ANCIENT BEACONS LONG FOR NOTICE
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Review by Sebastian Smee

FORT WORTH — Launching rockets into space — no less than slathering on makeup, bulking up at the gym or paying for hair transplants — is a manifestation of our abhorrence of solitude, our yearning for love. Ask Elon Musk.

Nice if you can afford it? Sure.

Fundamentally risible? Perhaps. But it's also part of a rich human tradition.

In 1977, NASA sent two spacecraft beyond the Earth's atmosphere: Voyager 1 and Voyager 2. Since 2012, Voyager 1 has been in interstellar space, having broken through the heliopause. Voyager 2 did the same in 2018. Both are traveling at over 30,000 mph, making them the fastest objects humans have ever made. Their fate is now separate from the Earth's. Nothing we've made has ever traveled so far.

What has this to do with love and loneliness?

Everything, if you believe Dario Robleto, the Houston-based artist responsible for a 71-minute film that I am convinced is a 21st-century masterpiece.

The film is on display in Robleto's exhibition "The Signal" at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth. (Steven Watson/Amon Carter Museum of American Art; Dario Robleto)

Robleto's "Ancient Beacons Long for Notice," the third in a trilogy, is on display at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth as part of an exhibition titled "The Signal." It's a meditation on love and solitude that takes as its subject the Voyager missions, and specifically, a very unusual feature of both.

Though you may never have heard of him, Robleto is a stupendous artist with an extraordinary track record of fresh thinking and dazzling execution. He is one of only a handful of artists successfully delivering on the oft-proposed, seldom-accomplished integration of science and art. Usually such efforts are dutiful and joyless and tend to leave art looking trivial, decorative and dispensable beside the marvelous, blinkered juggernaut of scientific progress.

Robleto flips the script. He knows his science and history. He thinks through all the implications. But he is brilliant with images, sound and storytelling. All of that — quite apart from the fact that the top of my head remains blown off a week after seeing it — is why I'm calling "Ancient Beacons Long for Notice" a major accomplishment.

Part of the film shows the path of two Voyager missions, traveling away from the Earth. (Dario Robleto)

Right now, as Voyagers 1 and 2 hurtle through space, they have bolted to their sides a kind of archive of life on Earth called the "Golden Record." An actual golden LP, it was conceived by the astronomer Carl Sagan, who devoted much of his life to researching the possibility of extraterrestrial life. The project's creative director was Ann Druyan, now 75, who later became Sagan's wife.

What would you put on a record tasked with representing life on Earth to other intelligent life forms — a record intended to last longer than the planet itself? And what might be the meaning of such an exercise?

These are the questions Robleto and his collaborators Jennifer Roberts, Skye Ashbrook Wylie Earnhart and Bill Haddad address in "Ancient Beacons Long for Notice." The film, a documentary-style meditation on "The Golden Record," combines remarkable footage and graphics, deftly interwoven music and sound, and a deeply poetic narration that lingers in the mind. Adjacent to the darkened room in which it screens is a gallery showing related works on paper and sculpture.

A detail view of Robleto's sculpture "American Seabed," 2014, made from materials including butterflies and fossilized whale ear bones. The antennae on the butterflies is made from audiotape of a Bob Dylan recording. (Dario Robleto)

The contents of the Golden Record, which Robleto describes as the greatest archival project humans have ever undertaken, were guided by NASA's ethos of positivity, diversity and diplomacy. The record, in other words, was intended as a goodwill ambassador. So it includes greetings in 55 languages, various musical selections (Beethoven, Senegalese percussion, Melanesian panpipes) and recordings of crickets, frogs, earthquakes, thunder, rain, surf, rocket engines, a screeching chimpanzee, baying wolves and whale song.

To convey even more of the complexity of the Earth's history and human achievement, the record also contains coded images of reproduction and birth, DNA structure, eating and drinking, a Balinese dancer, Arabic writing, physical unit definitions, a family portrait, dolphins, and seashells. The images were recorded as audio waveforms after projecting them onto a screen and capturing them with a television camera. (The record's cover includes instructions to help decode the images, but how do you write instructions for life forms you know nothing about?)

It may sound all a bit random and futile, but Robleto makes great claims for the Golden Record. He calls it the most enduring world monument ever designed and thinks of it as a final arc of knowledge, a last will and testament, a vessel of science taking a leap of faith and a frozen symphony awaiting its thaw.

I think it's valid to see it as all these things — even, perhaps, as "the greatest work of art that has never been accounted for," although given the blown-out frames of reference, that last claim obliges us to ask what art itself might be. It is, after all, a flexible, highly contingent concept.

Plenty of cultures here on Earth have made resonant objects they never thought of as art. So what is the likelihood that extraterrestrials, if they exist, would recognize the Golden Record as art?

