



War Pigeon With A Message (*Love Survives The Death Of Cells*), 11 x 8 x 5 ½ inches, 2002, pigeon skeleton, WWI era pigeon ID tag, homemade paper (pulp made from human ribcage bone dust 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 POW husband), WWI bullet, ribbon, rose petals, rust, dirt, rubble from the Berlin Wall. Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston.

Material History: The Handmade Paper Work of Dario Robleto

LAUREN ROSS

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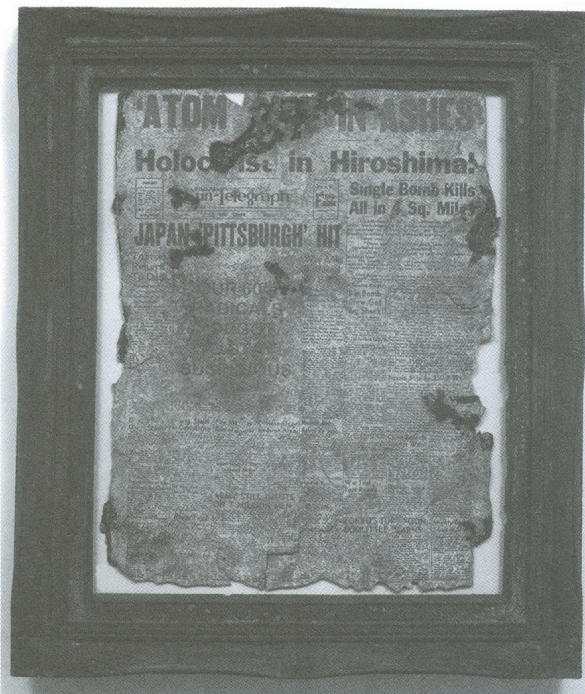
LEFT: *Our 60's Radicals Forgot To Stay Suspicious*, 25 x 21 x 2 inches, 2003-2004, cast of homemade paper (pulp made from cotton, military sheet music from American wars and bone dust from every bone in the body), dehydrated bone calcium, bone charcoal, ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion, circa 1945 from Trinity test site, when heat from blast melted surrounding sand), wheat starch, cold cast steel, nickel and zinc, melted bullet lead, rust, shatter proof Lexan, typeset. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

RIGHT: *War Wreaths Set On Fire*, 9 x 8 x 1 inches, 2004, homemade paper (cotton infused with ground laurel leaves, chrysanthemum ashes, tincture of poppy, Blessed Thistle), melted bullet lead, cold cast nickel and silver, brass, rust, polyester resin, bone glue, typeset. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

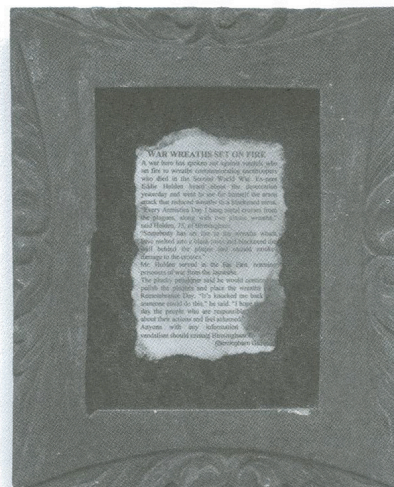
Marshal McLuhan's famous statement, "the medium is the message," comes to mind when examining the work of San Antonio-based artist Dario Robleto. One cannot fully appreciate the meaning of a piece such as *War Pigeon With A Message (Love Survives The Death Of Cells)* (2002) until reading the work's list of materials—pigeon skeleton, WWI era pigeon ID tag, homemade paper pulp (pulp made from human ribcage bone dust and a Civil War era letter), WWI bullet, ribbon, rose petals, rust, dirt, rubble from the Berlin Wall. Robleto bases his selection of materials for his work not only on their physical and formal properties, but also on the inherent and implied meanings embedded within them.

