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Oral history interview with Dario Robleto, 2020 August 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dario Robleto on August 17, 2020. The interview took place in Houston, Texas, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Dario Robleto at his home in Houston, Texas on August 17, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. So, Dario, thanks for taking some time to talk to the Archives, and we're really just wondering how people have been doing since March, and maybe introduce yourself a bit.

DARIO ROBLETO: [Laughs.] Well, thank you. Thanks for asking, Josh. I'm, uh, Dario Robleto, yes. I'm an artist. Currently live in Houston. From San Antonio. I was born and raised there. Um, been in Houston for over 10 years now, so I can fully say that I'm a Houstonian. Really proud of the—of the city. It's such a great art community.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DARIO ROBLETO: [Inaudible.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oop, it's freezing a little bit.

DARIO ROBLETO: Oh, is it? Darn it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: There you are. It's back. Well, that's also, you know, the Zoom technology interface is part of 2020, right. So we welcome those glitches.

DARIO ROBLETO: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So—yeah. So really, just however—what happened, you know, in March, what really pivoted in March when things kind of started shutting down.

DARIO ROBLETO: It was pretty dramatic. I was—I was maybe four days into beginning a residency at what's called the Harvard Art Lab.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DARIO ROBLETO: And I had quite an ambitious project lined up that involved uh my first kind of foray into working with dancers and choreographers and live musicians. And, you know, Harvard was one of the first schools to announce they were shutting down, so it was shocking. I mean, it was really hard to process. Um and the residency was quickly shut down as well, so I had—I had to quickly get back home.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So besides having to go back home, did the project—is it continuing in any form, or was it just a "we're stopping this for now"?

[00:02:01]

DARIO ROBLETO: Well, that—so with a few months into this now, you know, I've had time to reevaluate, and I think that's—one of the things that's becoming apparent during this time is how to salvage projects that were in motion, weigh it against how much do I just scrap, scrap and start over. You know, it's a rare time when you can kind of scrap a lot of things and then reevaluate. But I was so—I'm very committed to this project so I will figure out how to finish it one day but it's—for now it's going to have to be put on pause, especially since so much of it had to do with touching a lot of—a lot of very intimate choreography that was being planned. So it gives even that a new light to me, how to think about working with dancers.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Has this kind of new—this quantum leap into using virtual

communication played into experiment with that at all?

DARIO ROBLETO: It—well, I think as I'm in line with most people and I truly dislike it. I've never had to be creative like this.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DARIO ROBLETO: I'm also working on another project that I'm trying to—I'm determined to keep going through Zoom. Uh it has not been fun, but I'm inching along. Um, yeah. And so I'm incorporating it into my creative process but I'm very—I'm dragging my feet on it. I must be honest.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. You're not alone.

DARIO ROBLETO: Yeah [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: So fall is coming up when normally people have things scheduled. I don't know if you teach, but do you have other thing besides the Harvard residency that have been canceled or postponed?

[00:03:40]

DARIO ROBLETO: Several things, yes. Lots of lecturing has been canceled. I had a—there was a group show [inaudible] moved to February, so we'll see if that—if that sticks. Uh but one thing I've had to grapple with is I don't teach full time but I'm very active. I really believe in engaging with young artists, so I do a lot of lecturing and I've been actually curious how schools are going to solve this problem because I know their visiting artists budgets have been slashed. Uh, I've been concerned about, on an education level for art students, the importance of visiting artists and how this will change for them this coming year. So it's made me really evaluate, like, okay, I need to get over my Zoom problem because this is the way to do it, and I believe in, you know, studio visits and artist talks. So I've had a few that have been—we've been able to reschedule and I will—I'll test the waters on how I feel about lecturing through Zoom.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, I hope those go as smoothly as possible. Um to get a little more personal, you're in Houston. I'm curious what you're observing about the city you're in and how your, you know, has your conception of your living space changed? Who is your—who is your bubble?

DARIO ROBLETO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Uh yeah. We're definitely an epicenter right now. It's—I live very close to the medical center and, you know, I don't know if most of the country knows but Houston's, you know, identity is NASA and its medical center and it's a big deal so it gets a lot of coverage. And because I'm so close to it, I definitely sense—I see the—I see the workers leaving every day to catch the bus with their mask on and their scrubs and it's—it really hits home in that way. So my mother and sister also are in healthcare.

JOSH T. FRANCO: In Houston?

