

the Stranger

Visual Art

Death: The Remix

Dario Robleto Grinds the Bones of History

by Jen Graves

June 5, 2008



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DARIO ROBLETO *Detail of An Instinct Toward Life Only a Phantom Can Know (2007–2008), 19th-century wedding dress, mourning dresses, cut colored paper, homemade paper (cotton, ground passion flower), 19th-century mourning fabric and ribbon, cast black amber, carved ivory, silk, tulle, typeset.*

In plain terms, Dario Robleto takes amazing things and performs operations on them. Did you know that the first nuclear test explosion instantly melted the sands of the New Mexican desert into glass? Did you know there are million-year-old blossoms? Did you know that French women scoured World War I battlefields for wedding bands when there was nothing else left of the grenaded bodies? Did you know the longest-married couple in history made a recording about their love before they died?

Robleto specializes in finding these things. He is an artist, but half his time is spent researching history and collecting its detritus. (A network of nerds helps him.) Once he gets the precious material, he changes it. He grinds bones to dust, pulverizes love letters, melts vinyl records and cassette tapes, makes casts of bitten bullets and DIY prosthetic limbs, and brews homemade remedies from plants and powders.

These are the materials of his final works, usually sculptures with many parts resting inside vitrines with wall labels that are also part of the art. Often, Robleto writes the labels before the pieces are made. The ingredients are dictated not by their appearance but by the story or song he wants them to conjure when they're read.

Looking is not the principal way information is exchanged in Robleto's art. It is a faith-based art. You will not necessarily *see* ground pituitary gland, even though it is in the list of materials, and you will certainly not see any certification that it's *actual* ground pituitary gland.

But the elaborately composed wall label is the artist's claim to the truth of his materials—he says it's important to him that everything is precisely what it says it is in his art—as well as his testament to our fetishization of origins, of smoking guns, of timed starts. The artist's mind is usually where art begins, but not here. Here, art begins in the magically real, in things so unbelievable that they vex the whole concept of the real while affirming it at the same time. Robleto unburies the true pedestals of art: life, which, yes, is separate from art, and loss. In Robleto's work, art must have access to the real to survive. Art is an extension of life, an address to loss, and nothing without those. That's a platform I can get behind.

For Robleto, who grew up in San Antonio raised by his grandmother and his mother—his mother ran first a honky-tonk and then a hospice—the wounds and the losses are everywhere, and so are all stripes of nurses and doctors. Robleto thinks of himself as DJ, not RN, but both labels apply. His main subjects are popular music and war, his methods are alchemical and medical, and the result is a practice furiously opposed to the self-satisfaction of irony and in full agreement with the technique of the remix.

Robleto rose to national prominence about a decade ago. His first survey, *Alloy of Love*, kicks off its tour at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle this spring. Concurrently on display at the Frye is a commissioned installation by Robleto mixing new sculptures with the art collection and history of museum founders Charles and Emma Frye. The Fries left no children behind, only a collection of paintings—plenty featuring children, Robleto noted when he did his research.

That show, only appearing in Seattle, is called *Heaven Is Being a Memory to Others*. It's worthy of its own book, not only because it is of historical importance to Seattle and will not recur, but also because of its sheer power.

Ultimately it is a collaboration led by Robleto and including curator Robin Held. Each room represents one or more implied points of view: lover, soldier, grieving woman, bride, salesman peddling life improvements. The sight lines and the shadows cast by the temporary walls are as intense and revealing as the objects they connect. This is what is really meant by artist-as-curator.

Alloy of Love, the survey exhibition, is set up to address the commissioned show through the passageways of the small museum, but it acts most effectively as a separate distillation of Robleto's emotional and political abilities and sympathies—political not because of anything overt, but because of a documentarian-like insistence on actuality and engagement. The methods couldn't be more different, but the project is not so far from Donald Judd's, or any number of minimal, pop, and conceptual artists addressing the loss between what is represented and what is.

Robleto once folded the candy wrappers from a Felix Gonzalez-Torres installation into origami airplanes for a work of art, and Gonzalez-Torres is the artist he's most influenced by and associated with. But his loosely assembled bits remind me, paradoxically, of Tony Smith's masterwork of metaphor and fact, mythic innards and human scale—his six-foot black cube called *Die*.

The difference is, Robleto wants to heal, and the expression of this desire in his work takes on the character of the one treatment neither science nor superstition has a hold on: the placebo effect. Robleto completed one of his first artworks, before he started making sculpture, on the block where he grew up, sneaking around at night replacing the lightbulbs on people's porches with slightly higher-wattage ones. People wondered why things were a little brighter. ★

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