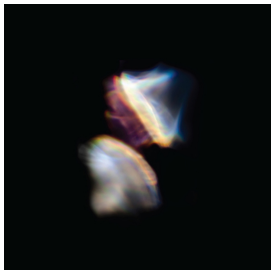


Brainwashed - Emptyset, "Borders"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Emptyset has always been a project that I felt weirdly guilty about not appreciating more, as they seemed like a more cerebral and mercilessly deconstructed twist on the UK's industrial-damaged post-dance milieu of Raime, Haxan Cloak, and Demdike Stare. Also, I love James Ginzburg's Subtext label. Unfortunately, all their songs sounded vaguely the same to me and I found all the praise for their architectural inspirations a bit mystifying. Yet still I kept optimistically buying each new album hoping for a masterpiece that never arrived. Thankfully, this debut release for Thrill Jockey finally makes everything click for me. The same general template as always is still in place (improbably dense, ribcage-rattling bass and a slow-motion kick drum pulse), but Ginzburg and Paul Purgas have now distilled it into a thing of truly bludgeoning elemental force: *Borders* absolutely explodes from my speakers. Also, the duo now wield a bass-heavy homemade "zither" to wonderfully visceral and snarling effect, which I did not see coming at all. I am officially now a convert.

[Thrill Jockey](#)

I freely admit to being very late to the party in embracing Emptyset, but there have always been some rather significant and mitigating "the emperor has no clothes" aspects to the duo that were somewhat difficult to get past. While I have not heard all of their releases, I have heard several of the major ones and Ginzburg and Purgas have a long history of avoiding anything resembling hooks, chord changes, melodies, propulsive rhythms, or songcraft. In fact, a remarkable number of Emptyset pieces (particularly the ones on this album) are built upon the obsessive repetition of just one note. There is also an unwavering fixation on deep, slow-motion thuds for the rhythmic component. Occasionally, on pieces like "Descent," Emptyset open up with something resembling a relentlessly pummeling groove with multiple notes and rare ping-ponging snare-like drums. Even then, however, the duo lock into that groove to a mechanically rigid and relentless degree. In general, however, *Borders* is a feast of extreme bass worship, heavy industrial textures, and cutting edge sound design. To some degree, many these eleven songs are almost interchangeable, but not in a "this band has absolutely no ideas" way. Rather, each new piece sounds like yet another monomaniacal attempt to bulldoze me into dust. I am totally fine with endless variations upon that theme.

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On paper, that might not sound especially compelling, but the sheer single-mindedness and absolutely crushing execution of *Borders* can be legitimately awe-inspiring, particularly when played at an appropriately high volume. In fact, I suspect the monolithic immensity of Emptyset can probably only be fully captured live, though *Border*
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seems to come as close as a mere recording can possibly come to replicating such viscerally seismic and all-consuming force. Also, the self-built zither was exactly the missing tool that Emptyset needed for their mission, as its buzzing metallic snarl gives these pieces a real sense of violence that far transcends conceptual sound art. The zither is especially effective when it is strummed with punky urgency, as in "Speak" and "Dissolve." Any attempt at maintaining forward momentum at all adds another yet layer of gratification. It is certainly not something that Emptyset has explored much in the past.

I am most fascinated by Emptyset's core aesthetic though, as it dawned on me as I revisited some of their other albums that Ginzburg and Purgas were essentially applying a high-powered microscope to underground dance: they would essentially focus on small snippet of a groove, excise it, blow it up to rumbling and monstrous size, and then loop it. In that light, I now appreciate the "architecture" component of Emptyset's art a bit better, as their real magic is their ability to take a simple idea and absolutely overwhelm a space with their highly localized earthquake of oversaturated frequencies, rich overtones, and subterranean rumble. That, of course, makes perfect sense, as anyone who heard last year's Paul Jebanasam and Roly Porter albums can attest that the Subtext milieu have a genius for explosive production values. They also have a tendency towards crystalline clarity, but Emptyset bucks the trend, as *Borders* is quite an appealingly gritty and distorted affair. There truly is not anything else out there quite like this, as

Borders

feels half like old Raime and Haxan Cloak snippets that have been chiseled and jacked-up to brutal effect and half like a boozed-up Ellen Fullman album spoiling for a street fight.

Borders

is admittedly all force and density, but it is nearly impossible to imagine anyone else pulling off that feat any better than Ginzburg and Purgas do here.

Samples:

- [Body](#)
- [Descent](#)
- [Speak](#)