DARIO ROBLETO: No, not in Houston but in Texas, a different city. Uh and so they both work at a nursing home which is, you know, maybe the worst place to be right now. So every day I'm assuming the worst. I can't—my mother is, you know, older and not—she really shouldn't still be there, but um she's an incredible woman. She's been—and she worked at hospice and now she works in the nursing home. She's been a caretaker her whole life. A truly wonderful, beautiful heart and soul, and of course she's not going to quit her job right now. So as her son, I've really been grappling with what role I can take to support her from a distance, as well as my sister. And it's—it's been tough. I have to be honest, you know.

[00:06:44]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are you getting advice from them that you don't—that is—is everything you're hearing from them what you're hearing in mainstream media or are there discrepancies?

DARIO ROBLETO: Yeah. It's a disaster. You know, like as far as getting protective equipment in time, um the confusion of protocols to take, the constant changing by the state as far as what the rules are if you get a positive case. Just the bureaucratic nightmare of it all I hear from my mother a lot and, you know, like everyone we're reflecting on the infrastructure of our country right now too.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DARIO ROBLETO: And kind of seeing all the weaknesses become apparent. So that's very present on my mind as—because of a direct family connection to how those bureaucratic and political nightmares have a direct effect on loved ones.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

DARIO ROBLETO: Very, very aware of it. And just the very haunting stories my mother conveys about, um, you know, family members having to stand outside windows to see their family, you know, the window outside their room, a patient passing away and, you know, nobody there to commemorate them and so the staff doing that instead for them. Very, very gripping kind of stories she's communicating.

[00:08:18]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You know, our secretary, Lonnie Bunch, has very clearly identified two pandemics happening in 2020, COVID-19, but also the kind of surge in especially anti-Black form of racism we've been experiencing.

DARIO ROBLETO: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And I wonder what you've observed about that in Houston, or personally what BLM marches look like where you are.

DARIO ROBLETO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I have—there have been—like with everywhere, there have been protests. You know, Houston, I would say on—in the broadest terms, one of our sources of pride in Houston is diversity.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DARIO ROBLETO: And it's been interesting watching how I think—of course we have problems. I'm not saying we don't. But it's been interesting that things haven't escalated exactly the same way some of the other—you know, like Minneapolis, for example. And I think a lot of people have reflected on what is—what's the social cohesion in Houston that's at least allowing us to communicate well enough that it doesn't sort of escalate to those next levels. I don't have a good answer, but it's definitely been on my mind, what is it about some cities that it seems that we're communicating enough that it doesn't boil over to that next level. And as of now, Houston I think [inaudible].

You know, I know it's a tough topic as far as the policing right now as well, but our police chief here has been very vocal. He's gotten a lot of national attention. He's been—he's been on CNN, and I—this is just my own thoughts, I don't know if others would agree, but I think he's doing okay as far as trying to communicate and that may be what I'm getting at here about why, why things are relatively calm here, or at least people are communicating, is that he's really gotten out in front and tried to show that he's willing to communicate. And, um, so I know these are—these are very recent observations, of course. I don't know—I'm sure there are problems that I'm unaware of behind the scenes, but it is curious to why a city of our size has been getting—cooperating at some level, you know, and it is—I don't have much more insight than that yet except to say that that's what's happening here that I've noticed.

[00:11:04]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Maybe it's because it's Beyonce's hometown.

DARIO ROBLETO: Yes [laughs]. That's a huge thing. Yeah. That's a—that's a great point [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: I have a question too. I've been asking everyone about studio access. Do you have a studio separate from your home, and have you been able to go there? Has that changed?

DARIO ROBLETO: I've made a pretty radical move in my life. I'm very much a studio-based artist and I've recently had to let it go. I really can't stress enough how, how traumatic that's been for, you know, someone who lives and breathes being creative, wake up and go to sleep and that's all—that's kind of where my mind is all the—all the time. So my—you know, for most artists, their identity is tied up in their studio space, and to let it go is quite, is quite a big deal. But I've embraced it because I've been a full-time artist for over 20 years, and by every year I'm stunned that I'm still a full-time artist and it is such a gift and I'm really proud of it.

