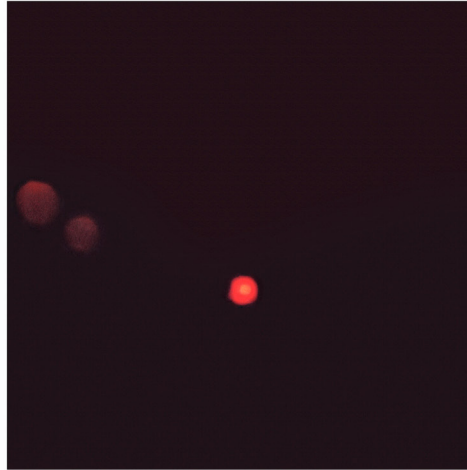
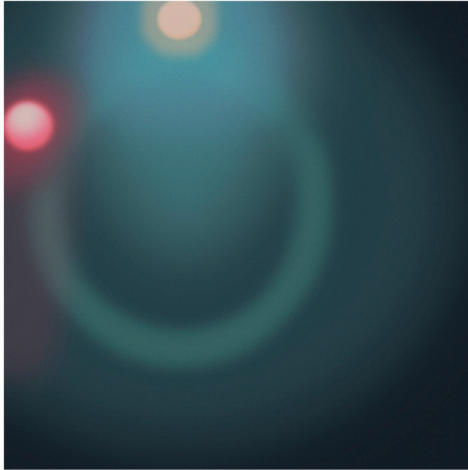


11/16/14 - 03/29/15

FRONT
ROOM

DARIO ROBLETO

Setlists for a Setting Sun



Dario Robleto. Detail, *The Sky, Once Choked With Stars, Will Slowly Darken*. 2011. (Rick Nelson - *In Concert* and Lightnin' Hopkins - *The King of the Blues*). Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery

“Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg and owlet’s wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.”
– William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene I

“Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens
Brown paper packages tied up with strings
These are a few of my favorite things”
– Oscar Hammerstein, “My Favorite Things”
from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s
The Sound of Music

BOTH IN THE OMINOUS INGREDIENTS added to the witches’ boiling cauldron in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and in the images of purity and comfort in a much-loved song from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music*, magic lies in the specificity of the objects invoked.* Dario Robleto’s art similarly relies on the power of the particular. By employing such unorthodox materials as audiotape imprinted with highly expressive songs, pulverized records from his family’s album collection, and artificially augmented butterfly specimens, Robleto crafts an intricate meditation on passing time, the emotional force of music, and the power of family bonds. These

moving themes and the nostalgic forms in which they are embodied are remarkably romantic, sentimental, and earnest, standing out within the art of today, which often favors depersonalization, irony, and critique.

In addition to their talismanic presence within his works, Robleto’s materials are lyrically enumerated on accompanying wall labels, which he writes like elegiac poetry or liner notes to a beloved album. The artist has called himself a “materialist poet,” concerned with both the physical aura of the substances that co-mingle in his art and the strange incantations they suggest as descriptive text. Another analogy he draws is to the work of a DJ. A portion of Robleto’s creativity lies in the thoughtful selection and skillful re-combination of fragments of historic, scientific, and cultural references, just as DJs sample an array of existing music to generate a new sound.

In this exhibition, Robleto unexpectedly “mixes” allusions to classical, blues, folk, and rock music with the motif of space exploration in an effort to give shape to the epic and elusive concept of time. The twin pieces *Setlists for a Setting Sun (Dark Was the Night)* and *Setlists for a Setting Sun (The Crystal Palace)* share their origins in humanity’s desire to record its music for posterity. Since he was a child, the artist has



PHOTO BY THOMAS R. DUBROCK

Dario Robleto. Detail, *Setlists For a Setting Sun (The Crystal Palace)*. 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery

been captivated by the Voyager spacecraft, launched in 1977 and still operational today. Traveling on both Voyager 1 and 2 as they venture into the depths of outer space is a copy of the *Golden Record*, sounds and images compiled by scientist Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, the creative director of the record, to represent our existence to other life forms that might one day encounter the spacecraft. Of the 27 pieces of music included, bluesman Blind Willie Johnson's 1927 recording "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground" was selected to convey human loneliness.

Robleto pairs a sculpture inspired by this song—and its profound intergalactic task—with another that takes as its subject an 1888 recording of Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, which was performed at London's Crystal Palace before 23,722 spectators. This is the earliest known recording of a live musical performance. As we listen to it today, we share an experience with the people that comprised the Crystal Palace orchestra, choir, and audience over 125 years ago, suggesting a poignant continuity in our species' passion for music. It stretches the limits of imagination to consider how that continuum might extend to and beyond the millions of years it could take for the *Golden Record* to reach a planet conducive to life, let alone beings that are able to perceive the music preserved on it.

The Sky, Once Choked With Stars, Will Slowly Darken is a suite of eight digital prints that considers music and time from a different vantage point, offering recorded light as a companion to the recorded sound examined in the *Setlists* sculptures. The pictured bursts of light appear like those captured by instruments such as the Hubble Space Telescope, another fascination of the

artist's. With headquarters adjacent to the BMA on the campus of The Johns Hopkins University, the 25-year-old Hubble has recorded light that has traveled so great a distance that the cosmic bodies initially emitting the light no longer exist. The flashes in Robleto's prints, however—rather than glimpses into the life cycles of heavenly stars—are generated by stage lights that blaze from the covers of concert albums by Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix, and other deceased musical luminaries. As with the recording of Handel's oratorio or Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night," how long will the memory and meaning of these stars persist?

The artist introduces a more intimate but no less powerful scale on which to register time in his pieces *Music Has the Right to Children* and *Melancholy Matters Because of You*. The first incorporates butterflies that have been altered with facsimile antennae made from manipulated audiocassette tape of recordings by parent-child musicians, ranging from Arlo and Woody Guthrie to Bob and Ziggy Marley. This study of musical generations is mirrored in the second piece, a touching portrait of the artist's family in which records from his personal collection, along with those owned by his mother and grandmother, have been ground to dust and refashioned into the form of adult, adolescent, and fetal hand bones. Both works reveal that love of music and familial bonds span the passing years. With its soulful optimism in the power of creativity to endure both the micro and macro expanse of time, Robleto's complex and nuanced exhibition might be considered as mysteriously prophetic as the Shakespearean witches' peculiar concoction and as gently consoling as Oscar Hammerstein's precise lyrics.

*"Specific Objects" is the title of a 1965 article written by artist Donald Judd. The phrase has since come to describe the geometrically and materially precise sculpture categorized as "Minimalist." This is not at all the meaning of "specificity" when applied to Robleto's work, which seems made in a spirit quite counter to the austerity of Minimalism. Rather, in this essay, "specific" is intended to suggest the broader understanding of the term, one not limited by art-historical usage.

The sculptures *Setlists for a Setting Sun (The Crystal Palace)*, *Setlists for a Setting Sun (Dark Was the Night)*, and *American Seabed* were commissioned by Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, California, where Robleto was a 2014 Artist in Residence.



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Curated by Curator of Contemporary Art Kristen Hileman