

John Lowther on Dario Robleto

Fifteen years ago or thereabouts, in a Kathmandu bookshop I purchased a novel by Philip K. Dick called *The Eye in the Sky*. Naturally I have forgotten most of it, and in all likelihood what I do recall – the disturbance of something uncanny – has probably shifted during occasional recollections over the intervening years. But lately this uncanny moment, this sense of having been disturbed fifteen years ago has resurfaced in my memory time and again as I have contemplated the work of Dario Robleto¹. I could have reread the book, there has been enough time, but if my memory has changed in the intervening years I would rather not *correct* it just yet. Instead I would like to explore the connection that I feel there but that I don't entirely understand.

In the novel-of-my-memory (with all the mutation that entails), a group of characters have been injured in an explosion but they don't know it. They are all, in the book's *reality*, in a kind of stasis while medicos and machines are working to heal them. Yet by some manner of science fiction artifice these injured people still think that they are all together, unharmed and where they had been before the blast. Instead of any awareness of the trauma that they've suffered they find that *their world is changing inexplicably* around them. Their surroundings are aging, rather rapidly, in reverse. I don't mean that they are getting younger or newer, instead not only is their world moving backward in time, it is also being more aged and decrepit. A point is reached when matter itself seems to fall prey to this combined force of chronological regression and entropic decay and solid objects, suddenly weaken and turn to dust in one's hands. It is this crumbling to dust, a moment of uncanniness, of no longer knowing *what the world is made of*, that is for me the intersection with Robleto's art.

Consider his work, *The Melancholic Refuses To Surrender*. If one's initial contact with this work is purely visual, as mine was, and as I assume it will be for most who see the actual work in a gallery or who look at it online, it will seem rather uncomplicatedly to be an old, rather worn pair of boxing gloves hanging from their laces. This is how they appear down to the smallest detail, and those details have such convincing realism that I had no second thoughts at all about *what* this object was. I had a pair of leather boots once whose smooth outer surface was cracked and peeled away here and there in precisely this fashion. The images of these gloves show the same creases that the boxing gloves that I had growing up did after I'd had and used them for a few years. One of several detail shots shows the label on the wrist where a name has been written, "J. Johnson." The name is too large for the small label and so the final "on" crosses over onto the glove's surface, where the ink, though readable, did not take as well on the leather surface. Something about this particular detail image troubled

me and I found that I returned to it frequently unable to suss out just what it was that bothered me. Faint bells were ringing in my memory but I couldn't draw out their source.

At this point I had already noted the title but had not really been struck by it. Boxers are fighters, fighters fight on, refusing to surrender. Refusing to surrender evokes the image of the fighter, stumbling around, perhaps delirious – a technical knock out waiting to be realized. Potential notes of steadfast heroism or rugged individualism aside, this is a rather melancholy outlook if applied to life generally. I had the sense that I *got it* but that the title didn't really open up or enrich the meaning of the work for me, even as I liked it in a poetic sense. It was only after all of this that I looked at the list of materials, fully expecting to read something like "one pair



The Melancholic Refuses To Surrender

Cast and carved bone charcoal and melted vinyl record of Leadbelly's "The Titanic", broken male hand bones, ground coal, horse hair, dirt, pigments, lead salvaged from the sea, string, rust
11" x 14" 5"
2003

of vintage boxing gloves” and perhaps paint for touch-up. Instead I found this rather extraordinary list;

Cast and carved bone charcoal and melted vinyl record of Leadbelly’s “The Titanic”, broken male hand bones, ground coal, horse hair, dirt, pigments, lead salvaged from the sea, string, rust

The Melancholic Refuses To Surrender is not the most visually arresting of Robleto’s works and it is surely an accident of my own personal history that as I scrolled down through the images of his work on this site that it caught my eye and was my point of entry to what makes Dario Robleto’s art so uncanny, and so far as I know, totally unique. Still, looking at this list of materials my initial reaction was simply, *What?* This was followed by a blatant connection, boxing and broken bones. I also noted the links between the Titanic and “lead salvaged from the sea” and perhaps also “rust” but the logic of these connections or their relation to a pair of boxing gloves was still opaque. And of course now, could I say that this was a pair of boxing gloves at all? My earlier *What?* was followed by a much more insistent *How?*

