

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2006

Art in Review

Sara VanDerBeek

Mirror in the Sky

Dario Robleto

Fear and Tenderness in Men

D'Amelio Terras
525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 14 (*VanDerBeek*) and
Oct. 28 (*Robleto*)

Whether by plan or accident, these side-by-side gallery debuts form a spirited seminar about different approaches to art-making. Subjects of debate include truth to materials, appropriation of images and other detritus, and the challenge of imbuing an artwork with meaning.

Dario Robleto's objects have a novelistic complexity that more than ever is available largely from reading, not looking. On their own, his latest labor-intensive efforts seem mawkishly sentimental. They could be macabre 20th-century assemblages, à la Bruce Conner, or actual 19th-century funeral wreaths, homemade reliquaries or folk art. They allude to American wars and their legacies of death, suffering, loss and commemoration.

But their true singularity lies in the emotionally charged materials and symbolic objects they incorporate, which are spelled out on a checklist. These include "excavated shrapnel," "mourning dress fabric," "battlefield dirt," "a WWI chaplain's metal rosary beads," "WWII surgical suture thread" and pulp made from "brides' letters to soldiers from various wars" and "soldiers' letters to sons from various wars."

These lists are moving in their mundane specificity, but also annoying. They enumerate the selective destruction of keepsakes once treasured by people who are no longer alive. In the process they reveal the artist's obsessive, almost prideful devotion and control. In the end the visual results are too familiarly antique to seem worth either the hidden effort or the destruction.

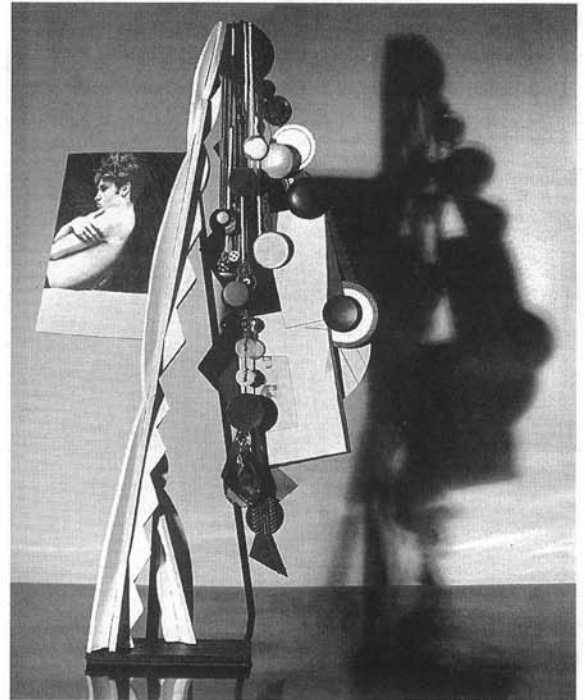
While Mr. Robleto favors opacity, Sara VanDerBeek's adventures in set-up photography and appropriation embrace transparency and disclosure. Her works have mysteries, but their effects seem constructed before our eyes and are easily disassembled; the elements remain discreet.

Ms. VanDerBeek knocks together little sculptural armatures and then photographs them, creating modernist allegories. She uses string, thin rods and cut-out bits of wood and festoons them with small objects and widely available images, often cut from books or magazines.

The images used in the photographs here include a Warhol Elvis, a Stella black painting and a bit of Brancusi's "Endless Column"; these dangle from thread, as do clusters of buttons or strands of glass beads. In "A Different Kind of Idol" this accumulation casts a shadow worthy of Synthetic Cubism. In "Ziggurat" the presentation of images takes the form of a Calder mobile. In "Extravaganza" the motifs of several black-and-white photographs are outlined with silver glitter — a tree, a dancer, a Warhol car crash — and piled up in a way that suggests a frozen bonfire or a surfeit of glowing, fading memories.

Ms. VanDerBeek's artistic DNA includes Max Ernst and Paul Outerbridge and contemporaries like Carol Bove, known for shelf sculptures that assemble meaning from carefully selected books and objects. Ms. VanDerBeek nails down her fragile ensembles with the camera, converting postmodern assemblage into an illusionistic fusion of collage and photomontage. Like Mr. Robleto's, her art has a commemorative quality. It looks back to Modernism and finds it to be diminished, a miniaturized world but not an exhausted one.

ROBERTA SMITH



D'Amelio Terras, New York
Sara VanDerBeek's "Different Kind of Idol," a set-up photograph.

