I’m Gilbert Vicario, senior curator at the Des Moines Art Center, and I’m thrilled to have organized *Dario Robleto: Survival Does Not Lie In The Heavens*.

*Survival Does Not Lie In The Heavens* examines Dario Robleto’s current exploration of mortality and extinction through his incorporation of 19th-century folk traditions used to create visually arresting and densely layered objects. Faith and sentimentality are important components in Robleto’s work and are exemplified through his use of evocative materials. These may include 50,000 year-old extinct cave bear paws, human hand bones, woolly mammoth hair, glacial run off, or black swan bone dust, just to name a few.

His wide-ranging interests, which include science, interpersonal relationships, spirituality, and history, have imbued his practice with an overarching humanistic tenor that seeks to question the ways in which meaning attaches itself to human-made objects.

Robleto’s ceaseless exploration of our bodies and the memories they contain continues to remind us of the fleeting nature of life. By engaging in a conceptual practice that connects the knowledge of the past with the uncertainty of the future through objects, languages, and customs, his work obliges us to acknowledge our fundamental nature.

We have invited Robleto to speak about several pieces in the exhibition and the unique narrative qualities that guide their development.

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Hi, my name is Dario Robleto. I’m from San Antonio and currently live and work in Houston, Texas. The show you’re gonna see today is called Survival Does Not Lie In The Heavens. It’s my first large survey show in the Midwest of work from the past three to four years. So a little bit about my background—I have a strong interest in science, music, history, poetry, these are all different passions of mine in different fields that I realized early on made the most sense to them under the umbrella of art. So you’re gonna see that a lot in the show. There is a variety of fields and topics that I'm merging together to make into sculptural form, but I don’t always consider myself a sculptor strictly speaking. The term I like to use is called “materialist poet” and this gives an indication of where my mind is often, which is this relationship between materials and language. If I had to identify an overall theme in my work, it would certainly be the issue of survival. And although I can switch topics quite a bit, this generally is where I end up, which is the question of, “How do humans in the face of extreme loss, or grief, or trauma, how do they find some creative response to loss?” I think you will see that running throughout the show in every work from war, to the environment, even in medicine—there are several examples of my continuing investigation in how do we find ways to cope and survive?
This piece is called *Some Longings Survive Death*. This piece involves my recent investigations into environmental loss and something really struck me as I was dealing with this problem was that for most of us, it’s such a huge abstract problem that we feel powerless against it. When we just think of the sheer magnitude of the problem and the numbers of animals at risk, the glaciers are melting, it’s hard to get any sort of human sense around such a large abstract problem. So I decided what if I could apply all my years of research now into mourning art traditions and as I mentioned in the intro, what is the human creative response to loss, which has a long rich history. Could I apply that history and the craft techniques around it, to the issue of environmental loss? Could I take a big abstract problem and make it intimate and human on an individual level? In the piece you’re looking at incorporates the wooly mammoth material that is a creature that most scientists agree humans probably helped wipe out. One of the first instances of human induced extinction, but of course, it happened at a time when no one was really around to do anything creative in response, as far as this creative response to mourning I’ve been talking about. So my idea was, could I retroactively mourn for all these things that have never been mourned for, the mammoth being one, there are other examples in the show. One of the unforeseen consequences of the glaciers melting that is not widely known, is that there is an unprecedented amount of wooly mammoth material that’s being dislodged from the ice as it melts, and it’s just gushing into the ocean. So it’s this weird phenomena where a creature locked in ice, pushed to extinction by humans, is now being unlocked from the ice by more human activity on the planet. So as this is all gushing into the ocean, there are fisherman who have switched their industry in certain parts of the world where when they pull up their nets there is as much wooly mammoth material in it as fish. We’re talking about tons and tons of stuff, there’s much more of it out in the world than most of us realize. So, in this piece, I obtained wooly mammoth tusks, wooly mammoth hair and ivory, and then approach that material as a mourner from the 19th century would, let’s say a locket of hair from a lost loved one and made what’s called mourning jewelry, which are these elaborate hair flowers, a technique itself that has gone extinct for most people. This is the core of the piece. Can I apply a very human older mourning tradition to material that has been locked in ice for fifty thousand years, and as a creature that never got mourned for?
This piece is called the *Defiant Garden* and continuing on my themes of survival this one looks at that through the lens of the history of war, which has a long complicated rich history of acts of defiance and creativity in the face of the destruction on the battlefield. A defiant garden is defined as any attempt by a soldier to grow a small garden or plants on the battlefield in a time of war. So they’re very intense, private moments that are often hard to find for a soldier on the battlefield which makes them so loaded and symbolic. The realities of the battlefield are often horrible in that fallen comrades can literally be in that soil, past mortar shells that have been fired, bullet lead, any number of things. For a soldier in that landscape to try to find a sane moment and perhaps just try to grow a small little tomato plant in a trench next to them, becomes a very human act in the face of war. And so it has a beautiful history and this wreath is dedicated to that history, and it’s my own attempt at participating in that tradition of a defiant garden. This is another work I would encourage you to look at the material list to help understand what you are looking at and decipher my own symbolism in the work as far as the paper flowers that I’ve made, what they are made of, and how that can contribute in that tradition I just mentioned. I’m always up front in saying, especially of my war work, that I’m very conscious of what can be done back at the homefront to participate on these battle line efforts or gestures by soldiers, what can be done at home in solidarity in a sense, at similar defiant acts in war.