A few years ago I met a poet who’d had a job as a research assistant to a scholar of some sort who was trying to find proof of an hypothesis regarding the readymade of Marcel Duchamp. The hypothesis? That Duchamp did not simply purchase the urinal that became “Fountain” and that instead he painstakingly and secretly manufactured it and many, perhaps all of his other readymades. This poet, though sharing my skepticism, said that there had been no way as yet to confirm who had made the urinal and that it differed in various ways from every urinal of the time for which they had catalog or manufacturer’s information. Be that as it may I suspected that what was driving the search was a desire for “Fountain” to *not* be a mass produced and appropriated object renominated as art. It would certainly be fascinating if it could be proven that Duchamp had not only gotten away with nominating a urinal as art but that behind this double cross was a *triple* cross. I don’t believe it, but it is amusing to consider. It occurs to me that this hoped-for triple cross is very much akin to what Robleto achieves in *The Melancholic Refuses To Surrender* and so far as I can tell in *all* of his works.

To return to the work; I thought I knew what I was looking at. Then it seemed that I did not and suddenly I really *needed* to know— what is this made of, *really?* I really wanted to believe it. I was amazed at the possibility that it could be true. But I kept second guessing it, looking at other pieces like *Nihilist With A Dream* which appears to be a violin and a fife in a case on a chair next to a music stand with sheet music on it. I stared fitfully at the violin itself and scanned the list of materials which reads, “Violin and fife: cast and carved dehydrated bone calcium, decarbonized bone dust from every bone in the body, bone charcoal, bone oil, collagen, ground ivory, antler velvet, dirt from various battlefields, melted shrapnel and

bullet lead.” I noted the absence of wood, looked back at the picture, looked back at the materials. Is it possible that this charming and poetic catalog of ingredients is truly what this seeming violin and fife combo is in fact composed of? I doubted it. Thinking again of the boxing gloves I pondered just how many melted records you would have to mix with these other ingredients to make something of this size and how they would be made to hold together, to become solid. All of this doubt wanted an outlet and explanation, and I began to reconsider. What if the list of materials was not a literal list at all but a set of symbolic contents, a sort of code or guide into the work. This sounds plausible and while it does void some of the uncanny effect of believing in the list of the work’s material components it at last opened up an avenue of research. Now as it turns out I was completely wrong but it did take me on an interesting set of tangents and again, though wrong about these being *merely* symbolic contents, nothing I learned failed to enrich my understanding of this work.

The easiest point of entry seemed to be Leadbelly’s “The Titanic.” And sure enough a google search brought up two variant sets of lyrics and reminded me of who Jack Johnson was. Here is the verse of the song that seems the most pertinent to the work;

Jack Johnson want to get on board,
Captain said, “I ain’t hauling no coal,”
Cryin’, “Fare thee, Titanic, fare the well,” ²

It seems that this event is apocryphal, but as the song and the legend tell it, Johnson was refused admittance to the Titanic on account of his race, perhaps one of the only times when such discrimination benefitted him in any way. But in this verse we see the link to the “ground coal” in the list of materials. The “broken male hand bones” also made me think of how Johnson once, late in his life and long after his days as the 1st Black Heavyweight Champion, fought and defeated a young heavyweight contender in spite of having a broken arm. Reading through some of many online biographies of Johnson reveal another, possibly fictional story from his youth, that while working in a stables a horse fell on him and broke his leg, could this be the link to the “horse hair” in the materials list? Stretching a bit I am tempted to think that “pigments” may allude, rather modestly, to the central divisive issue surrounding Johnson throughout his life; race. This leaves but two ingredients that remain suggestive but elusive, “string” and “dirt.” There are strings visible in the images, these being the laces of the gloves, but if this catalog is as I had hypothesized, a list of symbolic as opposed to actual material ingredients, then surely sufficient scrutiny of Johnson’s biography would reveal some significance to both string and dirt.

What still troubled me though, were the opening words of the list of materials “Cast and carved,” that is, if these are mere

symbolic ingredients acting as a cipher of sorts for the work, what could “cast and carved” denote? This seemed especially pertinent as it fronts so many of the lists of materials for other works. Fortunately for me, it was at this stage of my ruminations that I made contact with Dario Robleto and was able to ask him about all of this and learn that my hypothesis about the materials was false. In fact, Robleto does construct his works from precisely what ingredients he later lists – this in no way denies them the symbolic determinations that I had followed – but it boggles the mind nevertheless. It was so hard for me to really grasp that even after having been told I still needed to ask another qualifying question, “So, then are you saying that these are absolutely the only material ingredients”? Yes. These and no more.

