Pitchfork

Take Cover: Yo La Tengo's *Popular Songs*

Artist Dario Robleto tells the story behind the new album's art.

By
Tom Breihan
on September 2, 2009

Excellent album covers catch the eye, dribble it around a little, and then snap it back into place, forever skewed. They can be funny, gross, shocking, stunning, or just plain wrong. They can define artists. With the Pitchfork News feature Take Cover, we aim to track down the best new album covers taking up web space and vinyl bins across the world and get the story behind them.

In this installment, we check in with conceptual sculptor Dario Robleto, the man responsible for the burnt, cracked cassette tape on the cover of Yo La Tengo's *Popular Songs*, which Matador will release on September 8. For context, it's important to know how Robleto made that tape and what's on it.

The 2002 piece is titled "At War With the Entropy of Nature / Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back", and here's Robleto's insane list of materials: "Cassette: carved bone & bone dust from every bone in the body, trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion at Trinity test site circa 1945, when heat from the blast melted surrounding sand), metal screws, rust, letraset; audio tape: an original composition of military drum marches, weapon fire, and soldiers' voices from battlefields of various wars made from Electronic Voice Phenomena recordings (voices and sounds of the dead or past, detected through magnetic audio tape)."
Our interview with Robleto is below.
Pitchfork: How did you first make contact with Yo La Tengo?

Dario Robleto: They actually contacted me, emailed me out of the blue, and you can imagine how thrilled I was. I was amazed they were even aware of what I did. Apparently, they had seen one of my shows years ago. They had bought my recent catalog and had chosen three works they were really interested in. Ira [Kaplan] sent me this wonderful e-mail asking me if I'd consider lending the work for the cover. In the e-mail, he even mentioned-- he didn't want to be presumptuous, but did I realize that they had a song called "Deeper Into Movies", which is a title of an early work of mine? And I told them of course I was aware of that. The work was made while that album was on nonstop. So it was nice that I could show them that I was a big fan of them for years now. They couldn't really narrow down which piece they wanted, so they just asked if they could use all three that they liked. So I was thrilled about that, and that's where we're at now.

Pitchfork: So three pieces of yours are part of the album art?

DR: Yeah. I think what they've done is pretty cool. I had told them that I'm very sensitive to liner notes and the history of liner notes and I don't want to take up all their space, but my work is always accompanied by these texts, my titles and my material lists, which are very important to my work. And they didn't even blink. They said, "Oh, no. We'll format it so we can have all three works as image and the accompanying text." What they did, which I think is the sweetest thing possible, is they loved my text so much that they did one for themselves, for the album, in homage to mine, in the same spirit. [*You can get an idea of the full album artwork here. -- Ed.*]**Pitchfork:** They listed what materials you used?

DR: Well, they did one for themselves. So they have the title of the album, *Popular Songs*. And then under it, they have a list of all the materials it took to make the album, but in a very clever, funny way. Like, "special guitar amp" all the way to "espresso." But it's just very sweet, the way it's listed under my three material lists.

Pitchfork: All I've seen is the cover, which is your piece "At War With the Entropy of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back". What other pieces are in the album?

DR: On the back of the album, there is an early work of mine called "Sometimes Billie Is All That Holds Me Together". It's these buttons that I had made from these melted down Billie Holiday records. They took some of the colors I used; they pulled the color out of that to use for the song titles, in various colors, taken from those buttons.

And then on the inside of the album, there's another image of one of the individual buttons and then another early work, called "A Dark Day for the Dinosaurs". That one is this tiny little match that I carved out of dinosaur bone. On the head of the match, when you look at it, it looks like a burned match. There's some ash around the head of the match, which is actually T. Rex's song "Life's a Gas". It's been melted down, and then I actually struck it. I lit it on fire, and you see a little bit of ash from the vinyl around the head of the match, which has the dinosaur bone as what would be the wood part of the match. So it's like the song went up in flames.

Pitchfork: In the piece that's on the cover, you used glass from the 1945 atomic bomb test at Trinity and also human bone and bone dust. How do you get a hold of all this stuff?

DR: Well, part of my work is this alchemical approach to materials. I've been doing this for over ten years now, and I have quite a collection of amazing things in the world that I will integrate into my art. And I'm such a collector myself that, at this point, just like in music, I know who to ask. I know who to call. I know the five people in the world who are collecting, you know, atomic glass. I've come to know and appreciate

all those sub-cultural collecting groups, and I have quite a web of connections at this point.

