

Brainwashed - Emptyset, "Skin"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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This latest EP is something of a daring experimental coda to this year's excellent *Borders*, as studio wizards James Ginzburg and Paul Purgas attempt to translate their crushing, frequency-saturated onslaught into purely acoustic recording techniques. Obviously, there has been a lot of foreshadowing throughout the duo's career hinting at this direction given Emptyset's longstanding fascination with architecture and natural resonance, but it was not until

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rs that

the essential missing piece was added to the formula: the viscerally biting snarl and rattle of a homemade zither. Given that

Skin

further constrains an already hyper-constrained vein of minimalism, this EP is primarily just for existing fans eager to see how well Ginzburg and Purgas handle pushing their vision to a seemingly self-sabotaging extreme, but a few of these simple variations survive the transformation with quite a lot of raw power intact.

[Thrill Jockey](#)

Any serious discussion of *Skin* has to begin by noting that Emptyset are willfully plunging into a stylistic cul de sac from which there is absolutely no escape without some considerable reinvention: Ginzburg and Purgas have taken minimalism so far that they have stripped away all melody, almost all rhythm, almost all harmony, and any possible kind of compositional arc. What remains is essentially just the textures and overtones that can be generated from reverberating metal strings and their surrounding acoustic environment. Naturally, this puts Emptyset in similar territory to that of artists like Alvin Lucier and Ellen Fullman, but with a massive key difference: Purgas and Ginzburg have no interest in exploring the shifting, slowly evolving microtonal harmonies that giant buzzing strings can conjure up in a longform drone piece, opting to instead traffic in condensed and punchy displays of wall-shaking force.

Skin

sounds like what Fullman might have done if she had toured

The Long String Instrument

on bills with Motörhead for a few weeks and had bottles hurled at her head. The opening "Skin I" is the strongest distillation of that "punk minimalism" aesthetic, as it sounds like two people violently strumming the same one-note bass line on vibrantly buzzing and rattling strings.

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Initially, it is just a jangling textural assault, but gradually one of the strings is bent, creating some menacing-sounding harmonies. The real magic happens in the background, however, as a cloud of low-frequency tones slowly begins to shudder and distort while ghostly harmonics form unexpected patterns. It is a very cool and deceptively subtle trick that I suspect would be especially stunning in a live environment where I could actually feel the room and the air itself vibrate and transform as the undercurrent gathered power.

There is only so much that can be done with a homemade zither and a kick drum though, so the rest of this brief EP is devoted to exploring the limited spaces not already covered by "Skin I." "Skin II" reprises the slow-motion bass drum pulse of its processor, but eschews the frenzied and kinetic strumming for a single, slowly repeating chord that gradually produces an oscillating haze of overtones. Unfortunately, the piece is under 3 minutes long, so it is more of a "check out this trick!" experience than an actual satisfying composition. "Eye I" is more a significant divergence for Emptyset, as an obsessively strummed single chord is joined by ritualistic-sounding vocal chanting that eventually coheres into something that resembles a stomping and lurching occultist procession. The closing "Eye II" is unsurprisingly more of the same, but with more of a rolling feel. It blossoms into something a bit more than mere variation in its second half, however, as a sneaking quake of blown-out-sounding sizzle creeps into the lower frequencies. More than any other piece, "Eye II" highlights the fundamental difficulty with *Skin*

: if listened to casually, this EP basically just sounds like someone endlessly strumming a single string for 20 minutes with some minor variations in attack and rhythm. Also, the songs seem to end rather suddenly and arbitrarily without particularly going anywhere new. That is not necessarily a terrible thing, as there is plenty of activity lurking beneath the surface, but *Skin*

is definitely a release that demands both volume and active, focused attention from listeners in order to be enjoyable. In a live setting, both of those prerequisites are guaranteed and there is probably an accompanying seismic, multisensory component to boot, but a recording simply is not the optimal presentation for what Emptyset are doing here. Unfortunately, a recording is the only way that most people will get to experience the duo's unique approach to sound art.

Skin's degree of success is far more interesting than its limitations however, and I have to admire Emptyset's unwavering commitment to experimentation and ceaseless exploration. On purely musical terms, a release like this seems like a quixotic and questionable move after the wide release and creative breakthrough of *Borders*, but viewed on a purely artistic level, it is obvious that Emptyset HAD to take this detour before they could start planning their next frontier to conquer. That is the essential caveat for

Skin

: it is not the next evolution from the pummeling tour de force of

Borders

, but rather an appealing amuse-bouche that captures Purgas and Ginzburg performing some modest feats of sonic prestidigitation without the safety net of their usual studio enhancements.

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Samples:

- [Skin I](#)
- [Skin II](#)
- [Eye I](#)