

A Closer Listen, April 24th 2014

Mark Lyken I Emma Dove: Mirror Lands

We last encountered Mark Lyken and Emma Dove a year ago with their installation-based EP and video *The Terrestrial Sea*. Their new work expands on the work of that prior release and continues an investigation of the sonic and visual properties of Scotland's Black Isle. An installation is again the launching pad; a special edition CD/DVD version is in the works, while the digital score is already available.

Mirror Lands, the film, is directed and lensed by Lyken and Dove, who share soundtrack duties as well. This ambitious 67-minute project represents a confident forward step. One of the appealing components of the DVD is that the narration, music and field recordings can be separated. While the soundtrack stands on its own, it makes a lot more sense in the larger context.

Sea birds cry and swoop against a black backdrop before the piano and narration are introduced. A distant train whistle competes with a cell phone. Now there is conversation and rain. At the two-minute mark, the visual element fills in a gap: we are listening to wind turbines. On the album, the first track is called "Crom Queen" and is separated by silence from the second; in the film, the mix is continuous. A narrative blend of history and memory provides a home-spun sense. Already at this point, the score of the film is diverging from the download. Many viewers and listeners will be torn, needing to experience all possible versions before expressing a preference. The camera dives into soft silt, then frames rolls of hay; ambient music fades to field recordings. The sound mix is incredible.

This is not a documentary in the strictest sense, but more of an impressionistic collage, with many dialogue-free stretches. Lauren MacColl speaks of a sense of calm in opposition to the "rugged" west coast, concluding "it has a certain peace for me". An aerial interlude brings this point home. A simple shot of shoreline spectators does the same thing; there's something universally soothing about the sight and sound of surf, however small. A goat will break the mood a few minutes later, but it's a small sacrifice to experience such a sweet wonder. Scene by scene the film unfolds, with only light musical accompaniment to augment the field recordings: never invasive, integrated so well it seems like part of the landscape.

For those who may be wondering: yes, there are bagpipes. But some unintentional humor is connected with their appearance. In the 27th minute of the video, the bagpipes play in the distance, a fog horn sounds up front and an ocean liner appears on screen. One wonders where the musicians are. Then one hears these words: "We try not to get too close to them ... but we do get closer than other people can. They spend the majority of their time underwater. People ask me if I would ever want to swim with them. I don't think I ever will ... some of them can weigh up to 500 kilos." Oh, those Scottish bagpipers! Oh wait ... she's talking about dolphins!

One of the most impressive images is shown on the cover, but the full effect can only be captured in the video (shown below): tall trees, seen from the ground, swaying in the wind. One thinks, "I want to see those trees." But *Mirror Lands* is more than just

an invitation to visit the Scottish Highlands; most of us have tall trees too (except in Iceland). Instead, it's an invitation to give the landscape a closer look and yes, a closer listen. When we encounter videos and sounds of this nature, we tend to think of how wonderful another place is, but Lyken and Dove demonstrate how one's natural habitat can be turned into a wonderland. All one needs are the right eyes and the right ears.

by Richard Allen