has used pop music as a launching pad for a complex investigation of American cultural history. With the good humor and attention to detail of a true fan, Robleto has mined pop music to make broader observations about U.S. culture, probing its heritage and uncovering its underlying racial and political tensions. Robleto's trademark medium is vinyl, melted down from pop albums and cast as symbolically loaded objects that reflect or comment on history. He has made cast vinyl versions of a tomahawk, human bones, missing buttons from thrift-store shirts and a nugget of fool's gold. Robleto demonstrates that cast vinyl can be a synesthetic medium, conjuring through its material transformation not just musical references but a wide range of associations. More recently, he has begun using a staggering variety of chemical, biological and mineral substances whose properties add further layers of meaning to his work.

Robleto has expanded his project during the last five years, "re-creating" what look like antique artifacts, fairly small in scale, to construct a loose narrative around a time-traveling American soldier. As a result of shows mounted at Houston's Inman Gallery (2003), Los Angeles's Acme (2004) and Galerie Praz-Delavallade in Paris (2004), he began to win a widespread, enthusiastic following. And on the heels of his first New York solo gallery show last fall at D'Amelio Terras, a selected traveling exhibition, "Chrysanthemum Anthems," was organized by the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C.; including 17 works, it is currently on display at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga.

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Overview (left) and detail (above) of Dario Robleto's Living with Death As Something Intimate and Natural, 2005-06, oak tree twig carved from a dissolved audiotape recording of the heartbeat of an unborn child and the last heartbeats of a loved one, dried flowers picked on foreign battlefields sent home by foot soldiers from various wars, thread and fabric from military uniforms, veteran's mason jar, mourning handkerchief, fabric and thread, pigments, water-extendable resin, willow, glass, 62 by 16 by 16 inches.

Opposite page, top and bottom, A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives, 2004-05, chair: cast and carved bone dust from every bone in the body, sealed with homemade balm (almond oil, beeswax, honeysuckle, resurrection plant, life everlasting, motherwort, mistletoe, sundew, Lady's mantle, eternal flower, life root, immortal root), zinc, nickel, silver, water-extendable resin, polyurethane; sewing materials, tools and rug: thread and fragments of American soldiers' uniforms from various wars, wool from combat casualty blankets, silk, cotton, carved bone, melted bullet lead and shrapnel, zinc, nickel, silver, walnut, 17½ by 16 by 13 inches.

Robleto's earlier cast vinyl sculptures and drawings were quirky, evocative paeans to musicians such as Patsy Cline, Billie Holiday, Kurt Cobain and Jimi Hendrix. Using pop-music culture as a kind of home base, Robleto took on the role of an artist-DJ, mixing references and combining objects to expand and refine meanings. A master of subtle and amusing metaphorical shifts, Robleto made works, for example, punning on the geological connotations of "rock" music, combining melted vinyl fragments and dissolved audiotape recordings of songs by Dusty Springfield, Public Enemy and others with gold and silver dust, dinosaur bone fragments, and crushed geodes, amber and crystals. As well as playing off the fetishistic appeal of vinyl for music collectors, these works explore pop music as a primal mass-cult form largely generated from American blues, spirituals and folk genres. Other works have drawn on the emotional component of pop music—its ties to romance, biography, sexuality and nostalgia.

His interest in blues and folk and the fallout of '60s utopian ideals led the artist to create sculptures and drawings addressing the deeper roots of American culture. He has focused on the guilt, retribution and sexual angst that characterize "the old weird America"—to use Greil Marcus's epithet for the rough-hewn, turbulent, premodern culture of the United States.¹ With a kind of comic yet defiant bravado, Robleto addresses big themes in his work, taking his cue from messianic or apocalyptic classic-pop anthems such as The Beatles' "All You Need Is Love" and Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart." Dissatisfied with the insularity and triviality commonly accepted in the art world, he uses such references as a springboard to address crucial issues of war, sex, religion and death.

