

## WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

# WHAT'S LEFT: *Bullets, bandages transformed*

By Tom Patterson  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

GREENSBORO — When artist Dario Robleto decided to take on the subject of war and its influence on loved ones left behind by soldiers in combat, he never considered using standard art materials.

That's not what Robleto does.

Instead, in typical fashion, he sought materials that have a direct connection to the subject, including bullet lead, shrapnel, bone dust, mourning clothes, soldiers' letters home and other material remnants of war. Over the last five years he has used these materials to create a continuing series of sculptures that he exhibits alongside detailed inventories of their components.

Seventeen of his most recent works about war's domestic influence are on view through Dec. 17 at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in a solo exhibition "Chrysanthemum Anthems." For Robleto, 34, from San Antonio, Texas, this is his second museum show in North Carolina. His first major solo exhibition was about seven years ago at Charlotte's Mint Museum of Art. It consisted of sculptures made from old vinyl record albums.

Robleto's art has attracted wide attention since his Charlotte show. In a recent slide lecture at the Weatherspoon, he discussed his art's evolution, concluding with comments on the works that make up his Greensboro exhibition and a companion show at D'Amelio Terras in New York.

To create the works in his earlier show at the Mint, Robleto adapted the sampling techniques favored by hip-hop deejays to his own visual purposes. One of those pieces was a gold-painted lipstick holder fabricated from the melted remnants of vinyl records by David Bowie, the New York Dolls and the Sex Pistols. Another was a tape of a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo that Robleto dissolved and transformed into an ersatz geode rock.

Issues of loss are crucial to Robleto's more recent work, which "explores the roles that grief, mourning, and longing, at the hands of war, have played in forming our country," according to Xandra Eden, the



ANSEN SEALE PHOTO

Dario Robleto's *Nurses Needed Now*.

Weatherspoon's curator of exhibitions.

"The potential to lose someone is one of the unspoken propellants of culture," Robleto said. "There's an overwhelming need to create using materials of destruction in a time of destruction."

Robleto said that all of the other works in his current Greensboro and New York shows originate from his piece titled *A Soul Waits for a Body That Never Arrives*, on view at the Weatherspoon. This domestic tableau centers on a miniature rocking chair fabricated from bone and bone dust. Robleto coated it with his own homemade herbal medicine, concocted to bring relief to soldiers' anxious or grieving loved ones.

Laid across the chair is a miniature embroidery sampler made from combat casualty blankets and embroidered with the sentence, "You will outlive the one you are used to loving." Robleto did the embroidery with a needle made from bullet lead.

In her essay published in the show's compact, 64-page catalog, Eden noted the resemblance of this piece and others in the series to mid-19th-century artifacts.

Robleto said that his transformations of actual historical artifacts have sometimes

been criticized as destructive, but he sees them, on the contrary, as creative acts that reflect his respect for these materials.

"To get into the work you have to get beyond the idea of altering materials as destructive," he said. "Most of this material is in an attic gathering dust and out of use. What I'm doing is not about a rebellious act of defacing something; it's about resurrecting these materials. I believe that meaning in materials can be activated through the artistic process."

The latter idea lines up with Robleto's notion of art-making as directly related to the ancient hermetic science of alchemy, which concerned itself with spiritual transformation as well as the transformation of base materials into gold.

"Alchemy has always been a great metaphor, and it's been used that way by many artists," he said. "But I made a decision several years ago to stop using alchemy as a metaphor and to be an alchemist. I believe that there is a spiritual dimension to the transformation of materials, and I'm not shy about saying that I expect that much from my art. I also expect that it (the art-making process) can transform me as well."

Robleto said that language is important to his work, and that his sculptures typically originate in stories that he writes. He said that his series of war-related pieces began with a story he wrote about an American soldier traveling through time to every battlefield on which American soldiers have fought. "The moral dilemma of the wandering soldier is that, even if you remove the politics of his own historical moment, he still has to fight, though he doesn't know why, because his own life is at stake."

In commenting on the series of works that he has spun from this original story, Robleto said, "Every one of these objects represents the worst of us and the best of us."

■ "Dario Robleto: *Chrysanthemum Anthems*" is on view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum on the campus of UNC Greensboro through Dec. 17. Phone 336-334-5770.

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