

## Works spun off a record turntable

ART REVIEW

ICA show captures artists' love of vinyl

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### **THE RECORD: Contemporary Art and Vinyl**

At: Institute of Contemporary Art. Through Sept. 5. 617-478-3100. [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)



Unlikely sounding subjects can make for amazing exhibitions. And that's certainly the case with the Institute of Contemporary Art's spring group show, "The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl."

If you had asked me last week to think up examples of contemporary art that employ vinyl

records or turntables, I might have come up with two or three. Now, after seeing this show, I am convinced not only that contemporary art's preoccupation with vinyl is a pervasive global phenomenon, but that it might amount to a secret key, an all-purpose metaphor, for late-20th-century creativity.

Who would have thought?

There is no single explanation for why so many artists have found vinyl records so attractive. There is a link, perhaps, between artists' sense of their own marginality and possible redundancy in a mass-mediated world and the more dramatic obsolescence of vinyl records. Long ago superseded by cassettes, CDs, and digital downloads, records nevertheless linger on as objects of romance and cult-like devotion.

More to the point, there is something hypnotic about records as objects: their satisfying weight and shape, the way they move on the turntable, and the way such a mechanically elegant contact between spinning disc and resting needle can unlock such aural and emotional wonders. The idea that a physical object, as opposed to a digital reproduction, can contain whole worlds, holds an obvious and inherent appeal for artists.

The best art in this show, which was put together by Trevor Schoonmaker for the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, taps into this appeal.

Dario Robleto, who also starred in "The Old Weird America," a group show with musical sub-themes that came to the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in 2009, is a case in point: His work combines cultish obsessions with electric wit and a generous dollop of pathos.

He is represented by two works here — one of them large, loud, and very funny. But the smaller, less prepossessing works are more beguiling. One is a vitrine containing a folded blue shirt and a colorful collection of buttons, each with a different shape and design.

It's called "Sometimes Billie Is All That Holds Me Together." The extraordinary thing about it is simply that the buttons were made from hand-ground and melted Billie Holiday records.

Some of these buttons have been sewed back on the shirt, which Robleto salvaged from a thrift store. As part of the same project, other shirts, freshly mended with Billie Holiday buttons, were donated back to the thrift stores from which he bought them.

Robleto, in other words, makes relics out of pop culture. There's an element of absurdity in most of what he does, but that very absurdity makes his works acutely poignant.

There are so many other great works in the show — great because they're unexpected, funny, socially and politically astute, and in several cases surprisingly beautiful.

In his fascinating low-tech videos involving spinning turntables and his witty collages of vinyl records, the celebrated Christian Marclay embraces imperfection: "Pops and clicks from scratches, and static noise from worn grooves are sonic expressions of the time passed," he writes in an artist's statement reprinted in the catalog.

Past time is beautifully captured by Malick Sidibé's 1960s and '70s portrait photographs of young Malians posing proudly and playfully with favorite LPs and turntables. "Je Suis Fan des Disques" is the title of one of them: "I am crazy for records." It's an exuberant, irrational obsession that pulses through the rest of the show, giving even the most cerebral works an undercurrent of levity.

There's a mysterious sensuality in Gregor Hildebrandt's "Kassetenschallplatte (Cassette Record)," a framed LP record made out of fastidiously spiraled magnetic tape unspooled from a cassette tape.

And there's almost endless comedy in Taiyo Kimura's tiny drawings all riffing on the circular shape of the vinyl record.

I haven't even touched on album art — the most direct connection between visual art and records, and therefore a vital ingredient in the show.

Look out, in this context, for Alice Wagner's remakes of modernist album covers made from colored thread and wax, and for the extraordinary invented record sleeves of Minging Mike, a self-taught artist who invented a whole recording career out of nothing.

This whole show, in fact, spins magic and substance out of what seemed slight at the outset. It's well worth checking out.

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