

loess



n5MD

emotional experiments in music
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■
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bio

Balance. In black and white photography providing the right balance between "black" and "white" to properly convey desired form is critical. But also just as important are the many shades of grey between the stark blacks and whites. Greys are the threads that hold the composition together. Loess in its purest form is much like the stark black and white photos they use to represent their music: the perfect balance of basic black and white form and the essential grey webbing that holds their music together.

Clay Emerson and Ian Pullman started Loess in the beginning of 2000. Previously they were part of improvisational ambient projects including Codec Scovill which they are still active with. They prefer to pronounce their name phonetically as "low-ESS" rather than the various correct pronunciations due to its fitting sound. The actual word loess is used to describe loose, fine grained soils that are thought to have been laid down by wind. This process often creates a characteristic terrain in the form of gently rolling hill slopes. Like the natural process, the qualities of Loess can be seen at both the microscopic scale, in their acute attention to detail, and on a larger scale in their gradual song structures.

Emerson and Pullman spent the first two years crafting their debut self-titled album and 3" CD single which were both released in 2002 on their own Nonresponse imprint. Their Loess debut was included on many journalists' best of lists for 2002 and was a focused ambient album which was punctuated with a perfect balance of skittering textural percussion, subtle melodies, and tactile grey fabric that has become Emerson and Pullman's trademark sound.

The following year replied to their self-titled debut with three singles. The 3D Concepts 12" (Toytronic), the nomon / schoen 7", and the 12BC Nonresponse remix 12" which saw Loess reworking Ontayso and gridlock tracks by making them all their own.

2004 and 2005 were what seemed to be quiet years for Loess. These years saw them both retreat from Philadelphia to the Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey. It was this move and time period which bore the frozen landscape that is *Wind and Water* (n5MD). The album features sounds that are moving, breathing, crumbling and decomposing; often within a single track. The feel of *Wind and Water* fluctuates between being ominous and foreboding, and hopeful and calming. It is within these contrasting elements that Emerson and Pullman find true balance between the musical blacks and whites and the all important greys that is unmistakably Loess.

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discography



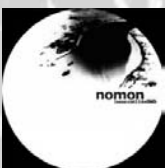
s/t (nonresponse)
CD

Thirty-six months, six grossly different studios and geographical locations later... What were once mere musical fragments, receive intensive mutations, re-visioning and re-compiling. The results are documented in this self-titled album. Compositions are arranged in a contiguous fashion in order to maintain continuity throughout the album. This material ranges from percussive-driven to rhythm-less pieces sprinkled with drifting melodic content. Arrangement style was purposely left in its natural, childlike form. Maximum focus was placed on crafting sound sources originating from subtractive-synthesis, found sound and digital-fodder inexplicables.



2nd twelve triads (nonresponse)
3" CD

3", three adaptations, three artists set on remixing Loess' '2nd Twelve'. Emerson/Pullman/Dematteis perform some critical re-constructions strictly utilizing sound sources found in the original track. Three drastically different outcomes, guaranteed.



nomon / schoen (n5MD)
7"

The 3rd in the n5MD 7transparen7 series brings Philadelphia's own electronica duo Loess to the n5 camp with their brand of emotional, clicked-out ambient.



3D concepts 2 (toytronic)
CD & 12"



12BC (nonresponse)
12"

Gridlock 'chrometaphore' and Ontayso's (u-cover/Belgium) 'cianuro' rebuilt by Loess. This vinyl debut on nonresponse marks their darkest work thus far; an unsettling lull looms throughout, along with a steady rhythm and occasional distractions. Though source material is almost entirely salvaged from the original tracks, the duo manages to apply their consistent approach to sound engineering: found sound manipulations, electronics, and muted melodic content. Flat footed, yet biting.



wind and water (n5MD)
CD

Loess is back! And 'Wind and Water' is proof that their time away was well spent. As the follow up to their critic-favorite on Nonresponse, 'Wind and Water' simply put; is Loess' finest work to date. Having since escaped Philadelphia for retreat in the Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey; Wind and Water is a meticulously focused reflection of these new surroundings while keeping echoes of their past haunts close at hand. The sounds on Wind and Water are both moving and breathing, and crumbling and decomposing, often within a single track. It is at times ominous and foreboding and other times hopeful and calming. It is within these elements that Loess finds a sense of balance. The album suggests a new respect for the two elements that embody these balances; the Wind and Water.

