

Brainwashed - Félicia Atkinson, "Everything Evaporate"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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This latest release from Félicia Atkinson is ostensibly a minor and somewhat transitional one, as it is a cassette intended as a sort of culminating document of a year spent traveling and performing. As with all recent Atkinson releases, however, the reality is far more complex, enigmatic, and deeply conceptual than anything that can be easily summarized in just one sentence. Partly inspired by the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler and partly intended as "a reassessed document of public performance with improvised studio interventions acting to break the linear stream of the live-on-stage temporality," *Everything Evaporate* is an intriguing and sophisticated release that seems to exist at the borderline of form and dreamlike abstraction. As such, it is not the optimal entry point for the curious (that would be 2019's *The Flower and the Vessel*), but deep listening reveals this release to be every bit as absorbing as the rest of Atkinson's recent hot streak.

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For the most part, *Everything Evaporate* is an remarkably apt title for this release, as several of these songs sound like they are heeding that command in real-time. On the opening title piece, however, Atkinson largely picks up exactly where she left off with *The Flower and the Vessel*

. Granted, it is a bit more minimal than usual, as Atkinson's breathy monologue unfolds over an oscillating and gently heaving bed of droning bass tones. Her seductively accented voice remains sharply in focus though, so the heart of the piece is an mysterious, poetic, and evocative spoken word performance. At this stage in her career, Atkinson's ASMR-influenced narratives are very much the strongest and most instantly recognizable feature of her work, as she manages to make even mundane phrases like "can I get a cup of coffee please?" seem pregnant with deep hidden meaning. While her voice is unquestionably the center of everything, however, there are plenty of unpredictable other factors driving and shaping Atkinson's recent work, as she seems to draw a significant amount of inspiration from both literature and visual art. And, of course, those "outside" influences rarely manifest themselves in expected or conventional ways. The following instrumental "I can't stop thinking about it" is a prime example of how those disparate threads converge, as Atkinson conjures up a surreal miasma of plinking marimbas, chirping birds, and spectral drones. At first, it all feels like a lazily clinking, disjointed, and formless haze, but the drones sneakily increase in richness and

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intensity for a shimmering and dreamlike crescendo. Notably, that piece also contains an excerpted fragment of a Helen Frankenthaler interview that recounts how she ruined a painting by messing with its fragile ambiguity. While that recording makes up a very small part of the album, its sentiment seems to be the guiding force at the heart of

Everything Evaporate

. I suspect Atkinson was being quite sincere when she titled the piece "I can't stop thinking about it."

The next piece, "Transparent, in movement," continues to explore that same hazy, impressionistic, and erratically plinking aesthetic, but Atkinson's voice returns for another cryptic monologue and the piece gradually converges into a slow, stumbling rhythm of sorts. Naturally, that alone is enough to make it a stronger piece. However, that is arguably just the piece's backbone, as a hallucinatory swirl of peripheral sounds blossoms outwards as the piece progresses towards an eerie finale of darkly twinkling piano. The following "Don't Assume" opens as yet another spectral haze of blurred drones and disjointed marimba plinks, but they are bolstered by an ascending roar of more visceral, metallic tones this time around. The piece admittedly takes a while to catch fire, yet it is worth the wait, as it eventually opens up into a genuinely creepy crescendo of overlapping, pitch-shifted voices and snatches of sinister-sounding sing-song melody. It feels like I am eavesdropping on a group of dead-eyed, possessed children joining together for either an occult incantation or a distracted performance of a macabre nursery rhyme. That late-album descent into darker territory continues into the closing (and ominously titled) "This is the gate," as an insistent harp-like chord obsessively repeats over a phantasmagoric mélange of floating feedback-like tones and murky smears of metallic chimes. Gradually, form emerges as rippling piano arpeggios overlap and the underlying metallic shimmer converges into a loose pulse of sorts. By the final moments, it actually blossoms into something quite beautiful as Atkinson's buried voice murmurs beneath some tender, lingering chords and a warm, all-enveloping hiss.

Those final two pieces are my favorite ones on the album and rank among some of Atkinson's finest work, particularly "Don't Assume." That said, "This is the gate" is probably *Everything Evaporate*'s most radical creative breakthrough—or at least the most successful incarnation of the aesthetic evolution that runs throughout much of the album. More than any other piece, "This is the gate" evokes an absorbing and gently hallucinatory state of suspended animation, as Atkinson creates the illusion that all of the instrumentation is floating, decontextualized, and untethered to any structure. Then, she begins subtly sliding each piece into place until her lazily lingering tones converge into a warm web of rippling harmonies engulfed in a comforting sea of hiss. That is not a far cry from what happens elsewhere on the album, however, as the biggest difference is only that other songs achieve a similar sleight of hand by transforming disjointed percussive instruments into richly layered drones. As a result,

Everything Evaporate

is an especially rewarding album for focused listening, as it is a delight to hear Atkinson pull metaphorical rabbit after rabbit out of her hat, subtly and surreptitiously transforming her hyper-minimal palette of misused marimbas and a voice into pieces of impressive depth and mystery.

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Samples can be found [here](#) .