

ARTFORUM

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Dario Robleto

D'AMELIO TERRAS

Dario Robleto's sculptures are reliquaries, totems whose power derives from the authenticity of the stuff of which they are made. He has, for example, cast a male rib from female-rib dust, and presented a pair of interlocking pelvises formed from melted-down rock-'n'-roll albums that belonged to his father and mother. His recent show "Fear and Tenderness in Men" was the artist's first solo exhibition in New York. Coming as a coda to an ongoing project begun in 2003, it dealt with soldiers' relics and survivors' mourning rituals. Installed against walls the color of dried blood, the seventeen small assemblages telegraphed an elegiac, faux-nineteenth-century mood. They had obviously been molded from found bits and pieces and looked like skillfully made but macabre craft projects. But the works did not testify overtly to their material sources; it took a perusal of the checklist—in effect a work in its own right—to connect the homespun sculptures to the dreamlike realism Robleto investigates.

Gathered from specialist collectors, the seventeen works center on American Civil War and First World War memorabilia. Robleto combines these with mineral, botanical, and occasionally artificial additives, which are then melted, ground, macerated, stitched, carved, and otherwise transmogrified. The gorgeously suggestive checklist comprises what Robleto calls his "liner notes." As in any conceptual practice, language here stands in for operations and values that the viewer cannot see. Robleto reports, in fact, that before he envisions an object or image, he settles on the words—not only catalogues of ingredients, but titles and backstories—that will frame it. He also consistently situates his work in the context of turntablists' sampling and alchemists' transformations. Robleto believes in the transmigration of elemental energies; what if matter really can soak up touch and intention, retaining it regardless of outward form? It's an appealing if fantastical proposition. The problem is that the reconstituted objects—in this show, at least—are ultimately less compelling than the mysterious, labor-intensive processes that reportedly went into making them.

A case in point is *Fear and Tenderness in Men / A Color God Never Made* (2004–2005). On a richly grained wooden pedestal stands a bone-colored, jewelry-box-size chest of drawers. Beside it lie two appliquéd mats. The drawers are open. Inside, on a lining of plum-colored velvet, rest such treasures as might be found among an aged widow's souvenirs: a misshapen, mismatched pair of glass eyes, a broken mirror, a burnt match, a comb that looks like it might be made of ivory, a set of teeth cast in dull metal, balls of clay, some dried flowers. The viewer registers nostalgic fictions and grisly grief, along with admiration for Robleto's mastery of

fabrication. The piece feels gothic, precious, and, as such, perhaps too easy. Then comes the fine print. *Fear and Tenderness* consists of "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 the 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."

A suggestive little poem that takes the visceral as the evanescent, the inventory is odd and beautiful, as is the concept of Robleto remixing and fusing these haunted elements. One might wish that the resulting art-things would move beyond the vocabulary of nineteenth-century sentimentality—which, after all, is inherent in Robleto's found objects prior to his transformative attentions. But he still spins a fascinating story.

—Frances Richard

Dario Robleto, *Fear and Tenderness in Men / A Color God Never Made*, 2004–2005, mixed media, 51 x 48 x 21".