Robleto's faith in the transformative power of art is manifested in odd syntheses of ingredients with symbolic overtones. The checklists for his recent work are inventories of the unusual and bizarre, from battlefield dirt and remnants of antique army blankets to bits of trinitite glass produced from a nuclear bomb test in 1945, excavated war bullets, daguerreotypes, message tubes used by World War II carrier pigeons and melted-vinyl casts of such recordings as Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer" and Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man." The artist largely culls this odd variety of arcane geological, chemical, naturalist and historical materials from sources he finds on the Internet.

Robleto performs seemingly alchemical changes on these potent ingredients using home-brewed casting agents fortified with metaphor and allusion. While some critics have been disturbed by Robleto's destruction of found personal items such as antique letters and photographs, his works are meant to retain—and even augment—the original spirit of those artifacts. The visually seductive works operate as an unusual form of conceptual art, demanding sympathy from contemplative viewers attuned to the aura accrued by objects associated with love and death.

In *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives* (2004-05), for example, Robleto cast and carved a foot-and-a-half-tall rocking chair from materials that include dust from every bone in the human body and a homemade balm of medicinal herbs. The chair sits on a braided rug made from fragments of American soldiers' uniforms and combat casualty blankets, among other things, and on its seat lies a piece of embroidery that reads "You will outlive the one you are used to loving." With such ingredients, Robleto seeks to embody a grief that is restorative and regenerative.

A number of Robleto's most powerful sculptures transmit the experiences of 19th-century war widows and their families, baldly presenting loss and mourning as the net effect of war. *A Century of November* (2005) is a framed infant's dress made from the pulped wartime love letters of soldiers killed in various wars. The dress buttons are carved from bone, its ornamental trim embroidered with World War II surgical suture thread. Emulating the look of Victorian artifacts and their ornamental display, Robleto channels the heightened sentimentality and expressive passions of that culture, in this case through a narrative of an infant who has joined her soldier father in death.

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In works emulating Victorian artifacts and their ornamental display, Robleto channels the sentimentality and expressive pathos of that culture.

The breathtaking poignancy of certain works stems from their rarefied ingredients, listed in the current exhibition on wall labels and in gallery shows on checklists. *Living with Death As Something Intimate and Natural* (2005-06)² is a Mason jar terrarium containing a tree twig carved from the dissolved tape recordings of the heartbeat of an unborn child and of a dying loved one. The twig is seemingly planted in a pile of casts of excavated bullets made from a mixture of battlefield soil and ground fulgurites (glass created from lightning strikes). Capped by an antique mourning handkerchief, the terrarium is a kind of breeding ground of melancholy, a tiny ecosystem of death and regenerated life.

In this recent work, Robleto has added recordings of American and British poets to his media inventories. *A Sadness Silence Can't Touch* (2005-06) is a small memento box containing six casts of Civil War-era "pain bullets"—used by soldiers to bite on during surgery—which were made from dissolved audiotapes of the voices of Walt Whitman, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Siegfried Sassoon, T.S. Eliot, Robert Graves and Dylan Thomas reading war-related poems. *Your Lullaby Will Find a Home in My Head* (2005) is a framed 19th-century style reliquary of three hair braids made from a stretched and curled audiotape of Sylvia Plath reciting her harrowingly bleak poem "November Graveyard."

While in many ways the medium is the message in all of Robleto's artifacts, a meticulous sense of craft has increasingly made the impact of his work less dependent on checklist evidence. *A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle* (2004) is an installation focusing on a pair of World War I cavalry boots cast from vinyl recordings of Skeeter Davis's song *The End of the World*. The boots seem to have skidded through a 6-foot expanse of white rice and rose petals, leaving marks in the dust. Placed in one of the boots is a cast of a Civil War soldier's hand-carved wood-and-iron prosthetic leg made from femur bone dust and vinyl melted down from The Shirelles' "Soldier Boy." This theatrical denouement, evoking the narrative of a specterlike wedding-day appearance of a missing wounded father, conjures scenes from great works of Southern Gothic literature by Poe, Faulkner and Welty.