Robleto's film is a meditation on the "Golden Record," an LP launched by NASA on the Voyager spacecraft in the 1970s to convey the complexity of the Earth's history and human achievement. (Dario Robleto)

Probably zero. But that is not Robleto's point. What he wants to know — and it is one of several surprising turns in his work — is what the Golden Record means to us.

Turning seamlessly from empirical facts to poetic speculation, he communicates with his heart. He knows he is onto something and wants so badly to share it that you feel your eyes begin to water under the pressure of his yearning.

In truth, there is almost no chance that any intelligent life form will ever discover the Golden Record. If it is somehow discovered, then decoded, there is probably even less chance that humans will ever know about it.

And so in one sense the Golden Record can be thought of as a gift without expectation of return, underwritten by a logic of compassion, even of love. In one of many memorable phrases, Robleto calls it a "mixtape for the unrequited."

The film shows Ann Druyan, the creator of the Golden Record, and her husband, astronomer Carl Sagan. (Dario Robleto)

And so what about love?

Here Robleto turns our attention to a curious historical contingency, twinkling in the dark like an orbiting satellite: While Druyan was helping to decide on what to include on the Golden Record, she and Sagan found themselves falling in love.

Before turning to the implications of this fact — perhaps trivial, perhaps profound — Robleto takes us back in history to the first live battlefield sound recording, made in Lille, France, near the end of World War I. Will Gaisberg, an American-born recording engineer, decided to record the sound of a British artillery unit firing mustard gas shells toward Germans on Oct. 9, 1918.

By then, it was clear that the four-year-old conflict was the most catastrophic in human history — a war that had laid bare a darkness and absurdity in civilization, and in the human soul. Gaisberg hoped his recording would have a cautionary impact.

Unfortunately, during the recording, he inhaled mustard gas, which so weakened his lungs that they couldn't handle the influenza virus then raging through Europe, and he died just weeks later. He had given his life to make a truthful document.

When she became aware of Gaisberg's recording, Druyan, who had just lived through the Vietnam War, got to wondering about truth in historical archives. There was nothing on the

Golden Record to suggest war, famine and environmental devastation. Wasn't this a shortcoming? If it was to be a true testament to life on Earth, shouldn't it acknowledge humanity's dark side?

Her colleagues at NASA thought the inclusion of negative sentiments could be perceived by extraterrestrial life forms as threatening. It was wiser, they argued, to present humanity's best face.

But Druyan wondered: What is the point of lies in a last testament?

Here, Robleto returns us to loneliness, love and the ethics of art and truth-telling. If the universe does indeed teem with intelligent life, why haven't we heard anything yet? How long will we remain lonely? Perhaps we and our extraterrestrial siblings are like doomed fireflies, cruelly separated by space and time, flickering out before any connection can be made.

Connection, seen from this cosmic perspective, can be understood as the rarest of gifts. It's not as if artists haven't always known this. "Only connect," wrote E.M. Forster in the epigraph of "Howards End." Meanwhile, Druyan and Sagan, it's comforting to know, were inseparable until Sagan's death in 1996.

In the 1970s, as she worked on the Golden Record, Druyan became convinced that it needed to include things about humanity that were more essential, more turbulent, more soulful. She wondered if there were a way to record something more innate, prelingual.

She turned to electroencephalograms (to record her brain's activity) and electrocardiograms (to record her heart). Over an hour, hooked up to these remarkable modern recording devices, she traced a specific mental itinerary, reflecting on the things that make us human: suffering, death, shame, humility and hope. For several minutes at the end of the hour, she consciously reflected on love, *felt* love. She compressed the hour into a minute, including it on the Golden Record.

A detail of Robleto's "Unknown and Solitary Seas (Dreams and Emotions of the 19th Century)," 2018, showing re-creations of 19th-century cardiogram heartbeats expressing different emotional and psychological states. (Dario Robleto)

Thus, a young woman in love had found a way to smuggle traces of that love — but also of war, shame and suffering — out of the solar system. Miraculously, those traces are now over 15 billion miles from Earth.

Physics, Robleto points out, does not permit lies. The Voyager missions themselves were dependent on a reality that could not be fudged — a once-every-175-years planetary alignment. If scientists can't lie their way to the stars, he contends, neither can the humanists, historians and poets who are tasked with telling our story.

The vastness of space, in other words, is not an argument for the futility of our actions. Instead, it can be a source of our ethics, our attempts to assuage loneliness. If the Golden Record was that

rarest thing — a gift without expectation of return, “a mixtape for the unrequited” — this same ideal of selfless love should undergird our ethics on Earth, highlighting the imperative of preserving love and truth alone.

All this is my clumsy, journalistic attempt to convey the gist of what Robleto communicates with infinitely more art, tact and beauty. So please, seek out his work. It may not last for billions of years, but it will be around awhile, I’m sure of it.

“Dario Robleto: The Signal” featuring “Ancient Beacons Long for Notice” *through Oct. 27 at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth.*