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For the Record: A Warped History Dedicated to Vinyl

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By HOLLY MYERS, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

"Deep Down I Don't Believe in Hymns," Dario Robleto's exhibition of recent work at ACME, plunges dauntlessly into the fetishism that's grown up around the vinyl record since the coming of the digital age. With the restless vitality of a deejay, the obsessive erudition of a record collector and the detached curiosity of a chemist, Robleto does just about everything one can do to records without playing them: He shreds them, slices them, melts them, molds them and fossilizes them, all in the service of an obscure and vaguely Victorian system of alchemy.

The largest piece in the show is "The Diva Surgery," a glass-case laboratory crowded with a macabre assortment of containers and instruments (a lab burner, a glass breast pump, a tracheal extractor and "vintage surgical equipment," to name a few). It features a downright bizarre collection of materials, including not only vinyl and audio tape, but sulfur, carbon, amino acids, crushed cubic zirconium, Novocain, sugar, honey, ocean water, oil, hummingbird and butterfly nectar, beeswax and polyester resin. Robleto blends these substances in sterile jars and beakers to form compounds such as "Low End

Boom," "Honey Vocals," "Vocal Dissolution" and "Sing Me to Sleep Mix," which presumably stimulate reactions with the saffron-like threads of shredded vinyl--distilled diva-ness--that wait in dozens of tiny glass vials with labels such as "Peggy," "Bessy," "Patsy," "Shirley," "Ella" and "Edith." This chemist, in other words, is a disc jockey.

The remaining works are less elaborate but equally clever. In "Dusty in Stasis (Dusty Come Back)," Robleto preserves fragments of a Dusty Springfield record in what is apparently hand-ground prehistoric amber. In "Falsetto Can Be a Weapon," he transfigures records into tools of defense and destruction: The Carpenters' "Hurting Each Other" becomes an arrow, Tammy Wynette's "Stand by Your Man" a spear, and Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly With His Song" a tomahawk.

A series of paper collages called "Chemistry in the Church" extends the scientific motif into the realm of Christian music to produce covers for fictional albums such as "Organ Favorites of the Lutheran Lunacy," "Holy Roman Inquiry on Nanotechnology" and "Vicars for the De-Romanticization of Astronomy."

The only material that this intelligent, conceptually thorough exhibition lacks, it seems, is sound. Or does it? Its meticulously labeled artifacts conjure voices in the memory, generating a lively internal soundtrack. One can't help but wonder how much of this music emanates from the vinyl itself.

ACME, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 857-5942, through Feb. 9. Closed Sunday and Monday.