At this point I returned to the detail image of the label where “J. Johnson” had been written. Now that I know what these are made of, even if I can’t imagine how they were made, I can see what troubled me before about this detail shot. The upper left corner of the label seems to merge with the “leather” of the glove. It is a small thing and eluded me all through the first weeks I spent looking at the work. But now, knowing what I know it feels like a tiny indication that things are not what they seem.

Again I wondered at the title. Who is the melancholic referred to? Is it Johnson? Nothing in the biographies that I have seen thus far suggest him to have been a melancholy man, quite the opposite in fact. Most pictures show him smiling. He smiled in the face of large crowds hurling racial slurs at him. He was a famous rake and was romantically linked to Mae West, Lupe Velez and Mata Hari among scores of others both black and white. He held three patents one of which was for an adjustable wrench. He had his own jazz band, owned a Chicago nightclub and acted on stage. And evoking a comparison with Nerval and his lobster, Johnson reputedly walked his pet leopard on a leash while sipping champagne. None of these things rules out melancholy, but somehow the term doesn’t seem to fit Johnson. Johnson seems too expansive too active too alive to be called a melancholic. Now the label took on another meaning for me. It, the label, was too small for Jack Johnson, both his name and this artfully simulated label on a pair of gloves and also all the labels and slurs hurled at him during his career bear the same relation. The reality of this man was too great for the simplistic ways he was understood in the press. Did I mention he played the bass viol?

When Johnson was at last allowed to fight for and win the world heavy weight title, racist white america became enraged. Later, when he defended himself against the retired white champion who had previously refused to fight him on account of his race, Johnson’s victory and especially the films of the bout were held to be the cause of race riots and black and white violence all across the country, violence whose main victims were black. If this is not grotesquely obvious societal misattribution, what is?

Perhaps then this melancholic who refuses to surrender is not Johnson but the african american (or any ethnicity) systematically subjugated by “whites” in this country? Is this melancholy then an enforced one? The answer to that is obvious. Johnson offered hope to black americans during one of their darkest times post-slavery, hope for an end to enforced melancholy, and he did it on his own terms, and mostly with a smile. Leadbelly’s “Titanic” has Johnson somehow hearing the collision that would sink the Titanic and dancing as he cries out “Fare thee, Titanic, fare the well.”

This information amassed, I still do not feel as if I have fully untangled or truly accounted for everything this work offers. Further information from Robleto strengthens this intuition, as, unlike many artists I know, he doesn’t simply collect nifty items to later combine them, when inspiration arrives to suggest how they might be used. Instead each of his pieces begins as language alone – a title, an idea, a list of ingredients and I know not what else – then as the work grows this text reduces to the title and the materials used as the rest of it serves to generate the object. I see this as a unique turn on the implications of Pound’s famous “dichten - condensare” (usually rendered as “to write is to condense”) and Robleto appears more and more to me as a poet of materials.

Ultimately what Robleto accomplishes is something akin to what the dream accomplishes in Freud’s account. The elements of the dream appear to us like a rebus, and it is only by doggedly chasing the associations of each of them that we can begin to gain access to the significance of the dream and the contents of our unconscious. Robleto’s genius is to have literally and materially concretized this process, consciously, so that instead of searching our own associations or needing (impossible) access to his before being able to tease out the layers of signification in his amazing complex and condensed works, he has instead, with a sensitive eye for issues of race, class and social suffering directed us to our common if all too under-appreciated history.

¹ Virtually all of my experience of Robleto’s work has been through the two sites listed below. Both are wonderful presentations and I urge anyone reading this to have a look at them. The piece that consumes virtually all of my attention in this essay, *The Melancholic Refuses To Surrender* is found on the Acme Los Angeles site. <http://www.praz-delavallade.com/dariorobleto/expo2004.html> & <http://www.acmelosangeles.com/artists/dr/dr.html> Click on any of the thumbnails to bring up a scroll that contains larger shots of all of works.

² These two variant sets of lyrics are found at <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/titan13.html>