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Left: Dario Robleto, Still from *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice*, 2024. 4K video, 5.1 surround sound installation. Commissioned by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and Amon Carter Museum of American Art. © Dario Robleto. Right: Dario Robleto, *American Seabed*, 2014. Fossilized prehistoric whale ear bones salvaged from the sea (1 to 10 million years), various butterflies, butterfly antennae made from stretched and pulled audiotape recordings of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row," concrete, ocean water, pigments, coral, brass, steel, Plexiglas. Courtesy of the artist, © Dario Robleto

## **Santa Barbara Museum of Art Presents exhibition** ***Dario Robleto: The Signal***

**On view December 8, 2024 – May 25, 2025**

Exhibition highlight includes Robleto's newly released feature-length film *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice*, co-commissioned by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art

*November 4, 2024* — A solo exhibition featuring the internationally renowned Texas artist, *Dario Robleto: The Signal* opens at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) on December 8, 2024. The exhibition's centerpiece is Robleto's newly commissioned film *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice*, an immersive, 70-minute movie based on a rare and forgotten document—the first audio recording of warfare made in 1918—which was considered for inclusion on NASA's Golden Record. Presented in SBMA's McCormick Gallery, the film, co-commissioned by SBMA, will be projected in a black-box installation. It is accompanied by a selection of Robleto's works on paper and sculptures that augment the story of the film. The exhibition was co-organized with the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, where it was on view May 12 through October 27, 2024.

Spanning film, sculpture, and works on paper, this exhibition represents the culmination of Robleto's multiyear exploration of the Golden Record, the gold-plated phonograph disk containing sounds and images selected by a team at NASA to portray life on Earth to extraterrestrials. The Golden Record is currently traversing the solar system's outer reaches aboard the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecrafts, launched in 1977. The film *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice* weaves a story about why the first recording of

warfare was considered, then rejected, for inclusion on the Golden Record. The film is the third and final installment in a trilogy of video and sound installations that comprise Robleto's years-long investigation of the scientific, philosophical, and moral tensions around recording human life.

James Glisson, SBMA Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art, reflects on Robleto's poetic investigations into the history of "recording" the body and mind and the Golden Record's quixotic quest to preserve humanity in the grooves of a metal disk sent into the cosmos. Glisson says, "The ups and downs of our breathing, heartbeat, cascades of neuronal firing, the diurnal rhythms of waking and sleep. These are the signatures of being alive, and they are describable and recordable with the mathematical form of the sinusoidal wave. In fact, modern medicine records heart beats, brain waves, and breathing all the time. Few today, though, would argue that recombining these waves or playing them back will recreate the person, even if these were markers of the person alive, breathing, heart pumping, neurons firing."

Based in Houston, Robleto is a multidisciplinary artist, researcher, materialist poet, and self-proclaimed citizen-scientist. Until recently, he created modern-day *Wunderkammern*, assembling found and manipulated objects in intricate, handcrafted displays akin to the 19<sup>th</sup>-curiosity cabinet. In 2019, he departed from sculpture to attend to his new focus—a project comprising three films, and the creation of a book co-authored with art historian Jennifer Roberts, that addresses recordings throughout the ages of human existence and how we convey messages across time.

With his collaborators, Skye Ashbrook, Wylie Earnhart, and Bill Haddad, Robleto created films that feature rich soundscapes, an original score, and dynamic visuals sourced from still images of historical events, NASA footage, videos of his own lab experiments, and generated animations. Drawing inspiration from the PBS documentary series *Cosmos*, Robleto narrates his works using an approach more traditionally associated with science broadcasts. By subverting this format, Robleto simultaneously inserts the artistic perspective into scientific discourse while positioning scientific endeavors, like the Golden Record, within the art historical canon. The first two films in the series, *The Boundary of Life is Quietly Crossed* (2019) and *The Aorta of an Archivist* (2021), trace several "firsts" in the history of recording, including heartbeats, brainwaves, and significant moments in voice and sound.