This piece is actually a diptych, what I even consider, in a musical way, an A-side and B-side. The first piece is called The Boundary of Life Is Quietly Crossed. And it is this large black cabinet. This piece is devoted to a group of people called supercentenarians. And I’ve had a life-long fascination with this world record in particular, which is at any given time who is the world’s oldest person on the planet. And I find this record one of the most beautiful symbols of humanness and they really represent how far we’re capable of going and a nice little side note to tell you about is the people who monitor this record, who verify the records, there’s these unwritten rules that have developed over the years in that there should never be one day that somebody is not acknowledged as the oldest person in the world. As soon as the current record holder dies, more than likely that day the next person is notified by Guinness, or handed off the baton. It is a very beautiful sweet thing, that on this outer edge of life that I’m just happy that somebody is monitoring and what they represent. This is my artistic attempt at monitoring that record and what you are looking are, since Guinness started keeping good records, are my reinterpretations of their obituaries through an artist’s lens. It’s all still factual, but it’s imagining what I felt should be highlighted about them as people. If you look in the bottom right hand corner, go across to your left then up, across to your right then up, and across to your left, that is in sequence the next person in line who held the record. This piece implies a commitment on my part, which is that it can never really be finished and as long as I’m alive as an artist I’ve dedicated myself to continue to make these cases. Just I feel that there should be an artist monitoring that edge of life as much as the record keepers. There are a few other design elements that I’ll pick up on in the piece to your left called The Ark of Frailty, which is a large white cabinet. And in the animal world, I found a similar group that were just as fascinating and also that I feel are operating at this edge of life and they’re called Lazarus species. And a Lazarus species is defined as any animal that at one time has officially been labeled extinct and then at some future date, maybe two years, maybe 20 years later, we find one more or two more. And what’s an unwritten rule that’s developed around them is that even if more than likely they are going to go extinct because their numbers are so small, somebody somewhere still needs to take them off the official extinction books until we’re sure that those have died. It’s a small sweet gesture that I call the “not yet moment.” There’s a small sliver of time where we need to properly acknowledge that there is one left even if someone has said there weren’t any. And it’s a gesture that I find poignant as far as acknowledging life on the planet. The last thing I would mention that you will see in many of my works is the relationship of the text to the object. And I would ask, if you have time, and the piece piques your interest, to give the museum copy next to the piece some attention because it’s so important to me that I even say that a better term for what I do is that I call myself a “materialist poet” rather than a sculptor because I feel this gives equal footing in my world in relationship to the text and the object and that these are, in my opinion, full on poems, that I approach and treat as poems as far as the title and material list and all the things that most artists sort of tack up at the end. This is on equal footing with me with the object. So you’ll see that reoccurring in all the works.
The next piece we're looking at is a four-part panel work called *Alchemical Gardens*, *Society of Seekers*, *Folks on the Fringe*, and *Maidens of Mother’s Milk Thistle*. And this piece is dedicated to more acts of defiance and survival through the tradition of posters, poster design. And in particular, I was drawn to the WPA era posters made during the depression and other very tough economic times, and the government putting to work artists who designed posters that had very specific social messages or societal value. So there could be everything from group activities to grow gardens, to public health messages, theater groups, all kinds of things. So, each panel is dedicated to a different topic—there’s one devoted to war, there’s one devoted to medicine, there’s one devoted to the arts, and there’s one devoted to the history of labor and protest movements. So when I say they’re devoted, I mean I’m not directly copying them, these are all made from hand-cut paper, and I have elaborated on them. These are all my own titles and imaginary events, but all based on real historical fact. This is another way I integrate my own writing into my works—there’s poetry to it.
So a piece that’s making its debut in the show is called *Candles Un-burn, Suns Un-shine, Death Un-dies*. And it’s a rare piece for me in that it’s a print, but, as you see it’s a very large scale installation as well. And what you’re looking at appears to be a Hubbell telescope image of what’s known as the deep field images. And I specifically designed this piece to mimic those Hubbell images that are unique in that they’re the earliest or furthest back that we’ve ever seen in time. It’s the peering back, often to the edge of the birth of the universe, by the Hubbell telescope. So they have a very particular aesthetic and look to them that’s different than, for example, the normal image of the night sky. And you see a lot of baby stars that are flickering on for the very first time. And there’s a lot of chaos and things kind of clumped together. So you see erraticness that defines the images. That appears to be what you are looking at, but what you’re actually looking at, these are all the stage lights from live record albums of now deceased musicians. as I mentioned earlier music’s a big passion of mine and I have always been mesmerized with live albums as a format, because in general it’s the artist, fully alive, in the act of performing, often sweating. And usually hovering over their shoulder, or somewhere in the background is this one stage light that I have always been fixated on because of how oddly astronomical it looked. So, I have taken decades worth of albums—dozens and dozens of artists—all at the moment of living and in their prime, and simply extracted the stage light and made this new composite image that looks like the birth of the universe. So the idea is that, if you believe in the way light travels and the idea that we’re looking back into time when we look into the night sky, I like to point out that it runs both ways, so that if someone was looking over in our neighborhood, more than likely the stage light burst on the stage Jimmy Hendricks is on 40 years ago, and that light is still heading out there somewhere. So if someone was peering back here, Jimmy would still fully be alive and performing. The idea is there is a lot of playfulness and the idea if the light can radiate somewhere, then we are all surviving somewhere, through someone’s perception.