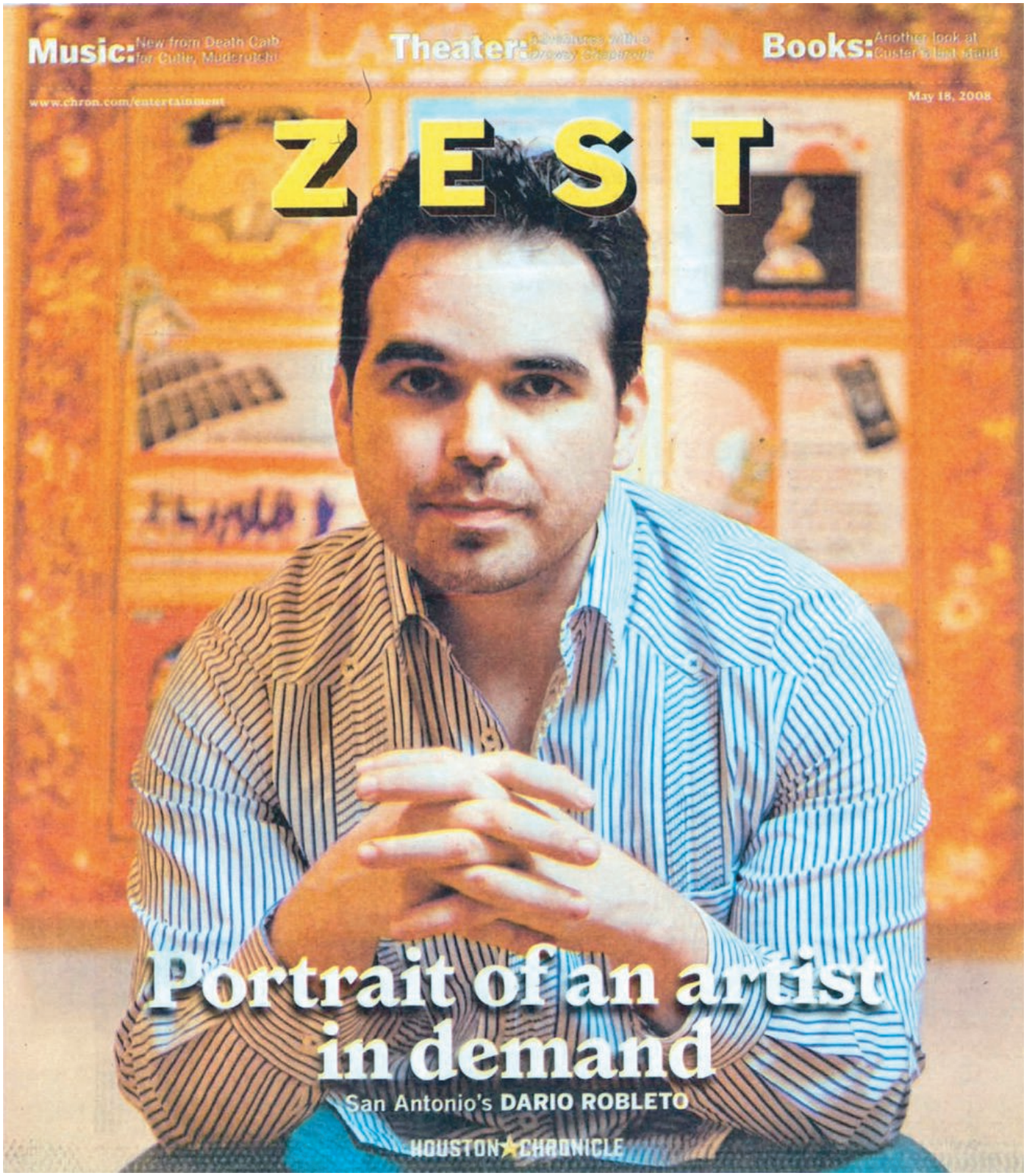
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Portrait of an artist in demand
San Antonio's DARIO ROBLETO
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Dust in the wind

DARIO ROBLETO'S sensational sculptures, often composed of provocative materials, are catching the eye of art lovers near and far.

SEATTLE — As artist Dario Robleto and curator Elizabeth Dunbar walk through the galleries of the Frye Art Museum, sidestepping crates and finalizing decisions on where to place which of his sculptures, the conversation turns to which one they'd save iff — heaven forbid — a fire broke out in the building.

Robleto, 35, hesitates. He thinks of his highly personal, labor-intensive artworks as his children, and he hasn't seen most of these pieces in years. How can he choose just one?

