

Brainwashed - Markus Guentner, "Extropy"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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It has admittedly been a while since I have actively followed this German composer's work, but his 2001 debut album (*In Moll*) spent quite some time in heavy rotation for me during the early 2000s dub- and ambient-techno boom. In more recent years, Guentner has jettisoned the "techno" part of his previous aesthetic and devoted himself to an acclaimed run of space-inspired ambient opuses on LA's A Strangely Isolated Place. Accordingly to Guentner, *Extropy*

"marks the final chapter in an accidental triptych of astronomy-related exploratory albums" that began with 2015's

Theia

. While the previous two epics in the series drew conceptual inspiration from the birth of the moon and the earth's relation to the largely unknown and possibly infinite universe, this latest release focuses on "the indefinite growth of the life we hold so dearly." More specifically, Guentner was fascinated by "a pseudoscientific prediction that human intelligence and technology will enable life to expand in an orderly way throughout the entire universe." While I personally expect nothing but entropy instead and note that this album has more of an elegiac feel than an optimistic one, there is no denying that Guentner knows how to make an absorbing and beautifully crafted album. In fact, he may be a bit too good at it, as

Extropy

would be a bit more memorable if he allowed more sharp edges and eccentricities to creep into his art. That said, this album still seems like it would be one hell of a challenge to top as far as billowing ambient cloudscape are concerned.

[A Strangely Isolated Place](#)

According to *Extropy's* description, Guentner views the album as something of a return to "what some may call his early, classic sound." I am not sure how much I agree, as I would describe much of the album as classic/textbook ambient (if unusually well-executed), as most pieces are a feast of frayed, blurred, grainy and billowing synth drones. However, the closing "Here" does break from the pack with a subtle nod to Guentner's techno past, as deep bass tones gradually creep in to provide a sense of structure and forward motion. To my ears, it calls to mind a ghostly abstraction of one of Seefeel's more dubby and vaporous cuts. That is always welcome territory, but I also loved the unexpectedly sharp feedback-like tone that repeatedly burns through the bleary haze of soft-focus droneage.

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While easily one of my favorite pieces on the album, "Here" is also significant for helpfully illustrating everything there is to know about *Extropy*: as far as ambient music is concerned, Markus Guentner is a consummate professional with exacting standards, so the album's baseline level of quality is quite high. However, "skillfully executed" is not the same thing as "memorable," so I especially appreciate the moments in which Guentner veered off-script into more distinctive territory. My favorite of those moments is "Everywhere," which beautifully enhances Guentner's cloud-like swells with slicing harmonic-like streaks, a submerged chorus, and some beautifully harmonizing brass drones. Aside from that, "Everywhere" also nods to Guentner's rhythmic past, as one section feels like warm washes of static breaking up on the shores of a brooding bass pattern. Elsewhere, "Concept of Credence" beautifully tugs at the heart strings with a crescendo of ringing and reverberant church bells that evoke the picturesque square of a cobblestoned dream village. The opening "Nowhere" is yet another favorite, as streaks of sharp feedback carve through a fog of flickering ghost melodies. Nearly all of these seven pieces are excellent though. At the moment, my gut tells me that

Extropy

is a very solid album with a handful of great pieces, but one that could benefit from more intrusions from field recordings, melodies, and sharper textures. I seem to enjoy it more with each listen, however, so I may belatedly proclaim it to be a masterpiece in another five years or so (when my patience and appreciation for nuanced emotional shadings finally catches up with Guentner's own).

Samples can be found [here](#) .