And—but what that means is that for every one of those 20 years, every year has been different on how to do it. There's not—there—you know, the life of stability, you know, an employer that will ensure you all these sorts of things, being a self-employed artist is a particular problem and you have to be nimble. And so I had a really deep soul-searching moment that the most aggressive sort of financial step I could take was to let go of my studio. And because I [inaudible] to continue being an artist with my life, and I know that periodically I need to make some tough decisions and this is that one for this year. So I'm being—I was being super proactive. I think I made the right decision. I'll get a studio again one day, but it has meant that I'm shifting my creativity in exciting ways, actually. It's become a challenge that I'm embracing.

[00:13:22]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DARIO ROBLETO: So.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's good. That's great. And what about the artist community in Houston? Are you—do you feel like you are part of a community there or there's social distance visits happening between each other yet?

DARIO ROBLETO: I have not interacted with any local artist in person since this all started. Well, I should say—no, I should say maybe one or two but it's not—of course it's not the same as it was. I can't—I have to say I don't feel that I know well enough sort of the state of the health of the art community here right now. I know it's probably suffering like everywhere. I think partly just the lack of contact is one thing, but I think like many of us I've kind of hunkered down and have been in my in my own head in a way that I need to watch and not let myself spiral down into my isolation.

[00:14:32]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Speaking of which, it's also a bit interesting to track who's kind of jumped on—have you kind of dived into any of the, like, sourdough starter thing or—

DARIO ROBLETO: Nuh-uh [negative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: —[inaudible] copings? Okay.

DARIO ROBLETO: No [laughs]. Well, I mean, for me I guess, I mean, it's always my art was the—was the coping thing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

DARIO ROBLETO: And thank God I have that. I have two projects that I'm, like, all in on, 24/7, which has been wonderful to have that stability right now. But I guess in that sense my life hasn't changed in the level of hours I put in a day, and the passion behind those hours is as high as it's ever been. So that's been good. That's been really good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So this—you know, we're Smithsonian. We reasonably believe we'll be around and will be the place people can go for records, like, far down the road. Is there anything, any part of the kind of accounts you're seeing in 2020, what are they leaving out that you would want to ensure is on the record?

[00:15:46]

DARIO ROBLETO: Yeah. That's a great question, and I think one [inaudible] I've always been a bit of a historian myself and it's a crucial part of my work. And I actually, for a project, was able to study the end of World War I and the flu pandemic, and so I had a bit of a sense of that time period I think better than most. And—but more broadly, my interest in history has given me something that I—is sort of obvious but I think worth saying out loud and reminder in these times is—and I know I'm talking to the Smithsonian and the value of historical perspective. You know, this tendency we have to think that we are in the worst moment in history, every generation can make that argument because it's the one they know and which is the case for why historical perspective is so important. And that is in no way to downplay our moment, but what—which I think our moment will turn out to show some very unique things that history will judge as standing out from the rest. But with that said, because my work gives me that historical perspective, and in particular my work requires me to understand traumatic history, war, social

upheaval, various types of loss, more broadly speaking, my work has dealt with my whole life. So, you know, seeing the level of loss from the end of World War I, moving into the Spanish flu pandemic, it's just horrifying. A contemporary person would struggle to understand how bad it was. And of course we live in a moment where, as I said, we think we are in the worst moment.

[00:17:56]

And so it's soon—it's very soon to I guess be saying that because everyone is so aware of their own pain and suffering, and we should be, and we should care for each other in that. But what concerns me is that when it force—when it produces a sense of hopelessness that things will never get better and that this is the worst moment in history, and that is terrible for creativity. And as artists and someone invested in the power of creativity, I'm always hypervigilant as far as what are the threats to long-term creativity or being—or being creative long term. And I see this as a possibility that the sense of hopelessness [inaudible] away from the belief that art can still change the world in really important ways.

And so I'm hyperaware of that right now and I think—I believe in art and the power of artists so much, and history is my guide and it shows me that every time artists rise to the occasion. I don't think this time will be any different and we already have been. But I think right now if you watch the mainstream news, you would not get a sense of the fight for hope that's being displayed in creative ways at the same magnitude as the other forces in our culture. And so with time, I hope that becomes apparent, and I'm certainly trying to do my part in that, you know.

Yeah, I think that's kind of the big picture. It's so fresh and new that I hope, you know, I have something more meaningful to say in a year. But right now it's kind of got—you got a big picture remaining—having a sense of perspective.

[00:20:06]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I think that's great. That's a great place to end. Hope and fight.

DARIO ROBLETO: Great. Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you, Dario, for this.

DARIO ROBLETO: You're welcome, Josh.

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