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What Connects Is What Bonds

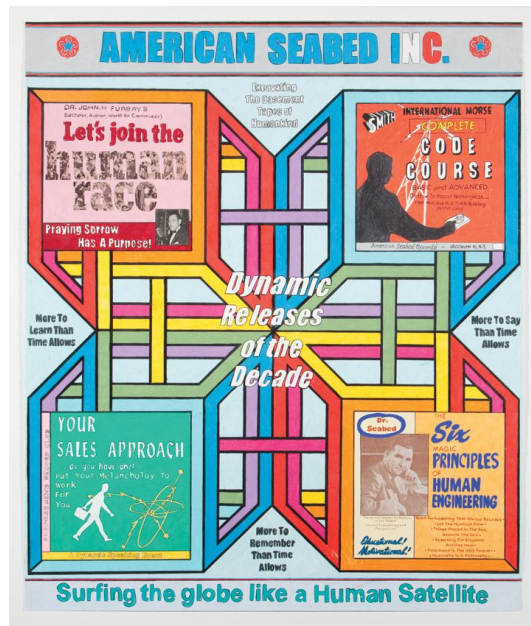
Dario Robleto 'Folks on the Fringe' at ACME.

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By David Pagel

Dario Robleto's "Folks on the Fringe" is a dazzling display of patience, humility and empathy. Even better, the Houston-based artist's exhibition at ACME is infectious. To visit it is not only to bear witness to Robleto's heartfelt convictions. It's to experience similar passions oneself. And to become more compassionate to others -- utter strangers alongside loved ones.

That sounds corny, especially for works of contemporary art based in the unsentimental tenets of image-and-text Conceptualism. But Robleto's folksy works are not beholden to the shibboleths of that style. Instead, he goes back to Conceptualism's original democratic impulses, not to mention its fearless experimentation with accessible language, to bring together the past and the present in a crescendo of eye-opening, mind-blowing, emotionally loaded insights.



All of his are works are compelling meditations on the relationships between individuals and groups. Each is a sharply focused exposition on the fluidity of identity and the various ways singular selves are interwoven into the social fabric.

"Folks on the Fringe" occupies two galleries. The first contains nine simply framed pieces that range in size from approximately 2 by 2 feet to 7 by 6 feet. Each is a stunner, its immediate impact unforgettable. And every one gets more and more interesting the longer you look, more mysterious and moving the more you relish every detail.

The largest, "Tales of Theodicies," is 20 works in one. Entirely made of cut paper, cardboard, colored pencil, foam core, glue and a bit of ribbon, this masterpiece features 20 seemingly real album covers that actually have sprung from Robleto's imagination. Each plays off of actual styles and genres, mostly 1950s jailhouse ballads, in a way that makes you think you have seen it before, even though that's impossible. Strangeness and familiarity swirl around each other, drawing you into the story.



A group of four homemade shrines, each rimmed with lovely hand-cut paper flowers in a pastel rainbow, features imaginary posters announcing small-town and neighborhood events. Rallies, dances, protests, picnics and fundraisers are announced in a terrifically vertiginous mash-up of styles, layouts and graphics. Smartly composed by Robleto, and adorned with phrases both innocent and double-edged, these pieces look old fashioned and up-to-the-minute.

Other works riff off of '60s self-help albums and 19th century DIY medical manuals. Blurring distinctions between past and present, all of Robleto's fictitious mementos make connections across time and space to create unlikely communities.

The two works in the second gallery focus on the losses felt by wives, parents and children of soldiers killed in action, from the Civil War to World War II. Here, Robleto shows himself to be a dedicated collector, gathering together actual artifacts to add to the pageantry of melancholy. Old letters, mourning dresses, dried flowers, lead bullets, seashells and the skeletons of carrier pigeons add to the poignancy of his handcrafted homages to anonymous citizens.

"Folks on the Fringe" marries Pop Art and folk art to suggest that being on the fringe is central to the experience of being an American -- and that that is where life is lived at its fullest.

ACME, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 857-5942, through Nov. 13. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.acmelosangeles.com

Photos: Top, Dario Robleto's "American Seabed Recordings." Bottom, his "Tales of Theodicies." Credit: ACME