

## dario robleto

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paola morsiani



**Paola Morsiani:** In your previous body of work, you were directly addressing the history of pop music; in this most recent one you seem to focus on your own artistic experience—I am referring to the show *Roses in the Hospital*, in which you looked into the obliterating absurdity of war, followed a month later by its “Side B,” *Men Are the New Women*, with works addressing mythologies of creation.

**Dario Robleto:** I have been investigating the strategies of pop and the strategies I know well—of sampling—in parallel, trying to understand their linkage. The beauty of hip hop and sampling is rooted in the fact that a whole generation of artists, told that

everything that can be done has already been done, said: “We do not care if all we have are the scraps of the past. We are still going to make something of it.” Sampling to me is an example of human creativity pushing through and raising lots of questions along the way about authorship, originality, and so on. It also brings about a sense of revisionist history and issues of responsibility, the power an artist can or should have, and I think this is why sampling has had such difficulty translating in a complex way into culture in a larger sense. We also can’t overlook sampling’s roots in black youth’s experimentation and the resistance in America to handing



◀ **Dario Robleto** *At War With The Entropy Of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want To Come Back*, 2002, cassette: carved bone and bone dust from every bone in the body, trinitite; audio tape: an original composition of military drum marches and soldier's voices from battlefields of various wars made from E.V.P. recordings (Electronic Voice Phenomena: voices and sounds of the dead or past, detected through magnetic audio tape), metal, screws, rust, Letraset, 9.5 x 1.7 x 6.3 cm. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston.

▼ **Dario Robleto** *Men Are The New Women*, 2002, bone dust, carbon, water, extendable resin, pigments, dirt, engraved plexiglas, polyurethane, mdf, light. A female ribcage bone was ground to dust then recast and carved as a male ribcage bone; 1 of 2 from a complete set of ribcage bones, 38.1 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm. Courtesy Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris and Inman Gallery, Houston. Private collection.

revisionist power to them. My idea of sampling is that it is a philosophy rather than just a technique. It can occur at any point in the whole spectrum of the creative field—imagery, material, sound. In its larger definition, sampling is the artistry of finding things. Because you really have to imagine that something exists to have the ability to find it.

**PM:** Can you talk about *War Pigeon With a Message (Love Survives the Death of Cells)* (2002) and the idea of time travel that it involves?

**DR:** This sculpture continues my interest in issues implied by sampling and digital technology and the metaphysics of presence. If you can store it properly in a digital format, nothing is really dead anymore. The work is included in *Roses in the Hospital*, an exhibition dedicated to an imaginary soldier who is being plucked through time and deposited into different wars, so he doesn't know who he is or what he is doing. This raises philosophical and ethical problems, such as who is your enemy? In *War Pigeon With a Message*, a pigeon looks as if it has crash landed into a pile of rubble, then deteriorated down to its bones—as if the viewer has come across it fifty years later. In the world of American Civil War artifacts collectors, I found this wonderful letter to a Confederate general that is so poignant, written by a woman using very poor grammar—even her misspellings are lovely—to ask for the release of her husband, a P.O.W. Union soldier, because she loves him and he takes care of his family and farm. I have reground that letter, distilled down to a tiny scroll held up by the pigeon. The tragedy and beauty of this woman's letter and its deepest symbolic value, to me, are that it attempts to rationalize in a time of war, arguing for love. I do not know what happened: it is one letter among probably thousands, which may have ended in a happy way or not. My sculpture suspends the moment: my pigeon has that letter and it still hasn't given up on its delivery. If you read the description, the pigeon starts off in one war, it gets shot down in another one, it's identified in a third, it crash lands in a fourth, and we come across it today as art. The installation suggests that it hasn't given up. It references an optimistic view of sampling and digital time travel that asks if we can correct the wrong, can art correct history?

**PM:** I wonder if one can say that you are working against entropy, as the title of your sculpture *At War With The Entropy Of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want To Come Back* (2002) suggests? That is, against the loss of hope and ideals, the disappearance of things, and the obsolescence of technology in particular—itsself in a perpetual state

of expiration. However, although you emphasize the role of digital processes in contemporary culture—an issue you have addressed in earlier sculptures as well, such as *The Polar Soul* (1999-2000) and *The Diva Surgery* (2000-2001)—you have used these techniques only sporadically to actually make your work. *At War With the Entropy of Nature* is a sculpture of a cassette tape carved out of a small block you made from bone dust, containing a magnetic tape.

**DR:** The materials I use may be linked to philosophical issues of preservation and hope, but they remain rooted in a physical and