ARTFORUM

NOVEMBER 2006

Dario Robleto

D'AMELIO TERRAS

Dario Robleto's sculptures are reliquaries, totems whose power derives from the authenticity of the stuff of which they are made. He has, for example, cast a male rib from female-rib dust, and presented a pair of interlocking pelvises formed from melted-down rock-'n'-roll albums that belonged to his father and mother. His recent show "Fear and Tenderness in Men" was the artist's first solo exhibition in New York. Coming as a coda to an ongoing project begun in 2003, it dealt with soldiers' relics and survivors' mourning rituals. Installed against walls the color of dried blood, the seventeen small assemblages telegraphed an elegiac, faux-nineteenth-century mood. They had obviously been molded from found bits and pieces and looked like skillfully made but macabre craft projects. But the works did not testify overtly to their material sources; it took a perusal of the checklist—in effect a work in its own right—to connect the homespun sculptures to the dreamlike realness Robleto investigates.

Gathered from specialist collectors, the seventeen works center on American Civil War and First World War memorabilia. Robleto combines these with mineral, botanical, and occasionally artificial additives, which are then melted, ground, macerated, stitched, carved, and otherwise transmogrified. The gorgeously suggestive checklist comprises what Robleto calls his "liner notes." As in any conceptual practice, language here stands in for operations and values that the viewer cannot see. Robleto reports, in fact, that before he envisions an object or image, he settles on the words—not only catalogues of ingredients, but titles and backstories—that will frame it. He also consistently situates his work in the context of turntablists' sampling and alchemists' transformations. Robleto believes in the transmigration of elemental energies; what if matter really can soak up touch and intention, retaining it regardless of outward form? It's an appealing if fantastical proposition. The problem is that the reconstituted objects—in this show, at least—are ultimately less compelling than the mysterious, labor-intensive processes that reportedly went into making them.

A case in point is *Fear and Tenderness in Men / A Color God Never Made* (2004–2005). On a richly grained wooden pedestal stands a bone-colored, jewelry-box-size chest of drawers. Beside it lie two appliquéd mats. The drawers are open. Inside, on a lining of plum-colored velvet, rest such treasures as might be found among an aged widow's souvenirs: a misshapen, mismatched pair of glass eyes, a broken mirror, a burnt match, a comb that looks like it might be made of ivory, a set of teeth cast in dull metal, balls of clay, some dried flowers. The viewer registers nostalgic fictions and grisly grief, along with admiration for Robleto's mastery of

fabrication. The piece feels gothic, precious, and, as such, perhaps too easy. Then comes the fine print. *Fear and Tenderness* consists of "cast and carved de-carbonized bone dust, bone calcium, military-issued glass eyes for wounded soldiers coated with ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion, when heat from the blast melted surrounding sand), fragments of a soldier's personal mirror salvaged from a battlefield, soldier's uniform material and thread from various wars, melted bullet lead and shrapnel from various wars, fragment of a soldier's letter home, woven human hair of a war widow, bittersweet leaves, soldier-made clay marbles, battlefield dirt, cast bronze teeth, dried rosebuds, porcupine quill, excavated dog tags, rust, velvet, walnut."

A suggestive little poem that takes the visceral as the evanescent, the inventory is odd and beautiful, as is the concept of Robleto remixing and fusing these haunted elements. One might wish that the resulting art-things would move beyond the vocabulary of nineteenth-century sentimentality—which, after all, is inherent in Robleto's found objects prior to his transformative attentions. But he still spins a fascinating story.

—Frances Richard

Dario Robleto, *Fear and Tenderness in Men / A Color God Never Made*, 2004–2005, mixed media, 51 x 48 x 21".



sculpture

May 2007
Vol. 26 No. 4

International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

NEW YORK

Dario Robleto
D'Amelio-Terras

At first glance, Dario Robleto's wreaths, framed mementoes and pillows, plaques, altars, cages, and jars placed on the floor or in vitrines on sanguine-colored walls look nostalgic and even a bit abject—things more likely to be found in a Victorian home than a Chelsea gallery. Objects of contemplation and reliquaries to war and death, they are fashioned by the artist's recycling of found materials such as letters, photos, audio tape recordings, military uniforms, dresses, bullets, and vinyl records, as well as natural substances like hair, dirt, bones, and rust. Immersing the viewer in the past, they speak to the present as they explore the effects of war on daily life.