In a special collaboration, Robleto has invited John Herrington, Former NASA astronaut and retired U.S. Navy officer, to arrange the presentation of the artist's heartbeat waveform prints from the series *The First Time, the Heart (A Portrait of Life 1854-1913)*. Herrington has degrees in applied mathematics, aeronautical engineering, and a doctorate in education. He is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, and the first citizen of a federally recognized tribe to accomplish space travel and a spacewalk. In each iteration of *The First Time, the Heart*, Robleto invites a new collaborator to "re-sequence" the order of the work. This approach uncovers new paths and outcomes in the story of life while poetically highlighting the role each of us plays in interpreting the unspoken meanings we hold within our hearts and minds. In creating the Golden Record, Carl Sagan believed it was unlikely that an alien species would find and decipher it. What was certain, though, is that human beings would reckon with the recording decades or centuries after it was made. Just as Herrington chooses a sequence for these drawings based on his background and experience, so too will an extra-terrestrial intelligence or a human in the future when they encounter the waveforms preserved on the grooved surface of the Golden Record.

Robleto's third film, *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice*, explores the backstory and philosophical debate surrounding the creation of the Golden Record by examining two understudied audio recordings—one selected for inclusion on the Record, the other omitted. Produced by American astronomer Carl Sagan,

his wife-to-be Ann Druyan, and a team of scientists, the Golden Record is, in its final form, a hopeful gesture, purposefully edited to put humanity's "best face forward" in a first-contact scenario. The Record's content, selected by the NASA team, includes images, a range of sounds found in nature, and audio chosen to represent humanity—including music, spoken greetings, footsteps, laughter, and a "life signs" recording submitted by Ann Druyan, Creative Director of the Voyager Interstellar Message Project. The "life signs" audio is produced by the electricity of Druyan's brain and heart when connected to an electroencephalogram (EEG) and an electrocardiogram (EKG). Supported by interviews with Druyan, Robleto's film focuses on this audio and what Druyan was thinking during the EEG and EKG recordings. Her goal was to relay messages through her thoughts—messages of love but also of the pain we can cause one another, bringing in aspects of humanity that were left off of the Record by the larger team. Robleto focuses on Druyan's contemplation of the question of whether love can be "recorded" through the electricity emanating from the heart and brain and transported through millennia. Simultaneously, the film examines a rare and forgotten file that was considered for inclusion in the Record—the first audio recording of warfare—made in 1918 during the final month of World War I. Notably, the Golden Record contains no visible trace of war, injustice, famine, or environmental decay. It's these omissions that Robleto's work asks the viewer to confront, questioning our moral obligation to present a "full accounting" of our actions when constructing the memory of humanity, as well as who has the right to curate that narrative.

"When presented with the opportunity to co-commission Dario's final film in the trilogy," James Glisson shares, "SBMA had to pursue it because of the artist's track record for thoughtful and exquisitely constructed works. Moreover, it is a chance to share this work with the rich film culture of Santa Barbara and California. Dario's art asks difficult and sobering questions about our lives' finitude and the very human hope to live on in some form. Space exploration brings these ideas into sharp focus because individuals, the human species, and the earth itself become insignificant when measured against the vastness of space. There is, in space exploration, a mixture of awe tinged with sadness because of this immensity. In his film, Dario weaves a striving for permanence alongside humanity's ongoing struggle towards love, comradeship, and community."

"One of the many powerful elements of Dario's work is its versatility and the poetics of his words and imagery—he is able to at once convey the sense of discovery, melancholy, and sublimity felt when comparing the vastness of outer space to the lifespan of human civilization," said Margaret Adler, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art's former Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper. "With Voyager 1 soon to exit our solar system and, therefore, its final contact with us approaching, we are especially honored to have commissioned this film and this exhibition, which are really about love and loss and speak to how we, as humans, have told our story in the past and how we will continue to do so throughout the ages."

*Dario Robleto: The Signal* is organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. The film *Ancient Beacons Long for Notice* is made possible in part by VIA Art Fund. The commission of the film for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art was underwritten by Sheila Wald and Bill Pierce, The Museum Contemporaries, and an anonymous donor. This exhibition's realization at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art has been supported with gifts from the Resonance Foundation, SBMA Women's Board, Martha Gabbert, Susan D. Bowey, and Jacquelyn Klein-Brown.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is one of the finest museums on the West coast and is celebrated for the superb quality of its permanent collection. Its mission is to integrate art into the lives of people through internationally recognized exhibitions and special programs, as well as the thoughtful presentation of its permanent collection.

**Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA**

**Open Tuesday – Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, 1<sup>st</sup> Thursdays 5 – 8 pm**

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