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Splendid

First of all, I have to say that this is one of the most eminently listenable IDM albums I've heard in a long time. Loess functions equally well as background music or as the center of attention. It has elements of abstract ambience, but it also has the organized sexiness of Portishead sweating through its metallic pores. The tracks range from near-disco beats to pure, ethereal organ-and-angels harmony. Some of them, like "Littoral", build slowly to a chaotic, brilliant stew. Others, like "Tone 2", are all about the variations in a simple rhythm figure. Clay Emerson and Ian Pullman conduct a master class on all things electronic and super-cool here. There are squeaks and clicks, laser-bolts and breakbeats, industrial drillbits and organic creaks. Every time you feel comfortable with their approach, they throw something else your way. In fact, the album's only limitation is the authors' dedication to novelty. Occasionally, one feels that the ideas behind these tracks could be better developed over a fully-linked-up sonic concept record. Let's be serious, though -- the disc is so intriguing and well-made that I'm really having to reach in order to find something less-than-positive to say about it. You won't be sorry for hunting this one down.

Pitchfork

Maybe there should be a rule that electronic music reviews shouldn't be allowed to use Aphex Twin as a point of comparison anymore. [Uh, Dave... didn't you get the memo? -Ed.] With a body of work as ubiquitous as Richard D. James', saying something sounds like Aphex Twin seems on par with a pop critic who compares everything he hears to the Beatles. It's not that the comparisons to James are irrelevant or untrue (good luck finding a bedroom composer who wasn't at least slightly influenced by him)-- it's just that the connection could be drawn without saying.

And yet, there are those times when such a comparison deems itself necessary. Like the premiere album from Loess-- the second release from Nonresponse, a label which previously brought us Codec Scovill's Clinical Imperfections. In fact, Loess' members are two-thirds of Codec Scovill. And though the music they make under the two guises shares a similar dark beauty, the two groups are set apart by more than names. Loess aims for a fuller sound, adding bass and beats to the elemental backdrops of Clinical Imperfections. But while these more traditional elements make Loess more accessible than Codec Scovill, they don't necessarily make it better. The songs on Loess are plenty enjoyable, but they're nothing we haven't heard before.

Which brings us back to good ol' Richard James. Loess' arrangements are built around old-school beats that unfold over long dramatic waves of synths, creeping between crescendo and decrescendo over long expanses of time, yet always in tune with the occasionally unpredictable beats. Of course, if you're going to rip off anyone, Aphex Twin is a good choice. There's nothing wrong with wearing your influences on your sleeve, so long as they're just that-- influences. Loess has plenty of moments that are distinctly their own, which promise of greater things to come. There's the prepared piano that weaves its way through "Spring Street," for instance. It begins with just a heavy repetitive clunking, alongside incoming waves of synths and glitches, but it soon transforms into something reminiscent of a John Carpenter score-- the on-edge tinkering gives the track a nice creepy bent.

Then there's the ten-minute ambient piece that appears out of the silence after the last track, which trades beats for a low rumbling-- barely audible, slowly shifting high-pitched tones and a chorus of sopranos looped and layered upon one another. Or the beats which loiter aimlessly through the dark, questioning murk of drawn-out chords of "2nd Twelve." Small crackles linger behind each beat, like the smell of sulfur that remains even after a match goes out.

Indeed, the beats themselves are what save Loess from falling in with a seemingly endless line of imitators. No mere drum machines here, the sounds themselves are rather unique. They appear to be lo-fi recordings of simple everyday sounds, garbled, chopped up and painstakingly molded into patterns. It's this vaguely organic feel that keeps me from pointing out that songs like "Pleuston" and "Maple Cill" sound, at times, an awful lot like something off the first Selected Ambient Works comp. But artists have always learned by stealing. And there has always been a distinction between those who are mere copycats and those who build upon the work of others by developing a style all their own. Loess falls clearly into the latter category. There are enough moments on Loess' self-titled debut to distinguish them from their inspirations-- enough ingenuity in the building blocks of the songs to prove that these guys are hardly Xerox artists. Give them some time to evolve, keep an open ear, and give in to the subtle rhythms. You'll be hearing great things from them in the future.

Static beats

The Loess album has been getting rave reviews everywhere you look as well as plenty of love in various music discussion groups. I think whomever is in charge of marketing for this group is about to see the light and realize their gonna blow up like the next Boards of Canada. Where others have tried and failed to reproduce that special BOC sound, Loess has succeeded and even made it sound original. The sound is glitchy, invocative, melodic, and rhythmic. It's Autechre meets Boards of Canada and a perfect blend of both. It's one of those albums you'll be wondering 3 years from now why you never owned. Find this album and buy it. It's brilliant, instantly classic and a must own.

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