This young artist is equal parts manufacturer, oral and written historian, anthropologist, archaeologist, scientist, collector, and alchemist. His work in sculpture, drawings, and prints (not to mention the occasional musical score) reexamines history through its events and remnants. All at once, Robleto mines the broad events and the tiny gestures, the global and the personal. This is achieved via a self-imposed, complex process. After extensive research, he sets out to collect byproducts of our country's history, such as foreign soil collected by American soldiers on tours of duty, or more specifically, trinitite, glass named after the Trinity test site where it was produced when the first atomic test explosion released temperatures hot enough to melt the surrounding sand. After obtaining these substances, Robleto crushes, grinds, pulverizes, or melts them down before reintroducing the material into various mediums. Robleto compares his process of unearthing and relocating to the sampling and mixing of a DJ (an apt comparison for an artist who sees music as one of our most powerful artistic and cultural expressions).

Given Robleto's interest in mediums that allow him to incorporate other items, it is not surprising that he frequently works with handmade paper. After acquiring paper based documents, such as personal letters written during wartime, he macerates them into a pulp from which he fashions his work. Robleto is sometimes challenged on the fact that his process necessitates the



Our 60's Radicals Forgot To Stay Suspicious, 25 x 21 x 2 inches.



War Wreaths Set On Fire, 9 x 8 x 1 inches.

loss of vintage material in its original form. However, Robleto sees his work as not destructive, but reconstructive. In his research he has found that a great volume of these materials have been discarded or forgotten, boxed in attics and basements. By recycling and recontextualizing an item, he hopes to imbue it with new meaning and new life.

Robleto's process of rebuilding serves as a metaphor for Reconstruction, a process crucial to American history. Taking conflict and war as subject matter, Robleto is consciously working in political territory, but is careful to avoid being didactic, reductive, or partisan. Recognizing the complexities of history, he takes an egalitarian approach, for example, considering military actions that include invasion and liberation or aggression and defense. Conflicts from different eras are often combined within his work, collapsing time into a pastiche of nonconsecutive events. This temporal rearrangement is often worked into narratives that are similarly nonlinear.

In late 2004 Robleto had a trilogy of exhibitions: "Roses in the Hospital / Men are the New Women" (a two-part installment at Houston's Inman Gallery), "Southern Bacteria" held at ACME in Los Angeles, and "Diary of a Resurrectionist" at Galerie Praz-Delavallade in Paris. Together, these presentations piece together a complex story involving soldiers who are plucked from various conflicts throughout history and deposited to face one another on the same battlefield. What, Robleto wonders, would happen to their political and personal motivations? One soldier who serves as the story's protagonist goes through a particularly rigorous set of metamorphoses as he travels through time—he mutates, his body is reduced to dust, and consequently rebuilt with organic and prosthetic alterations. Although the narrative steering the

exhibitions is meticulously detailed, Robleto understands that the viewer can never piece it together in its entirety. The observer's fragmented experience is in many ways akin to the perplexing shifts experienced by the story's characters. (The full story will be revealed with the publication of an illustrated book summing up the trilogy, planned for the near future.) In order to counter this fracture, Robleto makes certain that each show, in fact each piece, is autonomous and can be appreciated on a variety of levels. The depth of the excavation is left to the individual viewer.

The entire trilogy contained over one dozen paper based pieces. One of these was *Our 60's Radicals Forgot To Stay Suspicious* (2003-04), a reproduction of the front page of the *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph* from August 8, 1945, announcing the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Made of a tablet-like cast of handmade paper, the piece was purposely distressed by Robleto to look as if it itself had been through a devastating blast. As with all his work, the paper contains a plethora of unexpected materials within its fibers: cotton, military sheet music from American wars, bone dust from every bone in the body, dehydrated bone calcium, bone charcoal, and ground trinitite, along with other items. Faint red letters spelling out the words of the piece's title hover above the exacting replication of every word from the newspaper's front page. Strange and not entirely resolvable leaps occur in the viewer's mind: what exactly is the relationship between, say, the student protesters of the summer of love and the reported devastation that occurred before most of them were born? One's thoughts jump from the global havoc of the 1930s and '40s, to the protests of the '60s and the war in Vietnam they opposed, and inevitably to the transformation of many of the hippies into yuppies in the '80s. Robleto raises the issue of suspicion