Robleto's art is deceptive. The toil and craft that goes into making these pieces promotes a work aesthetic and invokes a sentiment for the good old days, even as the objects themselves veil a more subversive message. An elaborate list of materials accompanies each piece, obsessively articulating the process of creating new relics from old. Everything comes from somewhere—Robleto uses not just homemade paper, but pulp "made from bride's letters to soldiers from various wars" or "military issued glass eyes for wounded soldiers coated with ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion, when heat from blast melted surrounding sand)." Dissolved audio tape recordings of poet's voices, re-cast into Civil War-era "pain bullets" or woven into simulated hair, retain their original aspect only in the artist's inventory, but their associative meanings hover like an aura over these newly made pieces. Dependent on the viewer's belief in Robleto's act of reclamation, this recycling sometimes stretches credulity—as with the inclusion of such ephemeral ele-

ments as the "dissolved audio tape recording of the heartbeat of an unborn child and the last heartbeats of a loved one" or the "residue of female tears of morning overlaid with the residue from male tears of mourning."

But faith seems to be as much a part of Robleto's project as its elab-

orately reproduced materiality. Indeed his work functions at the juncture between hope and desire, seeing and believing. While his methods raise questions about originality, each piece contains multiple narratives initiated by language and transformed into objects whose presentation is intent on inspiring

respectful, even pious contemplation. Associating the past with the present, titles such as *A Sadness Silence Can't Touch*, *Fear and Tenderness of Men*, and *No One Has a Monopoly over Sorrow* evoke poetic idyll, reinforced in some pieces by the actual if recycled presence of the spoken word. Transmuting text, images, and found or natural materials into art, Robleto becomes a sort of alchemist, simulating the creative act even as he destroys history, effectively severing any possibility of actual restitution with every photo, letter, hair, ribbon, dress, tear, or memento that he obliterates.

Erasing the past while concurrently evoking its substance through hand-crafted objects associated with memory and healing, Robleto's pieces seek to have it both ways. At a time when images of the dead in a distant war are elided from our view in an attempt to control the discourse of history, these meticulous sculptures serve up a cautionary critique on the efficacy of revisionism, even as the sincerity of Robleto's meditation on death and transformation argues for the restorative and healing power of art as one way to reconcile the pain and loss of battle.

—Susan Canning

Below: Dario Robleto, *A Century of November*, 2005. Child's mourning dress, paper made from soldiers's letters, sepia, bone dust, carved bone buttons, hair flowers woven by a Civil War widow, and mixed media, 38 x 38 in. Bottom: Dario Robleto, *A Sadness Silence Can't Touch*, 2005–06. Casts of Civil War "pain bullets" made from dissolved audio tapes of poets, mourning dress fabric, yellowheart, ash, and mixed media, 9.5 x 14.5 x 9.25 in.





Time Out New York / Issue 574: September 28–October 4, 2006

Review

Dario Robleto

[D'Amelio Terras Gallery](#), through Oct 21



If We Fly Away, They'll Fly Away
Photograph courtesy D'Amelio Terras

He has had more than a dozen solo shows (including one at the Whitney Altria); now Dario Robleto makes his New York gallery debut with a deceptively modest exhibition titled “Fear and Tenderness in Men.” Small, intricate, folksy-looking keepsakes are displayed in frames and vitrines, lending the gallery the look of a regional historical society. Fitting, since Robleto’s untitled sculptures originate from relics, which the artist transforms into moving mediations on loss.

To evoke the “male tenderness” of the show’s title, Robleto uses tokens of personal affection salvaged from American wars (Revolutionary to Gulf). His raw materials include correspondence between soldiers and loved ones, scraps of uniform fabric and shrapnel recovered from battlegrounds. In most cases, the mind-bogglingly complicated processes used to create the sculptures are their most arresting feature. A delicate birdcage is constructed from bone dust; love letters are pulped to make elaborate flowers.

At times, Robleto crowds too many layers into his pieces. Facsimiles of Civil War-era bullets (used to bite down on in surgery in lieu of anesthesia) are cast in a material made by dissolving audiotape used to record poems about war and death—the checklist gives viewers a lengthy syllabus to chew on. The gesture seems excessive because the artifacts Robleto recycles—including antique wedding rings and tiny flowers made from braided human hair—embody sorrow eloquently enough on their own. Still, without making specific reference to current conflicts, Robleto’s sculptures bear witness to the grievous toll of war. — *Merrily Kerr*

ART

Issue of 2006-10-09
Posted 2006-10-02

DARIO ROBLETO

Mourning jewelry, corroded wedding rings, stitched samplers, and skeletons bespeak the folk art of bereavement in Robleto's assemblages. Presented installation style, his weirdly charged objects rest in casketlike vitrines and ornate frames in a room painted cordovan red. The general tone of nineteenth-century sentimental grief is complicated by the works' raw materials: every bone in the human body, powdered, for example, or melted bullet lead from Civil War battles, or shredded audiotape of poets like Siegfried Sassoon reading their antiwar work, or pulped letters from war widows. Through Oct. 21. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)