

# Regine Basha interviews Dario Robleto

Dario Robleto, born in 1972, lives and works in San Antonio, Texas. His most recent solo museum exhibition *Diary of a Resurrectionist* was mounted at the FRAC in Montpelier, France. Other recent solo museum exhibitions include *A Surgeon, A Scalpel and a Soul* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and *Say Goodbye To Substance* at the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. His work was included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, and is currently at work on a two person show with Jeremy Blake at Arthouse, Austin called *The Gospel Of Lead*, and a solo show with D'amelio Terras, NY, *Fear And Tenderness In Men / The Biology Of Hope*.

Your work seems to be about testing the limits of belief; straddling both plausible scientific inquiry and implausible leaps of faith. Why are you so interested in this position?

If I had not become an artist I think I could have easily become a scientist or an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records for some strange gesture. At some point I realized art was going to allow both to happen in some interesting way. There is an obsessively rational person in me and draws comfort from that, who also desperately wants his beliefs shattered at every turn that can only come with irrational leaps of faith. I am asking a lot from art to suggest it can keep me in this strange middle state. But I do expect it to do so. As much as I love arts' ability to communicate and pose questions to others, it is still a very private affair for me. Any question I pose or leap of faith I ask of others, I have grappled with as well. I am constantly calling my faith and foundation for meaning in life into question. It is in this uncertain state that I continually find the most beautiful and profound states of humanity. In the contemporary art world it seems a strange burden to hinge your "meaning of life" desires on your artistic practice. But I do. I don't know how it can be anything less.

Your earlier work, fore grounded the power of music as a telepresence of history. Lately your work has changed focus somewhat. Can you explain why and how it has a new focus? Or what role music still has in your current work?

Music has always been a given in my work. From my early investigations I realized I needed some foundational belief to hinge everything on. I found that in sampling and DJ culture. Those early years of studying their history and then getting to the point where I felt I was actually adding on to that history, not just regurgitating it, were crucial to everything that has come since. So where the topic or reference was music or musical figures themselves in much of my early work, it is now at my core in the way I go about putting things together. Sampling is so intertwined with who I am that I don't even reflect on it anymore when I am making decisions. On another note the way I structure shows and include "liner notes" in my work is still a

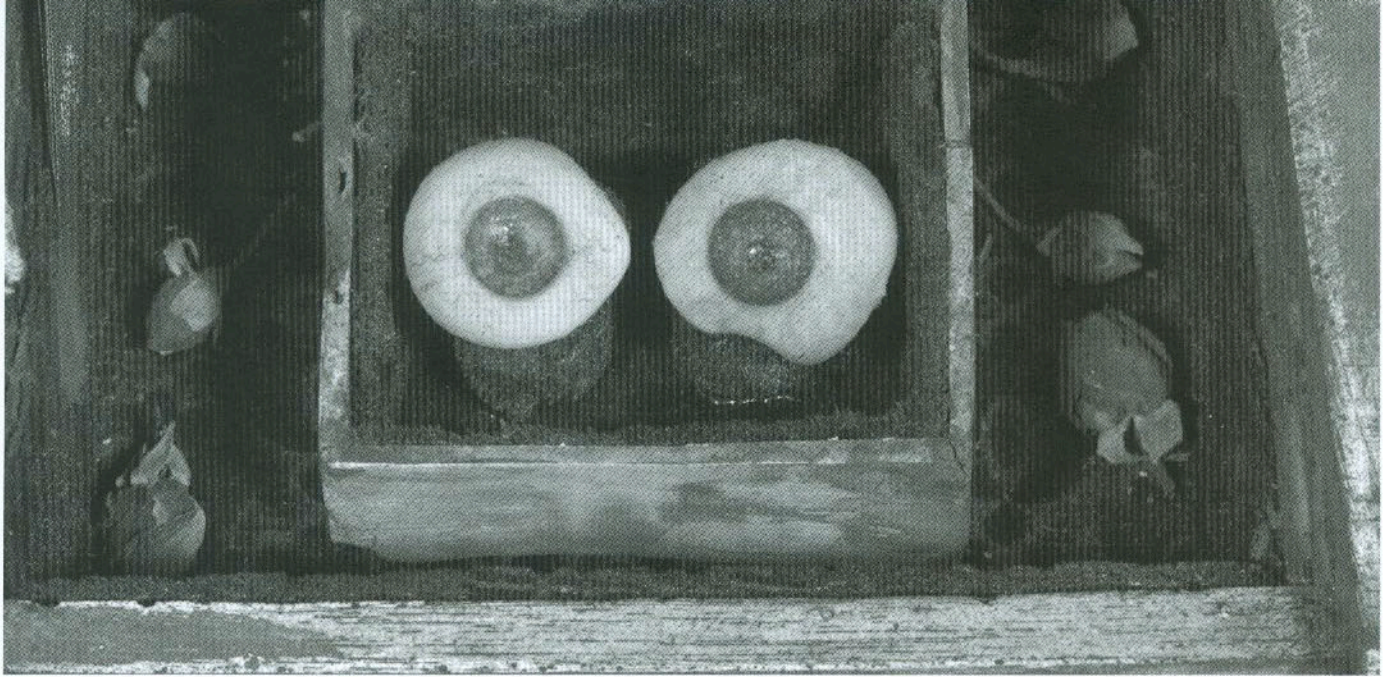
common element from that earlier period. I constantly use musical analogies when designing a show. The mixtape, the re-mix, sequencing, singles, a-sides and b-sides, double albums, production credits are still to this day vital to my formatting decisions. For example, as I grapple with the new issues art fairs are presenting to artists I consistently look to music for my answers. For me this problem is akin to the dilemma a "concept album" artist is presented with in a singles dominated market. There are musical predecessors to look to that have managed this dilemma and actually made it conceptually important to what they are.