The regenerative process of Robleto's cast-making complements his investigation of grief and mourning as a way of keeping love alive. *If We Fly Away, They'll Fly Away* (2005-06) consists of an open birdcage cast from the dust of every bone in the human body. Inside the cage is strewn a variety of small relics: fabric from a mourning dress, hair flowers braided by a war widow, feathers carved from a fragment of a record of Florence Nightingale addressing war veterans and a 2005 newspaper notice of the passing of the last soldier present at the Christmas Truce that temporarily halted fighting in World War I. Sitting on a small bench upholstered with fragments of military uniforms and blankets, the bone-dust cage transcends its status as a kind of reliquary of war by having its door left open for the hope of peace.

Robleto's earnest belief in the healing nature of art and his serious treatment of historical issues distinguish his work from that of most of his peers. Its "literary" aspect—an attribute once used in a derogatory fashion by critics such as Clement Greenberg and Donald Judd—seems refreshing in an art world mired in Duchampian gamesmanship, elliptical surrealism and bland political documentary. Unlike other emerging artists who work with 19th-century imagery, such as Aaron Morse or Alison Smith, Robleto takes a lyrical

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Above, A Defeated Soldier Wishes to Walk His Daughter Down the Wedding Aisle, 2004, cast of a hand-carved wooden and iron leg that a wounded Civil War soldier constructed for himself, made from The Shirelles's "Soldier Boy" melted vinyl record and femur bone dust, fitted inside a pair of WWI military cavalry boots made from Skeeter Davis's "The End of the World" melted vinyl record, oil can filled with homemade tincture (gun oil, rose oil, bacteria cultured from the grooves of Negro prison songs and prison choir records, wormwood, goldenrod, aloe juice, resurrection plant, Apothecary's Rose and bugleweed), brass, rust, dirt from various battlefields, ballistic gelatin, white rose petals, white rice, 21 by 20 by 80 inches.

Left top, A Century of November, 2005, child's mourning dress made with homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), carved bone buttons, hair flowers braided by a Civil War widow, mourning dress fabric and lace, silk, velvet, ribbon, WWII surgical suture thread, mahogany, glass, 38 by 38 inches.

Left bottom, If We Fly Away, They'll Fly Away, 2005-06, cast and carved bone dust from every bone in the body, bone calcium, feathers made from a carved vinyl record of Florence Nightingale addressing war veterans and nightingale bird songs, homemade paper (pulp made from soldiers' letters to sons and daughters from various wars, ink retrieved from letters), fragments of military uniforms and blankets from various wars, child's spoon and fork excavated from a battlefield coated with melted bullet lead from the Revolutionary War, residue from female tears of mourning overlaid with residue from male tears of mourning, war widow's mourning dress fabric and lace, hair flowers braided by a war widow, military photograph, military surgical suture thread, ground iron and brass, rust, walnut, typeset, 24 by 16 by 16 inches. All photos courtesy D'Amelio Terras, New York.

cal approach to historical content, rekindling attitudes and feelings of the past.

With America once again in a bitter, divisive war, the relevance of Robleto's work could not be more obvious. Skipping over the self-reflexive roadblocks of postmodern theory, he constructs objects with accrued meanings that transcend both ambiguity and narrow interpretations. Reconnecting with heightened emotional responses largely displaced by high modernism, his neo-Victorian, object-oriented conceptual art makes its own kind of music. □

1. See "The Old Weird America," an analysis of Harry Smith's compilation *Anthology of American Folk Music*, in Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, New York, Henry Holt, 1997, pp. 87-126.
2. Robleto sometimes double-titles his works like the A & B sides of pop-music singles.

"Dario Robleto: Chrysanthemum Anthems" was organized by Xandra Eden for the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, N.C. [Sept. 24-Dec. 17, 2006]. It traveled to the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Conn. [Mar. 11-June 24], and is currently on view at the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga [Aug. 25-Nov. 4]. "Alloy of Love," a 10-year survey of Robleto's work, will appear at the Frye Art Museum, Seattle [May 17-Sept. 1, 2008], and the Tang Teaching Museum, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. [Sept. 29, 2008-January 2009].

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