

Dario Robleto's beat goes on at the Menil

Depths of human heart meet science and art in solo exhibit

By Molly Glentzer

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When conceptual artist Dario Robleto sat beside his dying grandmother nine years ago, he instinctively put a hand on her chest to feel closer to her. She was 80 and in hospice care, so thin and frail it felt like her heart was in his hands. By chance, Robleto felt her last five heartbeats.

"It did all these things to my mind about time and love and space," Robleto said. "I needed to understand what had just happened, from the physiology all the way to the poetry."

That is the personal dimension behind Robleto's first solo show at the Menil Collection, "The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed," although only the title hints at it.

The exhibition tells a multifaceted story, and much of it springs from Houston. With a humanistic spin, it bridges the history of the artificial heart, the quest to put men into space and exploration in the deep sea.

Calling "Boundary" a sculptural installation doesn't fully explain the nuanced work of the soulful Robleto, 41, one of Houston's most important living artists. He's also a historian, a scientist, a researcher, a poet and a storyteller.

He's had other solo museum shows but "Boundary" is a watershed, said Houston art dealer Kerry Inman, who has represented Robleto 15 years. "For many of us, the Menil is a shrine, a temple built on the love of art and belief in the artist's view, so we look at the work presented there a little differently," she said.

Growing up in San Antonio, Robleto spent more time than an average 6-year-old hanging out near a honky-tonk's jukebox. He played football in high school and studied biology after that. His epiphany came at around age 22. He'd moved to Miami to live with a Nicaraguan father he barely knew. Depressed, Robleto stayed locked in his room a lot. Then one day his father, an avid Beatles fan, left him alone while - inexplicably - "St. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" repeated on a CD player.

"It sounds crazy, but I opened the door and sat in front of the speakers and wondered what was happening to me," Robleto said. He wanted pastels and blank paper. He knew he needed to become an artist. He returned home and earned a bachelor's of fine arts degree. His art drew critical praise from the start.

"No one works harder. And once he is pursuing a story, nothing gets in his way as he digs into the backstory," said Kerry Inman.



Dave Rossman/Freelance

Houston artist Dario Robleto placed Max Ernst's sculpture "Man With a Fluttering Heart" with objects of his own making, including sculptures that appear to be antique books, in "The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed" at the Menil Collection. Houston artist Dario Robleto placed Max Ernst's sculpture "Man With a Fluttering Heart" with objects of his own making, including sculptures that appear to be antique books, in "The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed" at the Menil Collection.

A research odyssey

All of Robleto's talents gel in "Boundary." He teases new ideas from seemingly shopworn themes, engages experts in esoteric fields, finds metaphorical value in materials no one else would consider - and then turns it all into something exquisite and poignant to look at.

After three years of intense study and studio work, Robleto has transformed a chamber in the Menil's east wing into a mini-museum where science and art, the past and the future collide.

He traces the show's genesis to a day in 2011 when he was an art-research fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., studying the Liotta-Cooley heart introduced in Houston in 1969. Holding the historic device, he remembered a lovely heartbeat story from one of his favorite recordings, the Golden Record made in 1977 for NASA's Voyager 1 space probe.

Pressed on gold-plated copper, the record contains images, languages, music and nature sounds that could provide a portrait of Earth if it's ever found by beings who figure out how to play and interpret it. Creative director Ann Druyan included an electronic signature from her own EKGs and EEGs. She was engaged to the project's leader, the astronomer Carl Sagan, and she focused on him while she was hooked to the monitors.

Robleto saw that act as art. Druyan's heartbeat and brain waves are an abstraction of human love, he said. He also pondered a missing prelude: Who first recorded a human heartbeat, and how?

New territory

Commissioned by the Menil and University of Houston's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, "Boundary" includes public talks with experts whose research has influenced Robleto, including Druyan.

"The experience of listening to him talk about the work is a whole other milieu," said Mitchell Center director Karen Farber. He first lectured about the project at the university two years ago.

At certain times weekly, visitors to the show can don a cap that collects data for a study by UH researcher Jose Contreras-Vidal, who will measure the brain's response to art.

Robleto's works alone could keep an inquisitive mind engaged for hours.

"Things Placed in the Sea, Become the Sea," a large tabletop piece about looking for signs of life, provides a visual vocabulary for the rest of the show. "Our desire to explore has been fueled by the mysteries of the deep sea, deep space and the interior of the body," Robleto said.

The work could be an altar, a launching pad or a barnacle-crusting offshore drilling platform. The objects on top could fill several Victorian curiosity cabinets. Among them are sea urchins, tiny space-probe models, Thomas Edison-style lights, orbs under glass, round mirrors, small prints of newspaper clippings and miniature magazine covers with sensationalistic headlines like "He lives!."

Robleto often casts melted vinyl LPs into intricate constructions. In this piece, he's used LPs salvaged from the ocean floor (he knows people who find such things) to make spiny sea-urchin sculptures. They represent nature's earliest attempts to probe surroundings, he said *Their shapes are remarkably similar to Sacred-Heart icons and NASA's antennae-spiked devices.*

"Fossilhood Is Not Our Forever," the show's other major piece, employs prehistoric whale ear bones. On tiny poles above elevated concrete cubes that look like they're floating, the fossils are connected by droopy "power lines" made of stretched audiotape. The tape contains heartbeat recordings. White coral grows beneath the concrete.

The show also features three other installations of impeccably grouped objects that explore man's attempts to capture the essence of the heartbeat visually and audibly. Many things that appear to be

historical artifacts are painstakingly made constructions - including "books" with fanciful titles and open pages Robleto has imagined on vintage paper, daguerreotypes of 19th-century patients and small prints of the first images of a human pulse, which are about the size of microscope slides. Robleto calls these zigzag drawings "tracings" or "pulse portraits."

