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Dario Robleto: The Signal

Curated by: Maggie Adler, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX; and James Glisson, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA

Exhibition Schedule: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX, May 12–October 27, 2024; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA, December 8, 2024–May 25, 2025

Reviewed by: Alexander Betz

Fig. 1. Installation view of *Dario Robleto: The Signal*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Photo: courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

When two waves collide, they undergo a series of transformations: amplifying where they align and dissolving where they contradict. Respectively known as constructive and destructive interference, the resulting waves bear the layered traces of each other's passage. Waves of any difference in amplitude undergo this process: the squeak of a mouse reverberates in the trumpeting of an elephant, and the flap of an insect's wings joins—however faintly—the great grindings of the earth. Although such interference quickly escapes the threshold of human perception, it nevertheless endures, spun into the threads of connection weaving all things together. This attunement to the delicate interplay occurring across disproportionate scales, where the small nestles into the large and the distant collapses into the near, echoes through the recent exhibition *Dario Robleto: The Signal*. Spanning works of art ranging from lithographs of human vital signs to butterflies with antennae fashioned from thin strands of cassette tape, the exhibition takes the waveform as an ethereal material and casts it into the real.

Upon entering the exhibition at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas (fig. 1), I found myself flanked by a series of images lining all but one of the gallery's walls. Entitled The First Time, the Heart (A Portrait of Life, 1854–1913) (2017), these eighteen lithographs bear the hazy traces of heartbeats captured over a century ago using one of the earliest devices capable recording human vital signs: a sphygmograph. Invented in 1853 by German physiologist Karl von Vierordt, the sphygmograph is a device that uses a single human hair to inscribe delicate cardiac oscillations into a layer of soot. While standing before a print of someone's heartbeats as they smelled a fresh sprig of lavender in 1896, I felt my own pulse quicken and wondered if my palpitations were bending to match—like a

metronome synchronizing to the swaying bodies of others or a shard of glass humming along to a resonant tuning fork—in a fleeting hope of union across space and time.

Stretching the desire for connection to a cosmic scale, the heartbeats' procession concluded on the final wall with Robleto's triptych *Survival Does Not Lie in the Heavens* (2012). In this work, Robleto trades sonic oscillations for waves of celestial light gleaned from the cosmos's deepest reaches. Amber golds and somber blues glimmer across a black expanse, referencing images created by the Hubble Space Telescope as it peered back into the fires of creation. Yet these motes of illumination are, in fact, no galaxies: closer scrutiny reveals them to be stage lights lifted from jazz, blues, and gospel album covers, their glow a human hymn masquerading as starlight. The viewer is left, then, to wonder about these new signals as they traverse the gulf of the cosmos. As we beam radio waves beyond Earth's reach, sometimes even the same songs performed under the pallid stage lights of Robleto's triptych, do they brush against and subtly bend the ancient light of distant worlds? Might they tinge the cosmos with the faintest traces of unrequited hope and longing along the way? In Robleto's hands, connection is interference, with each individual action but another ripple melding into the roil.

Fig. 2. Dario Robleto, *American Seabed* (detail), 2014. Fossilized prehistoric whale ear bones (1 to 10 million years old), butterflies, stretched and pulled audiotape recordings of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row," concrete, ocean water, pigments, coral, brass, steel, Plexiglas, 37 x 68 x 55 in. Courtesy of the artist © Dario Robleto

Holding the works dotting the walls in its gravity, the sculptural work *American Seabed* (2014) at the center of the room deposits their myriad waveforms into layers of terrestrial matter. Here, a kaleidoscope of butterflies dances among an array of fossilized whale ears perching on slender pedestals of brass (fig. 2). The butterflies' antennae, formed from filaments of cassette tape bearing Bob Dylan's 1965 song "Desolation Row," rise above a tessellated surface of concrete undulating like the surface of the ocean. Stalactites of bleached coral hang in the cavernous depths beneath the sedimentary waves like roots seeking the past. The piece evokes the concept of deep time, first theorized by James Hutton while gazing on the striated cliffs of Siccar Point, Scotland, in 1788, where geological strata revealed Earth's ancient, submerged histories. Much like those layers, Robleto's work compresses history's rubble into a single monument to annihilation, yet one still shimmering with hope: Perhaps, when I turn away, the butterflies will be on the wing.

Fragile antennae holding a lament recorded less than sixty years ago curl above bodies resplendent in the light of the present, while below waves of undifferentiated matter lap against bones fossilized across eons. In this work, the wreckage of time compresses under the slow, irreversible pull of entropy; the moving finger, having writ, moves forever onward.

