

Fossilized whale eardrums. And sounds no longer on this planet.

Reporter's notebook: Artist Dario Robleto at the Menil Collection

By Molly Glentzer

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There's no telling what odd materials you might encounter in an exhibition by Houston-based artist Daniel Robleto.

Fossilized whale eardrums are the featured element of "Fossilhood Is Not Our Forever," one of the large works Robleto created for his first Menil Collection show, "The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed." (For my story on the entire show, click [here](#).)

"They're several million years old. It gives you a sense of how big these creatures were," Robleto said as we examined the piece. (Whale eardrums are about two or three inches long, while the average human tympanic membrane is less than half an inch.)

Where does one even find such a thing?

Robleto has collected fossils for years, even hunted them himself.

"I've developed quite a few relationships with people in other fields," he explained. "I approach it as an artist, so it's not necessarily things others would be looking for. I want these more for their implied history on a metaphoric level than what they are physically. I am that strange collector of these esoteric things in the world that only a handful of other people are interested in."

Part of his artistry, he added, is detective work. "I take a lot of pride in just imagining, 'Could it exist?' and proving that it does. Then what you do with it is another question." "Fossilhood Is Not Our Forever" relates to a theme about the centuries-old human fascination with listening for heartbeats in our loved ones. The piece springs from a comment made by the only woman whose heart now beats in interstellar space, as Robleto puts it.

In the 1970s, after she'd just agreed to marry the astronomer Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan contributed sound from her own EKG and EEG to the LP known as the Golden Record, a compendium of audible Earth signatures aboard NASA's Voyager 1 probe, which is still operating and recently left the Earth's solar bubble.



Dave Rossman, Freelance

Dario Robleto and the eardrums of prehistoric whales in "Fossilhood Is Not Our Forever."

Druyan once commented that this recording of her heartbeat and brainwaves has essentially become fossilized, preserved on a time scale that no longer relates to our day-to-day life.

"The Voyager team set out to make something that would last 1 billion years. That sliver of her life... is now going to outlive any fossil on the planet," Robleto said. "I love this idea of how you fossilize a heartbeat."

In a plexiglass case with a steel frame, "Fossilhood Is Not Our Forever" looks like a power grid network that one might find hovering at the bottom of the ocean. The fossils are affixed to small poles and connected with droopy audiotape that contains recordings of human heartbeats taken in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Each pole grows from a small concrete cube, and the cubes are set at different heights so they appear to be undulating. They're also raised, and white coral appears to be growing beneath them. "I've always been drawn to fossils like this that were these strange vessels of ancient sound. They would have heard otherworldly things that are no longer on this planet," Robleto said.

"I was thinking about hearts interacting with fossils in this strange, unexpected way -- like a signal system. Then I started abstracting from that core idea, imagining if we actually did find such a thing at the bottom of the ocean, how would we grapple with it: Is it some ancient instrument? I wanted it to relate to pipe organs, so if you pressed one up or down it would have this effect. They're literally connected by sound. I wanted to be in this weird zone of lost monument that the Voyager will become. It will be a monument of what we were long after the planet is gone."

"The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed" is at the Menil Collection Aug. 16-Jan. 4.



Courtesy The Artist

"I am that strange collector": A detail of Dario Robleto's "Things Placed In the Sea, Become the Sea." Some of the "sea urchin" shells and spines were cast and coated with melted vinyl records salvaged from the deep sea. The work also contains stretched audiotape recordings of probe and heartbeat signals; soft coral; crystals and minerals; rock slabs; homemade crystals; seashells; sea urchin teeth; Van Dyke prints; and light bulbs.

<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/Fossilized-whale-eardrums-And-sounds-no-longer-5703242.php>