By Douglas Britt
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

NICK de la TORRE : CHRONICLE

FOLK INFLUENCE: *Dario Robleto is one of the artists featured in* The Old, Weird America *at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston.*

The front room has several works in progress for the Museum of Contemporary Arté San Diego's upcoming exhibition *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet.*

It's also got a treasure trove of oddities and rarities Robleto hunts down to use in his sculptures. A Red Cross vinyl record of a World War II soldier's message to his family. A black swan's vertebrae. The tusk and leg of a young wooly mammoth.

Robleto no longer works with pastels. These days, the closest he comes to what most people would call drawing are his 3-D "Dario doodles" — simple assemblages that symbolically grapple with ideas he's still working out.

He holds up what looks like a makeshift sailboat. It's comprised of a fragment of the Berlin Wall, a black swan's rib cage and a World War II uniform's pocket lining and thread.

Its passenger is an ear bone of an extinct species of prehistoric whale.

"What did they hear?" Robleto asks. "I just love thinking about it. It's a sound we'll never, ever know, but this is the thing it needed to make the sound."

He pictures the whale's ear bone "wandering on the ocean, picking up these weird things. The wind is pushing it through time. I wish I could have figured out a better way to use them, but it'll show up someday in a project."

He tells me I'm the first to see it. Emboldened, I ask if I can't take just a quick peek at the dirty room.

No dice.

"This is a big deal right here," Robleto says with a pained smile as he gestures around the front room.

It is a big deal. Robleto is legendary among curators for maintaining an alchemist's veil of secrecy over his working methods.

Toby Kamps, senior curator at CAMH, has known Robleto since 2002, when Kamps was a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which had just acquired Robleto's *The Diva Surgery*.

"There was kind of a mystique around him," Kamps said. "I've asked him several times if I could do a studio visit, and he's never said no, but he's never said yes. I think I'm getting the drift that he just kind of doesn't do that. Much as a priest or a medicine man or a scientist wouldn't want me in his lab, or a kung fu master wouldn't want me in his dojo."

Remembering my conversation with Kamps, I decide not to push my luck.

After his Beatles-induced epiphany, Robleto changed course academically, leaving his biology studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio and enrolling at UT-El Paso as an art major. He sold his blood for a while to make ends meet. Andrews used to ship him microwavable Dinty Moore meals.

He returned to UTSA but stuck with art classes, graduating in 1997.

Like *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, Robleto's early sculptures aimed to take sampling and remixing, the hallmarks of DJ culture, from the dance floor into the realm of sculpture — an impulse that has remained integral to his work.

In 1998, he ground vinyl records by Patsy Cline, Conway Twitty, Hank Williams, Tammy Wynette and others into a powder. Then he melted the powder, coated it onto the heads of matches, and laid boxes of the altered matches on the bars at three honky-tonks.

The origins of that piece, *There's an Old Flame Burning in Your Eyes, Or, Why Honky Tonk Love is the Saddest Kind of Love*, went back to his childhood. Robleto was 6 when Andrews took over a bar owned by a friend dying of cancer to help him through his last months.

"This small place catered to a fairly rough crowd of truck drivers," she says. "Dario spent a lot of time there with me when I couldn't get a babysitter for him, and he was always the quiet observer, watching all the people."

He also spent a lot of time listening to the jukebox. That was when it hit Robleto "how a song can reflect life," he says. "Hearing Tammy Wynette talk about a horrible relationship and seeing it happen by the pool table or bar."

Years later, Robleto again played the role of the quiet observer, sitting and watching

ROBLETO: CLOSER TO HOME

1

Dario Robleto: Oh, Those Mirrors With Memory (Actions 1996-1997) Gallery talk: Robleto and Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, director, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, noon Saturday, exhibit through Saturday. Inman Gallery, 3901 Main; 713-526-7800.

2

The Old, Weird America, through July 20 at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose; 713-284-8250;

3

NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith, June 27-Sept. 21 at the Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross; 713-525-9400;

4

The Marfa Sessions, Sept. 27-Feb. 11 at BallroomMarfa, 108 E. San Antonio St., Marfa; 432-729-3600.

5

Catalog: ***Dario Robleto: Alloy of Love***, edited by Ian Berry. Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and Frye Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press; 288 pp.; $45.

people put his altered but still functional matches to use, flirting as they lit each others' cigarettes.

"Unbeknownst to both of them, hovering between them are the very lyrics that are probably predicting the outcome of their relationship," he says. "Instead of taking it through the ears, they were literally breathing in Tammy Wynette's words. It was in their lungs, in their DNA."

After the bar, Andrews worked at a hospice for nearly 18 years, eventually becoming its president and CEO, but still spending much of her time with patients, holding many of them as they were dying.