The final work in the gallery, *Unknown and Solitary Seas (Dreams and Emotions of the 19th Century)* (2018), invited the viewer to reflect once more on the recorded signals of humans long since past. Here, Robleto transmuted ten sphygmographic waveforms from centuries distant into tangible forms of brass-plated stainless steel and laid them to rest in a box of black-lacquered maple. With gilded captions such as "Religious guilt, 1877" and "Name softly called while sleeping, 1877," I imagined myself picking one up and clasping around my neck a distant murmur of yearning. These once-ephemeral waves, now wrought into near-eternal golden luster, serve as a prelude to the exhibition's other half: the third and final feature-length film of Robleto's meditation on the Golden Record created by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Affixed to the *Voyager* spacecraft and cast beyond the solar system in 1977, this record endures as humanity's furthest emissary, a beacon of hope on a fool's errand into the cosmic deep. The record's pictorial content thrums with a resounding sense of optimism as it ranges from idyllic scenes of dolphins leaping above tropical waters to the birth of a child. Yet, these images exist only as soundwaves encoded into the grooved ridges spiraling toward the record's center. What might at first sound like fuzzy static engraved on the record's obverse side is instead a string of data denoting the location and color of each pixel comprising the images. To parse this data, one must standardize it with the twenty-one-centimeter-long electromagnetic wave loosed by hydrogen (the background hum of the universe) as its single electron changes spin, yet again predicating connection on the interference of waves.

Fig. 3. Dario Robleto, *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice*, 2024. DCP (70:00). Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Photo: Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Cowritten and narrated by art historian Jennifer Roberts, the seventy-minute film, *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice* (2024), unveils the Golden Record's dual function as a time capsule and, perhaps more crucially, a carrier of love and longing (fig. 3). For an art

historian who has championed the importance of making as embodied research and an artist whose practice is built on deep archival engagement, Roberts and Robleto's collaboration represents a rare and natural convergence. This interdisciplinary approach allows their film to explore a deeper kinship between the arts and sciences, framing both as practices seeking, as Roberts describes, to "perceive and represent phenomena that are not available to habitual forms of understanding."[1] Nowhere is this more evident than in the heretofore-untold story of an act of subversion forever etched into the surface of the record.

Ann Druyan, the creative director of the team at NASA who compiled the record's audio track in the 1970s, proposed including the first-ever battlefield recording—captured by the American soldier Will Gaisberg during a World War I gas attack in 1918—as a way to present a more complete profile of humanity, flaws and all, to those who might one day access it. NASA rejected Druyan's suggestion, fearing the potential for extraterrestrial listeners to perceive such an inclusion as threatening. As a result, the five hours of audio contained on the Golden Record appears at first glance to be little more than a message of kinship and welcome. And yet, such complexity remains embedded within the record's aureate furrows. Roberts and Robleto present groundbreaking research based on interviews with Druyan, revealing her subversive response to NASA's censorship. Unwilling to let the *Voyager* depart without bearing an earnest account of the human condition, Druyan included an electropherogram (a recording of her brainwaves, akin to the pulses seen earlier in the gallery) captured while she meditated on the full spectrum of humanity: suffering and war alongside hope and love. As the film describes, Druyan "has smuggled the memory of love and war out of the solar system."

The film draws the viewer back to a central conceit of Robleto's work: actions of any scale hold the capacity to influence all around them. As the film points out, the *Voyager* spacecraft's usage of Jupiter as a gravitational slingshot to escape the confines of the solar system left its mark on the planet's orbit, delaying its transit around the sun by about one foot per trillion years. The film thus asks viewers to consider the influence all actions have, noting that "if there had been an elephant roar instead of a cricket chirp" on the audio track of the record, "this difference in mass would have been revealed" not only in the velocity of the *Voyager* but in the ensuing delay the spacecraft imparted to Jupiter's orbit. As Roberts and Robleto explain, Druyan's reflection on the shades of complexity inherent within human experience became inscribed in the trajectory of the *Voyager*: perhaps each pulse of love removed ever so slightly more material from the record than one of despair and thus shifted the weight of the record. Drawn out over the astronomical distances and timescales that the *Voyager* will traverse, such small differences in weight will alter its course—and in turn our own—forever.

Known as a Fourier transformation, mathematics offers a way to unravel complex amalgamations of waves into their constituent parts. The original signals caught in the cosmic turbulence are still there, waiting to be uncovered. Leaving the exhibition, I stepped out into the Texas sun and found myself slowly unspooling the interference of all the waves I experienced inside: Here the flap of filigree as I watched an orange-gold butterfly flit among sunlit flowers; there the beat of my own heart returning, however imperceptibly, from its fall into synchronicity with palpitations centuries distant. And I

wondered if these waves, too, radiated out, interfering and connecting with everything around me: every thought caught in the gravity of Jupiter, every step felt in the rings of Saturn.

Alexander Betz holds an MA in art history in arts of the Americas from the University of Arkansas.

Notes

[1] Jennifer L. Roberts, quoted in Katherine Hillman, "Collaboration, Part 2: Perspectives on Science," *The Carter Blog*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, July 3, 2024, https://www.cartermuseum.org/blog/collaboration-part-2-perspectives-science.