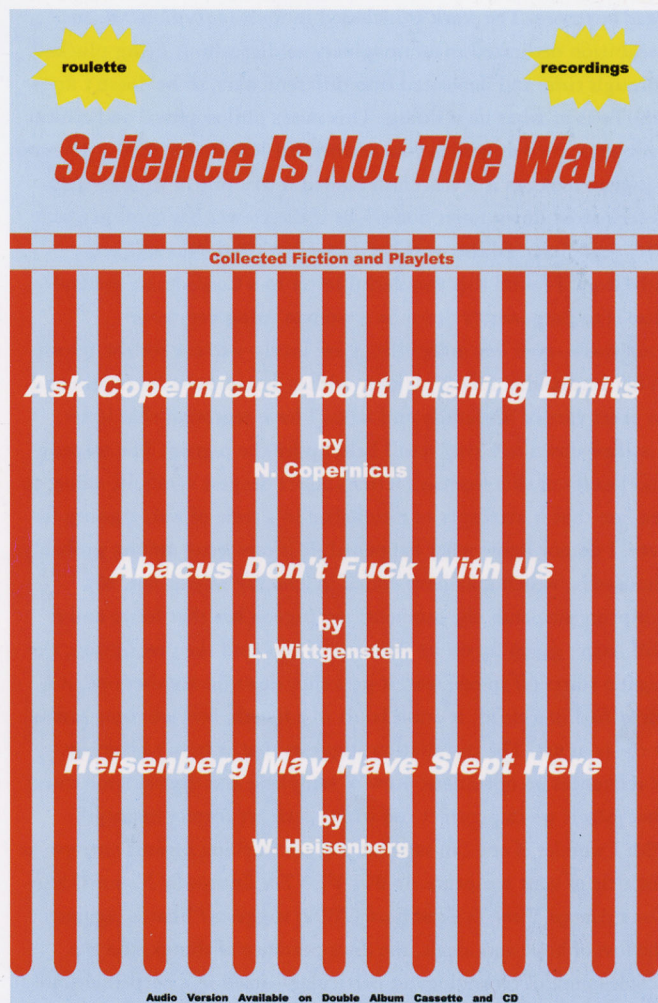


▲ **Dario Robleto** *Deep Down I Don't Believe In Hymns*, 2001, military-issued blanket (U.S.-Indian Wars, c. 1862), infested with hand-ground vinyl record dust from Neil Young and Crazy Horse's "Cortez the Killer," and Soft Cell's "Tainted Love," 45.7 x 40.6 x 6.3 cm. Courtesy ACME, Los Angeles. Collection Barry Sloane and Michael Duncan.

► **Dario Robleto** *Science Is Not The Way*, 2001, archival iris print on paper, 43.1 x 27.9 cm. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston.

►► **Dario Robleto** *Your Moonlight Is In Danger Of Shining For No One*, 2000-2001, custom made maple box, glass and hand ground trinitite (glass produced during the first nuclear test explosion [July 16, 1945] when heat from blast melted surrounding sand near impact site), quartz, velvet, engraved brass label, object size: 12.7 x 43.2 x 12.7 cm; pedestal size: 124.4 x 48.2 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston. Private collection, Houston.

handcrafted quality. I make my work from products that have already degraded, and there is a tension in this. Bone dust, for instance, is a very powerful metaphor. It deals with the scientific question of whether we will need our bodies anymore one day, and what that means for artworks and museum collections. The imagery of the body turning into dust is common in poetry. In *At War With the Entropy of Nature*, I wanted to really pull it out of the world of poetry and say, "Here is the real object of that happening." If you see someone in a pile of dust in front of you, that changes things quite a bit, and I like that tension. In this work, the cassette is made entirely from carved bone, accounting for every bone in the body. The audiotape is an original composition I made using Electronic Voice Phenomenon (E.V.P.) recordings of the dead made by members of psychic groups. What intrigues me about E.V.P. is that the technology of magnetic audiotapes has taken the exclusivity out of psychic perception; it is a democratic technique of talking to the dead. It is such a peculiar







subculture, one that on the surface seems morbid but is hopeful in that they believe that hearing from their lost loved ones is not lost, if only for the right equipment and patience. E.V.P. recordings take the expression “ghost in the machine,” used with digital equipment, to a weird extreme. I have made my own composition of drum marches and screaming soldiers from the E.V.P. recordings of various historical battlefields. I have literally sampled the sounds of the past. The tape looks as if it got pulled out of some explosion, that those voices of the dead are literally installed in the shell of the body of a human being, unspooling from the bones.

**PM:** Can you elaborate on *Men Are the New Women* (2002)?

**DR:** *Men Are the New Women* is the reversal of two thousand years of history. It consists of a single ribcage bone, one hundred percent female, but male in form, that looks as if it has been lying in the ground for two thousand years. Finding it involves a complete rethinking of everything. So, I propose that if we run ourselves down, through our aggression, maybe we should start over and try the other way this time—although I am not suggesting that it is going to be any better. But there is something to be said for even needing to try again. The piece is related to *Our Sin Was in Our Hips* (2002) and *Atheist with a Twist* (*I’m Not Sure About Magic*) (2002). *Our Sin* refers to the myth of “Elvis (Presley) the Pelvis” who was thought to cause hysteria in his female audience. I made these hips, male and female, from my

parents’ rock ‘n’ roll record collections, shown in the act of reproduction. I am intrigued by the idea that in American popular culture sin was placed on a whole youthful generation’s bodies because of their musical interest, and that I, and many in my generation, were conceived in those circumstances. I am implying that we were born from these “sinful” states of minds. Music was compelling our parents to be sexual creatures in a way that no one knew what to do with. I was born on overthrown religious ideas. In *Atheist with a Twist*, I commissioned a wand from a practicing witch and presented it together with my own copy. I am intrigued by this parallel: I think my wand is as delicately and sincerely crafted as hers, but mine is never going to have the magical weight hers will probably have, even though a lot of my work is about magic. I like this transference of my power as an artist through the wand into my artwork. I am pondering on the line after which my work starts becoming art. My power as an artist to magically remake something into more than it was is what she does every day as a witch, but her effort is not considered art. My role has diminished over the years, however, as has the witch’s. We are both not expected to change the world anymore, but somehow we still have that baggage suggesting we could. This is my rebuilding.

Dario Robleto was born in 1972 in San Antonio, Texas, where he lives and works.