Robleto volunteered in the hospice, working with patients and listening to nurses' and social workers' stories

That experience is reflected in his art, much of which draws on mourning art traditons, such as hair wreaths, wax-preserved flowers and love letters to the dead.

"He has a real passion about the sadness, but (also) what you can do through art to bridge that and make it more about remembering joyfully rather than just forgetting," Andrews says.

"You know I'm a witch right?" Robleto remember his grandmother telling him when he was a child.

Like her grandson would years later, Montez Dunbar (no relation to the curator) kept a back room in her house that she didn't let people enter. Dunbar's room was filled with books on witchcraft, ESP and predicting the future.

"She never really brought it up again, and I never really understood what that meant for her, how she practiced it," Robleto says.

"Everything that is good about me as an artist came from her," he says.

Dunbar was a free spirit and an obsessive collector. After she died, Robleto, who also took her library, found milk cartons filled with the used tops of dishwashing bottles accumulated over decades.

"Seeing that as an object was so beautiful; it was like a sculpture," he says.

Robleto had his hand on her chest, feeling her last heartbeats, when she died. One of his most recent sculptures, *The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed*, takes its title from that moment.

"Something had changed right at that moment, and I had my hand on it," he says.

Robleto and Elizabeth Dunbar walk through *Alloy of Love*, or what there is of it. Because it's the first day of installation, many of Robleto's sculptures are still in their crates or leaning against walls.

Still, it's already possible to see how guest curator Dunbar, who's visiting from Arthouse at Jones Center in Austin, is organizing the show.

"The hip piece is up," Robleto says, referring to *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*. "That always gets me."

He walks down a corridor to a small gallery the sculpture has all to itself. The room is pitch black except for the spotlight that's part of the piece.

Robleto finds it a little disconcerting to handle and install the work.

"It's weird holding the thing that you have to thank your existence for," he says. "I guess I have the strongest response to this one."

We stare at the piece, letting its silent concert fill the room.

"So is that the one you would save?" Dunbar finally asks.

It is, Robleto decides. If the Frye goes up in smoke, Dunbar's on her own rescuing the pigeon. He'll take the hip piece. Better to save the object that made all the others possible.

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But Dunbar, who's spent years pulling together *Alloy of Love*, a 10-year traveling survey of the San Antonio-based Robleto's work, has had plenty of time to come up with a favorite.

"I'd pick the pigeon," she says firmly.

Even by the standards of Robleto's oeuvre, which has drawn widespread acclaim for its narrative power and its capacity to inspire both heartbreak and hope, Dunbar's choice, *War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)*, is a doozy.

It presents the skeleton of a messenger pigeon, all but buried in rubble yet still ferociously clutching a letter, determined to deliver its note even in death. The bullet that presumably took out the bird lies nearby.

So far, so intense. But read the wall label — a must when dealing with Robleto's sculptures, which always have more going on than meets the eye — and learn that the bullet came from World War I, the bird wears a World War II pigeon I.D. tag around its ankle and the rubble is from the Berlin Wall.

And the letter? Its paper comes from pulp Robleto made from the dust of a human rib and a Civil War-era letter that a Union soldier's wife wrote to a Confederate general pleading for the return of her P.O.W. husband.

"It was a complete act of desperation," Robleto says of the wife's letter. "Her argument for releasing him was simply because she loved him."

For Dunbar, this pigeon, unrelenting in its resolve to deliver a message of love across more than a century of hot and cold warfare, sums up what Robleto's work is all about.

"There's the sense that, no matter what, there's this will to survive, that hope can conquer all," she says.

Robleto's sold. The pigeon it is.

Landing a 10-year survey, along with being included in exhibitions at the Menil Collection, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego at his relatively young age, are sure signs that Robleto's having a huge year.

As if that weren't enough, Robin Held, the Frye's chief curator and director of

CHRONICLE FILE

NO MATTER WHAT: *Robleto's* War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives The Death Of Cells) *(2002) embodies the idea that hope conquers all.*

exhibitions and collections, has invited Robleto to "remix" the museum's collection with new works of his own, giving him the run of the Frye's entire exhibition space for the summer.

But the icing on the cake has to be the catalog accompanying *Alloy of Love*. Backed by a gift from the Mattsson-McHale Foundation in Austin, the monograph offers a comprehensive look at his career.

"I think it will do wonders for his reputation to have a good book done on him," says Chris Mattsson, the foundation's director and a collector of Robleto's work. "His work is so conceptual for the average person looking at it, I think you do need help."

