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ROTTERDAM: Cambodia (Everestrecords)
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ROTTERDAM
Cambodia
ERCD044
Everestrecords 2011
07 Tracks. 38mins31secs

Amazon UK: DLD US: DLD iTunes: DLD

Cambodia is the debut album from Rotterdam, a duo hailing from Vienna, Austria, with a web address registered in Poland and a Swiss record label. Confused? Add to this the fact that they sell themselves as an unplugged techno act and you would be hard pushed to make any sense of it all.

Rotterdam is the project of Susanne Amann (cello, flute, electronics) and Michael Klauser (acoustic guitar, electronics). It has taken ten years for the pair to release their first album, yet, Cambodia is barely forty minutes long. But, far from being a mark of lack of inspiration, it is actually a testament to how they have refined and purified their music, taking away all unnecessary flourishes to retain only the essential.

Rotterdam are not entirely unplugged, but the main sound sources are undeniably acoustic. Repetitive motifs and fragmented loops of bow grinding on cello strings and plucked guitar notes form the essential of the sonic scope here, either in their naked, natural, forms or subjected to intense processing. The melodic aspect of the resulting tracks remains for the most part extremely discreet at best. Instead, Rotterdam concentrate on building hypnotic little sequences which, once engaged into a particular groove, never veer much from it. The press release claims that 'Rotterdam celebrate the power of monotony, which has rarely before sounded so varied'. A bold claim which rings surprisingly true, often simply because when change happens, it happens at such a slow pace that it appears as if nothing of any importance is actually happening. Take the title track for instance; over seven minutes of the same percussive pattern and same sole note repeated at regular interval. Now fast forward just a little, and things have evolved, the beat has become a richer drum figure, the lone note is surrounded by others, equally as relentless in their recurrence, but forming a livelier set up. Fast forward again, and everything is more sharper, ceased by the momentum of this seemingly perpetual movement.

So goes much of this record. Album opener Cool Bum Bum revolves around an increasingly strident and abrasive bow/string interaction and a numbing beat; Eckig is more appeased, but essentially follows the same principle; Sup Sup appears more varied, primarily due to the overall lighter aspect of the piece which allows for occasional fragments of melody to pierce through. Later, on Berlin, the pair adopt a tribal groove and appear to do away with musical instruments altogether to retain only drums and percussions, but it soon becomes clear that part of the rhythmic theme is based on the bow ricocheting against the strings of the cello. And while Rotterdam adds distortions to the by now regular configuration, closing track Zimzike has an interesting industrial feel to it, the cello being processed into a machine-like hum while for the first time over it develops a sustained melody in its later part.

While blending acoustic instruments and electronics is neither new nor groundbreaking, what Susanne Amann and Michael Klauser do is somewhat unique, not only in the way they use their sound sources, but also in how the resulting constructions take shape and develop. It took Rotterdam ten years to come to such a strong debut, let's hope it doesn't take another ten for its follow-up to materialise.

4.5/5

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