

Brainwashed - Fraufräulein, "Extinguishment"

Written by Lucas Schleicher

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Extinguishment
Fraufräulein
Billy Gomberg | Anne Guthrie

Two of the three songs that comprise Fraufräulein's *Extinguishment* start with a single foundational sound. On "Whalebone in a Treeless Landscape," it is Anne Guthrie's French horn that initiates the performance. Dripping water and the ring of a large, resonant metallophone follow immediately after. "My Left Hand, Your Right Hand" commences with a solitary, almost piercing electronic pitch, like an emergency broadcast signal stuck on a single wavering tone. After a few seconds, it is joined by an echoey snap, a distant singing voice, and the booming of a bass drum or a floor tom. They are both deceptively simple beginnings, richer in content and potential than their starkness implies. Billy Gomberg and Anne Guthrie treat them like seeds from which to grow and prune their compositions. They blend field recordings, of rain and a patriotic Norwegian parade for example, with scrapyards detritus, pair foghorn drones with the bristly friction of surface noise, and balance the eerie ambience of humming wires against a distorted monastic chant, all while maintaining a delicate connection with those first embryonic moments. The way they achieve that consonance and balance—between the acoustic and electronic instruments and in the structures of the songs themselves—defines the album.

[Another Timbre](#)

Extinguishment's macrocosmic inclination is set down during the course of its opening piece, "Convention of Moss." Like the songs that follow, it is cobbled together from a combination of prerecorded audio and live instrumentation. Differentiating between live and prerecorded can be tricky, however. In concert, Anne and Billy play French horn and bass guitar respectively and use various digital methods to record and manipulate their own sounds on the fly. Thus, the white noise generated by blowing through a detached valve becomes a loop-able and transformable sample.

Watching it happen in real time makes following the aural lineage of different passages easier, but on record there can be no such discernment. Without a visual aid, the entire album, from the perspective of the listener at home, sounds as if it could be a series of prerecorded tapes arranged with a computer. On the other hand, it is possible that much of what seems digitally achieved is actually the product of an extended technique utilized inside the studio, like drawing corrugated wire across the bell of the French horn. There is simply no way to tell.

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Confusion like this renders the music's canvas more absorbent, and new and unexpected elements enter the fray with the same ease and acceptance as a loud guitar solo entering a rock 'n' roll song. That is a feature in a lot of improvised electronic music, but Gomberg and Guthrie handle it gracefully and add something of their own to the equation, namely the derivation of structure and development from tone color and melody.

As wide open as *Extinguishment* is with respect to material, purpose and control still subsists in the duo's dedication to form and spaciousness. After establishing a core sound or a core melody, Anne and Billy toy with it, adding harmonious elements to emphasize some of its features and introducing discord for the sake of contrast and equilibrium. Reshaping, repurposing, and reimagining those musical events is the secret logic behind each song, something that is made perfectly clear on "My Left Hand, Your Right Hand." The title hints at the way in which Gomberg and Guthrie mirror each other and the contents of their field recordings. The song's opening high tone is first blended into, then replaced by a droning vocal melody. Next comes a French horn and voice duet, a high resonant whistle, and eventually an undulating pitch that could be either synthetic or acoustic. Each figure mimics the last one, maintaining some semblance of identity with what has passed while at the same time pushing the performance forward. At times, the field recordings seem to be in tune with the instruments and the electronics too, resonating at the same frequency or within the same key even when they are quiet or empty (think of the harmonic resonance of Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*).

All of this gives the music a tangible three dimensional quality. Anne Guthrie and Billy Gomberg connect the world outside to the world of music in a way that must by now be familiar, but they do an exceptional job of it, utilizing their tools and techniques to magnify apparently simple musical elements (and non-musical ones, too, if that distinction still holds) to the size of universes.

samples:

- [Convention of Moss](#)
- [Whalebone in a Treeless Landscape](#)
- [My Left Hand, Your Right Hand](#)