Like Robleto's sculptures, the catalog is designed to resemble a rare, vintage object — something you'd have to track down in antique book shops. It comes with a poster for the first 1,000 customers, like the vinyl records Robleto grew up collecting. It's his version of the rare edition of an album with bonus tracks.

Growing up in San Antonio, Robleto never thought he'd wind up an artist. He never went to museums and could name "maybe three artists, the obvious ones" like Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. His main academic interest was science.

And he was a jock through and through. Not only was he captain of the football team at Robert E. Lee High School, he weighed 225 pounds and squatted 415.

But if you ask Robleto's mother, Barbara Ann Andrews, who, like her son, still lives in San Antonio, she'll tell you there were always signs of a sensitive side, if not an artistic streak.

Recalling a trip to a bustling mall when Robleto was 5, Andrews says they walked past a woman sitting on a bench.

"I guess you'd call her a bag lady," she says. "You could tell she was very poor, wrinkled, elderly."

To Andrews' surprise, Robleto broke free from her hand and ran through the crowd "to this little, dirty woman."

"He looked at her and put his hands on hers, and he said, 'I think you're so beautiful,' and then turned around and walked back over to me," Andrews says.

"There's this little woman with a tear — I'm going to start crying — a tear on her face and just smiling," she says. "He's always had that affinity for the elderly, for the lost."

Andrews pauses, at a loss.

"I don't know. It's just something in that guy that appeals to, in some way, and wants to soothe their poor souls.

Robleto never knew his father, a biologist who helped identify a gene for fetal-alcohol syndrome, very well. An immigrant from Nicaragua, Robleto's father joined the Army on the G.I. Bill and met Andrews while stationed in San Antonio during the Vietnam War. Their relationship was short-lived.

"I was a total accident in a Beatles-induced haze," Robleto says.

For *Our Sin Was in Our Hips* (2001-2002), perhaps Robleto's most autobiographical sculpture, he combined hand-ground and melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments and dirt to sculpt two pelvises joined together, lit by a stage spotlight.

The female pelvis is made from Andrews' rock 'n' roll records. The male pelvis is made from rock 'n' roll records that belonged to Robleto's father.

Andrews says seeing the completed sculpture was "poignant."

"He got what the relationship was and what drew us together,"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARIO ROBLETO AND D'AMELIO TERRAS, NEW YORK

LET THE MUSIC PLAY: For Lamb of Man/Atom and Eve/Americana Materia Medica *(2006), a large three-part panel, Robleto created a series of imaginary album covers to tell stories of American spirituality, science and medicine. The covers are made from colored paper, cardboard, ribbon, foam core, glue and willow in the style of vintage vinyl art. The panel is on view in* The Old, Weird America *at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, through July 20.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARIO ROBLETO

THRIFTY ART: *For* Sometimes Billie Is All That Holds Me Together *(1998), Robleto sewed buttons made from melted Billie Holliday records onto used clothes, then donated them back to the thrift shops where he found them.*

she says. "He understood how he came about, in more ways than one — the evolution of a relationship into making another human being — and that what precedes that and what comes after that are not always what you expect."

If Robleto himself was a Beatles-induced accident, so was the epiphany that made him realize, in 1993, that he wanted to be an artist.

Suffering from depression, Robleto called his father, who was then living in Miami, and said he wanted to stay with him for awhile.

"I said, 'I don't care what you say; I need to get to know you better,'" Robleto says.

In Miami, Robleto and his father often had little to say to each other, but one thing they shared was a love of music.

Robleto takes fandom so seriously that he hasn't missed a Morrissey concert since seeing his first one at 14.

Robleto's father and uncles talked about learning some of their English from pop records. Robleto loved hearing those stories.

Still, Robleto's depression worsened, and he took to locking himself in his room for days at a time.

One day, his father left the apartment with the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* playing in repeat mode on the stereo. Robleto, "in one of these stupors" in his bedroom, heard the muffled sounds of the album playing over and over for hours.

"It was soaking in my mind in some subliminal way," he says. "I had never really grappled with that album."

Robleto's father had a biography of John Lennon. Robleto read it cover to cover.

"Something snapped, and I suddenly was going to be an artist," he says.

Robleto bought pastels and a pad of paper, locked himself in his room again and didn't emerge until all four walls of the room were covered in drawings.