This shift in focus in my work, while not musical on its surface, is still rooted in many musical interests. I would say one of my recurring themes has been violence and how it registers through music. From hard core drum 'n' bass to punk rock to the emotional violence of honky tonk music. While those may have been the topics themselves in earlier work several new projects again have musical history as their inspiration although the reference may not be immediate. Appalachian murder ballads, teen death songs of the late 50's and early 60's, prison choirs, recordings of professional mourners, the last known recordings of a eunuch in the Vatican chapel are all prominent themes in upcoming projects.

You recently engaged Jeremy Blake in a collaborative 're-mixing' of your 2 Trilogies (his Winchester and your Southern Bacteria) for a joint exhibition at Arthouse in Austin. To many it might be surprising that you chose to collaborate with a media artist - can you explain the connection you find in the work?

Yes, at their core I believe Jeremy's project and mine are about the legacy of violence on the American psyche. Although on the surface our projects materially seem very different, there is a common aura and tone that our topics left on our respective gestures. I have reflected and meditated on materials now for almost a decade and I feel I have the beginnings of a good grasp on what they are and can be. When I look at other artists work I have this strange sensation of being able to peer further and further down into the





Detail image of: **A Color God Never Made**

Cast and carved de-carbonized bone dust, bone calcium, military issued glass eyes for wounded soldiers coated with ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion, when heat from blast melted surrounding sand), fragments of a soldier's personal mirror salvaged from a battlefield, soldier's uniform material and thread from various wars, melted bullet lead and shrapnel from various wars, fragment of a soldier's letter home, woven human hair of a war widow, bittersweet leaves, soldier made clay marbles, battlefield dirt, cast bronze teeth, dried rosebuds, porcupine quill, excavated dog tags, rust, velvet, walnut

object to its molecular and atomic levels. I want to see how it is structured from its smallest particle up. When you consider something down to this level it makes no difference if the thing is "digital art" or more traditional material based art. I'm looking for an essence. And down at this level I really saw how our projects were similar and wanted to speak to each other besides the surface topic. In a sense I saw my work as a materialization of Jeremy's bits and streams and Jeremy helping to further pull my objects to the ephemeral state they suggest. Jeremy's work suggests a solid world underpinned by nonmaterial forces that have just as much real world consequence. In Winchester's case, how guilt and grief can become an architecture of loss. From my point of view this is a core "material" question. How does the immaterial produce a material effect on the living? So, quickly we are into those beginning leaps of faith questions we started with. What will make this project interesting is if we can show this productive contamination of each other not only on the surface topic of American violence but in a deeper material way too.

Almost like a *trompe l'oeil*, your objects mask the specific process behind their making. What do you say to those who are suspicious of your proposed art making process? Those who are compelled to know the so-called 'truth' behind it?

