

ART LIES

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L. Dario Robleto, *Some Longings Survive Death*, 2008; glacially released 50,000-year-old woolly mammoth tusks, 19th c. braided hair flowers of various lovers intertwined with glacially released woolly mammoth hair, carved ivory and bone, bocote, colored paper, silk, ribbon, typeset; 57 x 8 x 53 inches; installation view courtesy Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

R. *Some Longings Survive Death*, 2009; installation view, Inman Gallery, Houston; photo by Thomas R. DuBrock

HOUSTON

Dario Robleto
Inman Gallery

Drawing on Victorian mourning traditions, Dario Robleto examines human longing and grieving through nineteenth-century-looking creations that deal primarily with twenty-first-century issues. His solo exhibition *Some Longings Survive Death* unites work of this ilk from two previous West Coast exhibitions: *Heaven is Being a Memory to Others* at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle and *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Known for “remixing” materials of historical and metaphorical significance, Robleto prepared for *Human/Nature* by traveling to Waterton Glacier International Peace Park. There he recorded melting glaciers and collected the exposed remains of Ice Age creatures.

Fifty-thousand-year-old woolly mammoth tusks form the centerpiece of the shrinelike *Some Longings Survive Death*, a wall-mounted display case. The work also features nineteenth-century-style fake flowers, formed by interweaving locks of hair found in lovers’ mementoes of the period with strands of woolly mammoth hair. In the neighboring work *Words Tremble with the Thoughts They Express*, Robleto fashioned feathers out of stretched audiotape of the last recordings of now extinct birds. Robleto intertwines the natural and man-made worlds to show their interdependence; they are equally fragile and vulnerable.

Robleto’s process can be compared to DJ mixing and record producing, though he compiles physical pieces of the past rather than snippets of melodies. *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed* and *The Ark of Frailty*, each a wall-size display cabinet, can be read as “A” and “B” sides of Robleto’s response to issues of morality. *Boundary* is filled with the black-framed obituaries of supercentenarians (people who have lived to 110 years or

more), including one woman who attributed her endurance to “pickled onions and whiskey.” Optimistically showcasing the frontiers of human longevity, it’s also a reminder of death’s inescapability. *Ark* provides more hope for the future of the natural world, presenting white-framed stories about “Lazarus species,” birds and mammals once thought extinct but have been “rediscovered,” such as the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

The undead, especially the ghosts of lost loves, haunt Robleto’s installation inspired by Emma Frye, whose collection—shared with her husband—formed the basis for the Frye Museum. An ivory wedding gown and two black mourning dresses trail into a sixteen-foot path of Victorian-styled handmade paper flowers. *Demonstrations of Sailors’ Valentines* also features cut paper to express longing across time and space. Here Robleto cuts out the titles for songs that might have been written by lonely sailors’ wives, such as “Tear Stains on Ocean Waves” and “Alone, in the Tower at Dusk.”

As a potential cure for psychic loneliness, Robleto mixes alchemy with romantic idealism in *A Homeopathic Treatment for Human Longing*. A large Victorian-era traveling salesman’s display case is lined with purple velvet and filled with small vials of exotic potions made with relics from a vanishing world—million-year-old raindrops, black swan bone dust and extinct animal sounds. While for some, Robleto’s work might amount to an obsessive exploration of esoterica that potentially unhinges the physicality of his objects, unraveling them into the mere remnants of process, his sentimentality always comes across as painfully earnest. It is in this earnestness that these fragile amalgams deliver no small measure of solace.

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