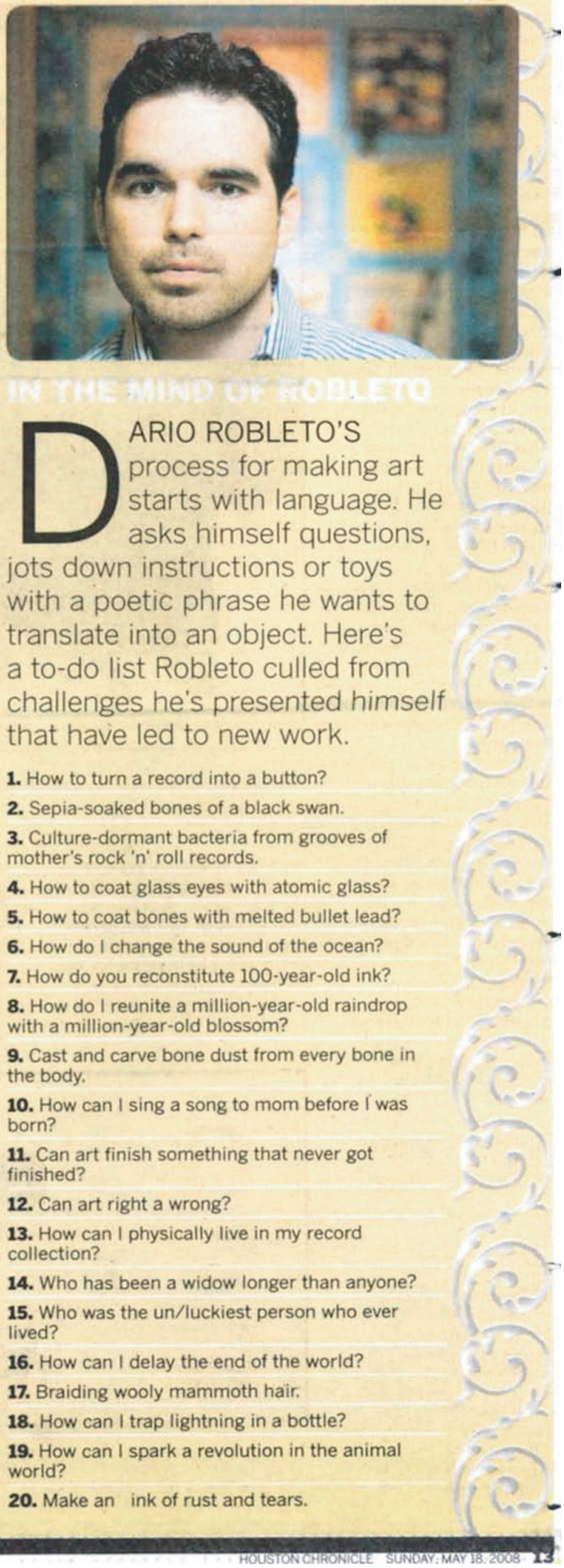
"I remember I just jumped in, and I made this drawing that I'll never show anyone," he says. Nevertheless, he adds, "if I dissected that image," the ideas he's pursued ever since are all there.

Robleto still won't show anyone certain things, first and foremost the part of his San Antonio studio he calls "the dirty room," the curtained-off area "where I do all the melting and grinding and test tubes and all that," he says. "It's (a matter of) having this space that's charged. Its privacy is hinging on that."

ECHOES: *The hair braid in* Daughters of Wounds and Relics *(detail) is made of stretched and curled tape recordings of Civil War soldiers and widows.*

ADAM L. WEINTRAUB

PLACEBO: *Part of the homeopathic tincture in* Time Measures Nothing But This Love *(detail) is made from a ground resurrection plant and a stretched tape recording of inventor Frank Lambert's* Experimental Talking Clock *(c. 1878).*



IN THE MIND OF ROBLETO

DARIO ROBLETO'S process for making art starts with language. He asks himself questions, jots down instructions or toys with a poetic phrase he wants to translate into an object. Here's a to-do list Robleto culled from challenges he's presented himself that have led to new work.

1. How to turn a record into a button?

2. Sepia-soaked bones of a black swan.

3. Culture-dormant bacteria from grooves of mother's rock 'n' roll records.

4. How to coat glass eyes with atomic glass?

5. How to coat bones with melted bullet lead?

6. How do I change the sound of the ocean?

7. How do you reconstitute 100-year-old ink?

8. How do I reunite a million-year-old raindrop with a million-year-old blossom?

9. Cast and carve bone dust from every bone in the body.

10. How can I sing a song to mom before I was born?

11. Can art finish something that never got finished?

12. Can art right a wrong?

13. How can I physically live in my record collection?

14. Who has been a widow longer than anyone?

15. Who was the un/luckiest person who ever lived?

16. How can I delay the end of the world?

17. Braiding wooly mammoth hair.

18. How can I trap lightning in a bottle?

19. How can I spark a revolution in the animal world?

20. Make an ink of rust and tears.

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