

XXX Macarena

XXX Macarena (From the Nursery/Primary Information, 2010)

XXX Macarena comprises artists Tony Conrad (violin), Jutta Koether (synth) and John Miller (guitar). The band has a great name; following in the tradition of The Pop Group and Spandau Ballet, it's completely misleading about what their music might sound like. (Who would have thought a band named after slang for World War I German fighter plane tactics would write such 1980s hits as 'True' or 'Gold'?) There's nothing X-rated about XXX Macarena. Nor - as I'm sure you'll have gathered from the line-up - is there any musical contiguity between them and Los del Rio's 1995 Eurotrash-Latin club hit 'Macarena', let alone any evocations of Seville's holy La Macarena procession - though the febrile intensity of their anxious, droning improvisations might inspire some kind of vision in the religiously inclined.

I've seen XXX Macarena play twice in New York: once at The Kitchen last September and, recently, at Greene Naftali Gallery during Gelitin's 'Blind Sculpture' exhibition (where they were augmented by Greg Parma Smith on synth drums). A joint vinyl LP released by curator and writer Bob Nickas' record label From the Nursery (recently responsible for two fine albums by Melvins and Orphan) and James Hoff and Miriam Katzef's independent art press Primary Information, this untitled album documents a 40-minute performance at Kunsthalle Zürich from August 2009, and is the most musically dynamic offering I've heard from the band.

The recording opens with sustained violin tones and a looped, three-note ascending scale on thick, distorted guitar. Koether's keyboard enters soon after and the trio builds up to a woozy, cacophonous crescendo until Miller's guitar drops out, giving the synth and violin some air. The sounds Conrad wrestles from his violin are like metal stretching and creaking, or building girders put under enormous pressure. Koether uses clean, factory presets on her Nord synthesizer, playing chords



that hover somewhere between dissonance and harmony, though it's intriguingly hard to tell whether this is due to the actual notes she's playing, or because they're constantly offset by Conrad's violin drone. In performances, you can see Conrad's fingers force their way under his violin strings, occasionally pulling them free of their tuning pegs and holding them taut with his fist as he scrapes and rips at them with the bow - a technique that here sounds just as powerful as it looks at their gigs.

There's a more dramatic use of loud/quiet dynamics and space on this recording than in the two New York performances I've seen. During the first half of the record, this allows Koether's playing to come to the fore; at certain points it evokes the crazed, cartoon quality of The Residents, at others a kind of plastic, ersatz Kurt Weill. The keyboard adds a sinisterly pristine edge to the XXX Macarena sound; think avant-garde minimalist ensemble combined with a seedy cabaret-club musician. Towards the end of side one, Koether's ready-made synth makes way for what is, relatively speaking, a delicate interplay between reverb-drenched, slightly delayed cascades of guitar and gentler clusters of violin notes, which then abruptly cuts off.

XXX Macarena performing at Kunsthalle Zürich 2009
from left to right: Tony Conrad, John Miller and Jutta Koether

Side two picks up immediately from where side one ended. The trio steadily thickens its sound from the earlier passages of quietude into a fearsome sludge of noise: Conrad fidgets and itches at his violin, Miller creates a gravelly scree of distorted guitar in which it is hard to distinguish chords or notes, and Koether goes at her keyboard like the mad organist from a Hammer Horror film. Bass seems to throb from the combined sound of all three players. Eventually, the sonic avalanche thins out, ending with just softly bowed notes on the violin.

Perhaps it's the combination of instruments - rocky noise guitar, sustained minimalist violin tones, keyboard presets - that helps give XXX Macarena's music such an anxious quality; instrumentation that speaks as much about how musical genres fit together as it does about how the specific unit that is XXX Macarena works with its contingent approach to performance and improvisation. The net effect is, nevertheless, one of foreboding. It expresses a feeling of constantly moving somewhere, yet with a gnawing unease about just where that somewhere is. It is music fit-for-purpose today.

Dan Fox

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