

Visual Arts

Secrets of the Heart: Dario Robleto at The Menil Collection

By Adam Castañeda Thu., Aug. 21 2014 at 7:00 AM



Dario Robleto's Things Placed in the Sea, Become the Sea (2013-14).

The Setup:

The human heart is a strange thing. It beats, pushing blood through the arteries, delivering oxygen and nutrients to the trillions of cells that make up our physical being. Without the beating heart, life simply does not exist. Yet, can the prime mover of our physical existence give insight into our interior lives, the emotional terrain that constitutes our dreams, desires, and faith? This is the question Dario Robleto attempts to answer in "The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed", an exhibition now open at The Menil Collection.

The Execution:

The culmination of Robleto's research of the human heartbeat is seen in his two new sculptures, as well as select items from The Menil's holdings. Visitors young and old will marvel at his table of curiosities, *Things Placed in the Sea, Become the Sea (2013-14)*. Thematically, the sculpture speaks to the historical confluence of the United States' race to conquer space, and the medical community's creation of the artificial human heart. Both endeavors reached a zenith of activity and success in the 1960s.

The alien landscape of the table is scattered with miniaturized clippings from the Associated Press about the exploration of space and the heart, but the bulk of the space is populated by small sculptures made from seashells and dried sea urchins. Robleto thus draws a parallel between the sea and space, both seemingly

unconquerable terrains, both as equally mysterious as the human heart. The objects of the sea were illuminated by early versions of the common light bulb, lending the sculpture a Victorian sense of wonder and discovery. The past meets the future here, and far beyond. I couldn't help but think of the sea urchins as possibly suggesting what an alien heart might look like - that would certainly be the next field of inquiry.

The second, smaller sculpture on the opposite side of the room is more subdued in presentation, but equally engaging. The piece sees a series of fossilized whale ear bones strung together by stretched vinyl that has been used to record the human heart. It offers a wonderful image of these enormous water mammals being attuned to the soundscape of the beating heart of another species. And what exactly does this beat sound like? Robleto suggests that the beating heart can tell a story of its owner, one that's specific to time and place and circumstance.

In the audio section of the exhibit, Robleto has compiled some of the most significant recordings of the heart, each as different from the next. Most compelling is *First Human Heartbeats & Brainwaves Exiting Solar System (In Love) (1977)*, a recording of Ann Druyan's heartbeat used in The Golden Record, NASA's attempt to condense humanity into a single soundscape. Druyan was the creative director of the project, but she knew that the recordings of her heart and brain were special. She had just become engaged to Carl Sagan, a NASA astronomer, and she was in the bloom of early love. Druyan had the inspired notion that if an alien presence found the record, they might be able to decipher the underlying story of her heart.

Also fascinating is *First Recording of a Continuous Flow "Beatless" Artificial Heart (2014)*. Rather than a clearly discernible heartbeat, the recording sounds like a sci-fi soundtrack; one can catch the whisper of a haunting melody and a continuous drone that's almost musical.

The Verdict:

This small, intimate exhibit speaks in response to much larger questions of exploration, science, and humanity. Robleto's work doesn't answer these questions, but gets the viewer to start thinking about them. I found myself asking, is it the heartbeat that makes a human, well, human? The recording of the first beatless artificial heart suggests that no, it does not. It suggests that the human experience goes far beyond what can be measured in tangible form. That's a beautiful thought, but one that is so far-reaching, it's almost scary.

Dario Robleto: The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed runs through January 4, 2014 at The Menil Collection, 1533 Sul Ross. For information, call 713-525-9400 or visit www.menil.org.