"I like to make things that blur the line, based on real history but with my toys," he said.

He's made a beautiful boxed set of custom-cut, 5-inch vinyl records, "The Pulse Armed With a Pen (An Unknown History of the Human Heartbeat)." It contains 30 recordings of the human heartbeat made from about 1853 to the present. Five tracks play through headphones, including Druyan's electronic signature, the earliest recorded fetal heartbeat and the earliest pulse recorded as a woman gazed at her husband.

"That had to happen for Ann and Carl to have their day. I'm sure no one's ever connected the dots to this narrative this way before," Robleto said.

Technological challenges

No one before Robleto translated early human-pulse imagery into sound. The earliest heartbeat renderings predate Edison's invention of sound recording and playback technology by about 20 years. At that point, scientists wanted to visualize the pulse, not hear it.

German physiologist Karl von Vierordt was the first, introducing the sphygmograph in 1853. His 200-pound contraption operated by a lever attached to a subject's wrist. At the drawing end, a stylus made from a single strand of von Vierordt's hair carved small, sinuous wave marks onto a moving strip of paper coated with soot from a candle flame.

"Just on a sculptural level, it's kind of amazing. It is remarkable he got anything at all," Robleto said. "An artist hopes every line he makes means something. These lines really meant something."

With help from 21st-century technology and sound historian Patrick Feaster, Robleto translated von Vierordt's tracings into audio form. (Feaster, who joins Robleto for a public talk in October, has also resurrected 19th-century music from wax cylinders.) Through the show's headphones, the reading von Vierordt took in 1854 of his wife, Pauline von Vierordt, now sounds like a fast heartbeat.

Even more haunting is the whir of a continuous-flow artificial heart introduced in 2011 by Drs. O.H. "Bud" Frazier and Billy Cohn of the Texas Heart Institute. The late Craig Lewis, who received the first beat-less heart, was the first human to live a few weeks with no pulse. Frazier has said that one of the biggest stumbling blocks to creating a mechanical heart is the assumption that it must beat like a natural one.

"It's an amazing turning point in this quest to build a heart, which is more difficult than anyone first imagined," Robleto said. But he also wonders, "What is the poetic price for a beat-less heart?"

Robleto also explores how pulse-measuring devices evolved. The players include French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey, who in 1865 recorded the first sound wave from a beating heart and Italian physiologist Angelo Mosso, who in the 1870s took the first "cerebral pulses" with his new brain-imaging technology. Mosso's breakthrough subject, the anonymous peasant Caterina X, had part of her skull removed because syphilis caused rapid decay in her bones.

Robleto pointed to a small portrait of Caterina and his print of the blippy recording Mosso made as she happened to see a human skull on his bookshelf. "Some philosophers would argue that what makes us human is being aware of our mortality. This is the first time somebody visualized it," he said. "Caterina, to me, is as important as any of the scientists who helped develop the machines."

Early researchers also wanted to know how the body responded when someone was depressed or anticipated pleasure. Robleto found images reflecting such questions as, what happens to the pulse during sleep? How does blood flow change when someone hears a whisper or listens to Johann Sebastian Bach's "Serenade"?

"These experiments seem so silly, but they had profound results," he said.

Exploring philosophy through art

A case showing how the heart has been depicted in religion, art and science includes Max Ernst's graceful bronze sculpture "Young Man With a Fluttering Heart" and framed constructions featuring the Sacred Heart.

Curator Michelle White lauds Robleto's thoughtful juxtapositions of works from the museum's collection with his own.

"He has created a great ambiguity about what's his and what's ours," she said. "The Sacred Heart with rolled paper looks like an object he could have made."

White helped Robleto navigate the Menil's vaults for more than a year. Most of what he picked hasn't been exhibited before - including 16th century prints and 20th century paintings by Ernst, Victor Brauner and Paul Klee. A vivid Andy Warhol print of the setting sun hangs like a horizon line behind "Things Placed in the Sea, Become the Sea."

"It is a sustained meditation on the cycle of life, which is what I hope I'm doing in the show as well," Robleto said.

He's resolved some of the issues that bothered him nine years ago.

"I know something about the heart that I don't think was known before," he said.

He's amazed that Druyan's electronic signature has entered interstellar space aboard the still-operating Voyager.

"She's the only human whose heart beats beyond Earth's solar bubble!" he said.

Through headphones, Druyan's signature sounds chaotic. It's compressed from hours of data.

Meanwhile, doctors still haven't delivered a lasting artificial heart.

"I want them to succeed, but there's something reassuring about knowing the heart is that hard to build from scratch," Robleto said.

Watching Frazier perform a heart transplant in 2012, he was astonished by the gap in the patient's chest.

"It was as if the whole room were rotating around that absence," he said.

He's now hyper-aware of his own heartbeat and the pervasiveness of heart language.

"We still use metaphors established centuries ago, when the heart was understood as the conduit between soul-directed behavior and the physical world," Robleto said.

"It's integral to your identity, your relationship to your god, the authenticity of your love, bravery, you name it."

Dario Robleto: 'The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed'
When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, through Jan. 4
Where: The Menil Collection, 1533 Sul Ross
Tickets: Free; 713-525-9400, menil.org

Also don't miss ...

Dario Robleto is preparing two other solo shows:

"Life, Left to Struggle in the Sun": On view Sept. 5-Oct. 18 at Inman Gallery, 3901 Main; 713-526-7800, inmangallery.com.

"Setlists for a Setting Sun": Nov. 16-March 29 at Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore; 443-573-1700, artbma.org.