

Brainwashed - Main, Modern Theater, Boston, Oct. 15

Written by Creag Dunton

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After just recently resurrecting the Main moniker after over half a decade of silence, Robert Hampson gave one of only two North American performances at the Modern Theater in Boston on October 15th. Partnered with German sound artist Stephan Mathieu, the performance demonstrated that regardless of the hiatus, Main remains one of the most unique and singular projects.

One of the causes for Main's suspension was the constant association with Hampson's use of guitar, which had actually been phased out of the project for some time. By retiring the project and working under his own name (see the brilliant *Vectors* LP on Touch from a few years ago), he was able to escape the pigeonholing and receive wider recognition as an electro-acoustic composer, performing at the likes of the GRM. But, as he was drawn back to his previous instrument, a return to Main was seemingly inevitable.

I may be mistaken, but I don't think Main was ever a project that did a lot of live performances, so I was quite excited when this show was announced over the summer. Having been a fan since picking up *Motion Pool* at a record store in a shopping mall over 15 years ago (the thought of which baffles me considering the shape of the recording industry these days), I knew I had to see them.

While I was unable to see the duo's full gear setup, there didn't seem to be any guitars present (physically at least). The requisite MacBooks were there, and Mathieu had what looked to be an autoharp and an array of ebows, along with an old radio. Sonically it was exactly what I hoped for: Hampson's knack for fields of sonic micro organisms was perfectly accompanied by Mathieu's fragmented, ghostly textures.

From a sparse opening, Main quickly layered a variety of tones and textures together, with a surprising amount of variation. I have heard many performances (and recordings) of artists working in similar realms in which repetition was prevalent, here it was an ever-flowing river of change. Sheets of rain-like white noise were quickly supplanted by spectral tones, to then be replaced with delicate crackling static.

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The two stood side by side for the entire performance, rarely communicating directly but there seemed to be no need. The noises each of them were creating blended together seamlessly, sounding as perfectly composed as any collaboration could. The sound constantly evolved and mutated throughout the entire piece they played, and even the slow dismantling of their gear proved to be audio fodder: the short clicks and pops of Mathieu's ebows being disconnected was stretched out into a wonderfully sparse series of rhythmic textures.

The Modern Theater proved to be an ideal venue for this show, as it balanced the intimacy of a small theater with a powerful sound system, resonating Hampson and Mathieu's work clearly, but never overpowering. Subtlety was key, and the sound reproduction (and audience) clearly respected that.

While Hampson never went away from music, Main carries a different vibe and weight to it than his solo work, and even now, nearly two decades since the project began, it still has the same familiar feel to it. Mathieu, a unique and very powerful artist in his own right, fit in perfectly with the Main sound. Knowing that there is new Robert Hampson and Main material in the pipeline, this show only made me more excited for when it finally sees the light of day. Although I can't be 100 percent sure, I'm pretty confident I heard a nice swell of processed guitar noise at one point in the performance, perfectly heralding Main's return.