Or, often, I will go find it myself. Like, I've gone on dinosaur bone excavation digs myself. All kinds of just amazing, wonderful things are in the world. But finding it is one thing, then getting it is another whole problem. And then it goes into the stage of, "Can I turn it into what I have in my mind?", which is a pure alchemical research-and-development stage. Like that piece, the tape, is part of a bigger body of work that was made during the height of the Iraq War. It was very clear that these works were a response to that. But just as an example, in my head, I have this thing. I want bone dust from every bone in the body. Then, I write that down as language. And then how do you go about doing that? It's a complex issue, but basically, without getting overly complex, I've been able to develop this casting technique where I take all that dust and just sort of cast it into a little block, and then I carve the object out of it. So the tape that you're seeing there is carved out of this little basic block that I made. And then, the soundtrack on it has a set of the sound of march music-- I also have a vast archive of recordings that are just as odd and strange as the materials. Have you heard of these EVP recordings before?

Pitchfork: Yeah, those are ghost voices, right?

DR: Well, these are, specifically, sounds people have stumbled upon when they were often looking for something else-- looking for a particular lost relative that will, by chance, pick up some gunfire from a war. These groups are all strange and beautiful, and they require leaps of faith and accepting what they say they're recording. How they do it is so weird and quirky, and what I love about them, too, is for some reason it's specific to audio tape. I don't know what qualities of the audio tape give you better access to the dead, but it's very strange that they believe so.

So anyway, that piece is sort of me trying to imagine the war of all wars. Like, if you could just plop soldiers from 200 years of warfare all on one battlefield, so that someone from the Civil War is marching into battle with drummers while there's machine gun fire from Vietnam shooting at them, if you could lay that all out on the same sound field. I just wanted to make this horrible soundtrack of confusion and chaos, everybody shooting at each other. And they're all in the wrong moment, and nobody knows why they're fighting anymore because they're all removed from their moment. So to stick that soundtrack, literally, in the case of a body, which is what the cassette tape shell is made of, and have the glass, the fragments of the glass inside of it, which is like this internal combustion, and then have the tape unspooling, really like the voice unspooling from the shell of a body-- yeah, it's a very political piece. It's about the horror of war and the damage on the body.

Pitchfork: Are you concerned at all that a casual consumer of this album might see the cover and not necessarily get everything that you put into it? That they'll just see, like, cassette culture nostalgia? Because the first time I saw this, that was the first thing I thought of.

DR: Well, hey, it's a great point. I encounter that in the art world all the time on a different level. Because most art viewers-- it's kind of a joke, but most of them don't even bother reading what's on the wall or what's in the catalog. After this many years, though, people know now, with my work, that the liner notes are crucial. And I say "liner notes" because I fully consider mine liner notes. I'm taking that from music vocabulary. People will search that out in the art world.

Now, this is a whole new audience. It's got a different purpose, as album art. So for me personally, as an artist, I'm fine with the process of personal discovery. I shouldn't say I'm fine with it; I'm *hoping* for it. I don't need everybody to know these things. Like, I don't have any inner anxiety over it. It's there if you want it. That's my attitude. Time and again, people stumble upon it, maybe a year later. And not everybody is even going to buy the CD. Most people who would have access to this information are only going to get it from the CD, from what I understand. I don't know that the vinyl copy is going to have the full liner notes, but even digital downloads, they're not going to have that access. So it's a quirky thing that I've just, over the years, come to peace with. But what I'm trying to emphasize is that it's almost more exciting if you stumble upon it sometime later. I really love that, because so many moments in my life of great art have happened that way. It's much more than it appears to be, and I like someone to find that themselves.

Pitchfork: Pop music plays a really strong role in a lot of what you've done. Before Yo La Tengo got in touch with you, did you ever think your work might be used as album art?

DR: You know, I can't possibly tell you how excited I am that it's finally found its way. I've finally weaseled my way into an actual album. For all these years, I've been honoring the history and legacy of album art, liner notes, the double album, b-sides, remixes-- I mean, you name it, it has found some equivalent in my sculptural universe. When I give talks about my sculpture, I always say one of my great art experiences was getting home with my new record and getting to sing along right away with it because of the lyric sheet. Or who produced it, where was it produced, all that stuff. I always felt like, why can't you get your new sculpture, and get to sing along with it right away, in the same sense? Like, why can't there be this equivalent interaction and excitement?

I only say this to emphasize how much of a pop mentality is hard-wired into my brain. Early on, I realized I was never going to be in a band. Those things weren't going to work out. I even dabbled in DJing. And one day, I just realized I could probably be a much more interesting artist if I sort of tried to break open all these new possibilities in the sculptural world by using the vocabulary of music. There's some ground, but new ground can be broken. So for me to actually get back into the covers that I've honored for all these years blows my mind. I can't believe it. I've always had an ongoing list of potential band names and song titles, so that in case I got into a band, I could contribute that right away. I couldn't contribute music, but I could contribute a great band name, or a great song title!

http://pitchfork.com/news/36087-take-cover-yo-la-tengos-popular-songs/?utm_campaign=search&utm_medium=site&utm_source=search-ac