

## REVIEWS

### BALTIMORE

#### Dario Robleto

Baltimore Museum of Art // November 16, 2014–March 29, 2015

INSPIRED BY THE proximity of Johns Hopkins University's Space Telescope Science Institute to the museum, "Setlists for a Setting Sun" is a collection of Robleto's collections, which cover themes such as music, archaeology, and space exploration. Two eponymous works, subtitled *Crystal Palace* and *Dark Was the Night*, are encased assemblages of objects that would populate 16th-century cabinets of curiosity; they include shells, coral, the skeletal remains of sea animals, precious stones, cave minerals, crystals—found and made—interspersed with cyanotypes and butterfly specimens. The insects' antennae in the two installations have been re-created from stretched audiotape recordings of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* and blues musician Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night." Performed at London's Crystal Palace in 1888, Handel's opera is the oldest recording of music. "Dark Was the Night," recorded in 1927, will perhaps be one of the most wide-reaching: It is included on the Golden Record aboard the Voyager spaceship launched in 1977, chosen to convey human loneliness to the beings who may someday hear it.

In his essay "The Collector"—itself a collection of text snippets—Walter Benjamin writes, "It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired) it turns to stone." Robleto goes one step further: His practice seems driven by a desire to extend the life of objects beyond acquisition, capturing not only music's ephemerality as a medium but the poignancy of the listening experience. Butterflies appear throughout the exhibition as a metaphor for impermanence and vehicles for disseminating music. *American Seabed*, 2014, is a compilation of fossilized whale eardrums that have become resting places for more butterfly specimens. Here, antennae have been replaced with pulled audiotape of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row," 1965, a song of notorious length that intertwines biblical, literary, and historical figures associated with water, like Noah, Ophelia, and the *Titanic's* passengers. Robleto's butterflies whisper these narratives to whale ears in a scene possible only through the collection, as a medium that combines fiction and historical reality with romantic and redemptive impulses.



FROM LEFT:  
**Dario Robleto**  
Installation  
view of  
*Setlists for a  
Setting Sun*  
(*Dark Was the  
Night*), 2014.

**Stuart Semple**  
*Oops I Did It  
Again*, 2014.  
Acrylic on  
canvas,  
29½ x 29½ in.

The artist establishes genealogy as an ordering system for idiosyncratic assemblages. In *Melancholy Matters Because of You*, 2010, Robleto fashions adult, adolescent, and fetal hand bones from his own, his mother's, and his grandmother's record collections. In *Music Has the Right to Children*, 2013, he displays butterfly specimens with antennae made from the stretched audiotape recordings of paired songs by musician parents and their children, such as Frank and Nancy Sinatra and Elvis and Lisa Marie Presley.

For *The Sky, Once Choked with Stars, Will Slowly Darken*, 2011, Robleto removes everything but the stage lights from concert album-cover images by Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix, and others. What remains in the eight digital prints appear to be telescopic views of celestial bodies, a conflation of deceased music stars with illumination in the night sky. Robleto concretizes poignancy on the scale of the universe by appropriating stars as lights that never go out. —RP



### LONDON

#### Stuart Semple

Delahunty // November 13–December 4, 2014

JOHN CARPENTER'S SCI-FI horror film *They Live* presents a dystopian future in which the population is bombarded by hidden authoritarian messages. These are visible only by using special sunglasses that also expose consumers as rotting zombies. Semple's new paintings function in a similar way: He proposes that we are in an "unconscious coma state induced by that flickering media flow which ultimately shuts us down."

"Anxiety Generation" (all works 2014) reveals Semple as an assured and accomplished artist. His post-Pop sensibility (he is a child of both Warhol and Koons) embraces a complex layering of appropriated images and stenciled lettering sampled from print and digital sources, as well as social media. Music is a key reference point, especially pop lyrics. In *Suspended in This Bliss* (titled after a lyric from the American indie band Bright Eyes), Casper the Friendly Ghost is juxtaposed with a film still of a brutal murder found on Instagram and Jamie Reid's iconic punk typography. The artist hints at the concept of erasure from Heidegger and Derrida; words in his paintings ("too high, too far, too soon," "cool aid," and "Froot Loops") are frequently crossed out, suggesting their inability to convey meaning.

Horror movies including *Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* also provide fertile material. Six paintings are based on stills showing sexualized violence from the '70s gory Italian film genre Giallo, overlaid with lyrics from the likes of Britney Spears, Kylie Minogue, and the Spice Girls. To cut through our cynicism and give images again the power to disturb is quite a feat; that Semple manages it via the medium of paint is even more impressive. An artist and an activist, Semple is politically engaged beyond his art critiquing mass media and consumerism: He is an ambassador for the mental health charity Mind and has also campaigned for artists' rights. His approach is summed up by the famous line from *They Live*: "I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass... and I'm all out of bubblegum." —Jonathan R Jones