

# Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH  
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**SARA VANDERBEEK\_Mirror in the Sky**  
**DARIO ROBLETO\_Fear and Tenderness in Men\_**

D'Amelio Terras\_525 West 22nd Street,  
Chelsea\_Through Oct. 14 (VanDerBeek) and Oct. 28 (Robleto)



Sara VanDerBeek's "Different Kind of Idol."

Whether by plan or accident, these side-by-side gallery debuts form a spirited seminar about different approaches to art-making. Subjects of debate include truth to materials, appropriation of images and other detritus, and the challenge of imbuing an artwork with meaning.

Dario Robleto's objects have a novelistic complexity that more than ever is available largely from reading, not looking. On their own, his latest labor-intensive efforts seem mawkishly sentimental. They could be macabre 20th-century assemblages, à la Bruce Conner, or actual 19th-century funeral wreaths, homemade reliquaries or folk art. They allude to American wars and their legacies of death, suffering, loss and commemoration.

But their true singularity lies in the emotionally charged materials and symbolic objects they incorporate, which are spelled out on a checklist. These include "excavated shrapnel," "mourning dress fabric," "battlefield dirt," "a WWI chaplain's metal rosary beads," "WWII surgical suture thread" and pulp made from "brides' letters to soldiers from various wars" and "soldiers' letters to sons from various wars."

These lists are moving in their mundane specificity, but also annoying. They enumerate the selective destruction of keepsakes once treasured by people who are no longer alive. In the process they reveal the artist's obsessive, almost prideful devotion and control. In the end the visual results are too familiarly antique to seem worth either the hidden effort or the destruction.

While Mr. Robleto favors opacity, Sara VanDerBeek's adventures in set-up photography and appropriation embrace transparency and disclosure. Her works have mysteries, but their effects seem constructed before our eyes and are easily disassembled; the elements remain discreet.

Ms. VanDerBeek knocks together little sculptural armatures and then photographs them, creating modernist allegories. She uses string, thin rods and cut-out bits of wood and festoons them with small objects and widely available images, often cut from books or magazines.

The images used in the photographs here include a Warhol Elvis, a Stella black painting and a bit of Brancusi's "Endless Column"; these dangle from thread, as do clusters of buttons or strands of glass beads. In "A Different Kind of Idol" this accumulation casts a shadow worthy of Synthetic Cubism. In "Ziggurat" the presentation of images takes the form of a Calder mobile. In "Extravaganza" the motifs of several black-and-white photographs are outlined with silver glitter — a tree, a dancer, a Warhol car crash — and piled up in a way that suggests a frozen bonfire or a surfeit of glowing, fading memories.

Ms. VanDerBeek's artistic DNA includes Max Ernst and Paul Outerbridge and contemporaries like Carol Bove, known for shelf sculptures that assemble meaning from carefully selected books and objects. Ms. VanDerBeek nails down her fragile ensembles with the camera, converting postmodern assemblage into an illusionistic fusion of collage and photomontage. Like Mr. Robleto's, her art has a commemorative quality. It looks back to Modernism and finds it to be diminished, a miniaturized world but not an exhausted one. ROBERTA SMITH