I think suspicion is a good thing as long as it leads

to something productive. My own doubts are often what lead me to the materials and topics I am drawn to the most. There is a great tradition of doubters that believed in a constructive approach to their doubt, not a destructive, tearing down for the sake of their own comfort. As I mentioned earlier, every artwork I grapple with is about testing the limits of belief itself, for me and hopefully in the larger public art conversation. I have always pushed myself to greater levels of production precisely to further problematize the belief issue. Many artists use the *trompe l'oeil* effect without the same kind of questioning I often receive. The problem arises, I think, when viewers are asked to come to terms with a substance they never even knew existed and then grapple with how it can take this new form I have morphed it into. How do you turn a vinyl record into a button, how can a skeleton become an audio cassette, how can extra-terrestrial lava become a cello string? When you have been invested in alchemical traditions as long as I have now, you not only know nothings impossible but fully expect to make it happen. I am just working from a completely different logic than a contemporary viewer living in a "reality" era who knows through irony that nothing really is real. To really mean what you say has suddenly become confrontational and that excites me. And one last note on the viewer who is compelled to know the "truth" of my actions, I would hope to remind them of the beauty



and romance and tradition of myth and not revealing it all that is vital to the art tradition. This larger cultural shift to being able to see everything at any moment “behind the scenes”, while maybe originally rooted in some shallow democratic impulse, has had some opposite effect and seems to now be producing cynical, suspicious doubters of the most unproductive kind who won’t believe anything unless they can see behind the curtain.

Sincerity as a work ethic has been important to your position on art. You have stated many times that you consider sincerity to be a radical approach to art (in face of irony). Could you point out what is sincere about your work? What is not sincere about it?

Yes, I believe this is an exciting time because sincerity can regain some political dimension it had lost. For a million different reasons our culture has produced a moment where to be cynical, ironic and detached is the only real stance one felt they could take. It’s also the easiest stance to make. If you don’t believe it yourself then why should anything you say matter? I think this attitude pervades in the art world. Many seem afraid to actually take a committed stance on anything. Something has to counter this trend, especially in the climate we are in now. So for me sincerity lies in a personal battle with your own beliefs. It’s about asking yourself first, before anyone else, what you have invested in whatever the topic and if you can honestly convey it to others. Sincerity is internal and personal. That you can set in motion an opinion, an artwork, whatever, and know that you have honestly grappled with those intentions. And also key here is that you can voice that intention without embarrassment or fear as to how it may be perceived by others. We have to be careful here because the word sincerity is so loaded at this point that walking around yelling how sincere you are will produce the opposite effect. In no way do I use the word or conceptualize it as a “holier than thou” stance. I am not for a sincerity that shuts down critique or is meant to condemn others. This would be hypocritical because it would be doing the exact thing I hope it combats which is the ironic, cynical stance. So in my work I can honestly always say that whatever issue I am asking a viewer to grapple with or believe, I have myself put everything on the line dealing with it too. I obviously never met Patsy Cline but do I believe she was sincere every time she opened her mouth? I certainly do. I just KNOW. When sincerity can find its way into a note or vocal range this is when it gets so

interesting to me. When sincerity can get abstract but also inspire others to do the same. I think at the end of the day this is the most generous gesture an artist can hope to give.

What did you enjoy reading this year?

I loved Jennifer Michael Hecht’s book Doubt: A History. It is a wonderful effort at properly historicizing the great tradition of doubters through history from Socrates to Jesus to Emily Dickinson. And she highlights this notion of doubt as a truly productive, even “sincere” gesture. A very important idea for today when doubt is routinely used in an unproductive, cynical way. Deeper levels of belief can actually be reached through doubt.

What role do you think art could have in society today? Or at least what role would you like to see it have?

Oh, so many. I am aiming high and truly expect art to answer the deepest possible questions of life. One fundamental one for me is does meaning reside outside humans invention of it? In other words, if every one vanished tomorrow would meaning still exist independent of us? I think the answer to this lies in materials and is in large part why I have chosen sculpture or material science as I like to say, as my passion. I also think art has a unique moment to contribute to other fields efforts at the same thing. For example I think art can contribute to some of the most profound issues occurring in modern physics today. Without getting tedious here let’s say the number one issue facing particle physicists today is that they no longer have the technology to test the theories they are coming up with. The theories have far outpaced what we are physically capable of doing. Real world testing is the foundation of science and left without this basic tool many have reverted to aesthetics as a tool of judgment. What stuns me about this development is what criteria of aesthetics are they using to move forward with their theories? Could a better understanding of the centuries now of aesthetic investigation by artists aid them in moving forward on some of the most fundamental questions of nature? To take it from macro to micro, the developments in phantom limb syndrome are no less mind blowing to me and revealing about human nature. And again, some of the most promising steps forward in this field have been with the ingenuity of cardboard and mirror objects! I would argue they rise to the level of sculpture and art and would the scientists devising these things break new ground with a more rounded understanding of art?