Nihilist With A Dream, 42 x 32 x 16 inches, with detail above of *Chrysanthemum Anthems*, 11 x 18 inches, 2003-2004, homemade paper (pulp made from a poem of WWI soldier wrote while recovering in the hospital, dried and crushed chrysanthemum petals, crushed blood root, sweet balsam, rose water, rose oil, peppermint oil, sunflower oil, dandelion oil, aloe juice, cotton), melted shrapnel and bullet lead, cold cast steel and brass, polyester resin, rust, bone glue, typeset; original score for violin and fife composed for soldier's poem. Courtesy of the artist and Praz-Delavallade Gallery, Paris.

and, by extension, complacency in a way that makes us ponder what happens when we let down our communal guard.

Among the paper pieces, eloquence abounds, as in *Chrysanthemum Anthems* (2004). Using a poem written by a WWI soldier while recovering in the hospital, Robleto collaborated with a musician to set the written words to music, creating a complete score for violin and fife. The score is typeset on paper made from that very letter, combined with dried and crumbled chrysanthemum petals, crushed blood root, bugleweed, sweet balsam, rose water, rose oil, peppermint oil, sunflower oil, dandelion oil, aloe juice, and cotton. Each ingredient is selected for its medicinal properties and traditional uses for healing. The piece sits on a musical stand constructed out of melted shrapnel and bullet lead, cold cast steel and brass, polyester resin, rust, and bone glue. Drawing on the traditional associations of chrysanthemums with mourning, Robleto's moving gesture suggests the ability of the creative act to transcend pain. Another similarly lyrical piece is comprised of six poems whose titles include *War Wreaths Set On Fire* (2004) and *A War Poet's Scorn* (2004). Each is printed on handmade paper, infused with tonics made from flora such as sundew, white chestnut, and meadowsweet. The delicate sheets are encased in frames constructed from melted bullet lead joined with other metals.

The first time I experienced Robleto's work, I found myself skeptical that all of the materials listed were indeed present. Before speaking to him, I wondered if it were essential to the piece's meaning that every bone in the human body is accounted for in the work. After all, history is full of distortions and exaggerations that become de facto truths simply through their repeated statement. But I found that on this point Robleto is passionate

and uncompromising. It is imperative to him that every item listed is present—in fact, he goes to great lengths to confirm that the materials he acquires are authentic and the events he reports are accurate. Anything less, he feels, would be akin to lying. Robleto is keenly concerned with, as he puts it, how history will judge this moment and its people. He challenges the popular perception of his generation as apathetic, ironic, and cynical by setting out to create work that reflects truth, sincerity, and spiritual faith.

When asked if his research has led him to believe that history repeats itself, Robleto replied that one thing he has seen re-occur consistently is the supremacy of human love and loss. The first time Robleto produced paper by hand was for the aforementioned *War Pigeon With A Message*. The Civil War era letter he made into pulp was written by the wife of a Union soldier addressed to the Confederate General who held her husband as a prisoner of war. In her letter, she pleaded for his release; her only argument being that she loved him. Such moving testimonials fuel Robleto's interest in history—the clash of emotions and politics. After people are gone, these forces can live on in the objects that serve as records and testaments. Ironically, these items often exist in a gray area between detritus and treasure. In the same manner that a splinter or a fragment of cloth can act as a religious relic, old documents are permeated with a transcendent magnitude that inspires faith. Robleto's work has an appearance that echoes that sentiment—the pieces often have a look that is simultaneously ordinary and sacred, mistreated and fetishized. With multiple layers of quiet power and poetic grace, they examine the overlapping realms of truth and magic.