

ALBUM REVIEW

# When silence becomes the loudest absence



KAITLYN AURELIA SMITH  
Gush

★★★★★

/ NETTWERK MUSIC GROUP  
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In the pursuit of filling every pause, a sound emerges that dazzles as much as it wearies.

OF NICOLAJ ROOS PHOTO: TIM SACCENTI

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Were it not for a chance encounter with a neighbour years ago in Los Angeles, we might well have ended up with an album of classical piano pieces rather than *Gush*. For American composer, producer and performer Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith, the true turning point came when she borrowed a Buchla 100 synthesiser – a contraption famed for its unruly temperament – and in doing so shifted her trajectory from the acoustic to the electronic.

Smith is by no means a newcomer. A Berklee graduate, she has been releasing albums at a near-annual rate since the early 2010s and has worked alongside synth pioneer Suzanne Ciani, for whom she also served as studio assistant. Beyond music she’s been a clerk and trained in martial arts – a discipline whose rigour seems to echo through her musical output.

She thus joins a lineage of women who have left indelible marks on electronic music – from Clara Rockmore and Daphne Oram to Else Marie Pade and Laurie Spiegel. They were recently celebrated in the documentary *Sisters with Transistors*, which highlights their uncompromising search for new forms of expression, often with machines as both collaborator and adversary.

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Where Kraftwerk underscored the mechanical edge of technology with surgical precision, Smith leans towards the opposite: organic, breathing structures in which electronics pulse with life. Earlier works such as *Ears* and *The Kid* ventured into the experimental and at times the bodily and danceable, while *Let’s Turn It Into Sound* (2022) flirted almost openly with pop. *Gush* continues down this path but pushes further into a dense, near-saturated sonic landscape.

From the outset, opener “Drip” sets the tone: a minimalist skeleton of pitched-down vocals and bone-dry drum machine that gradually swells into a jagged mass of lo-fi strings. There’s a certain chilly allure to the layer-upon-layer aesthetic, yet one can’t help but crave space to breathe; Smith seems intent on filling every crack in the canvas.

“Urges” toys with jungle-inflected percussion, vocal loops and stereo trickery, but the result can feel claustrophobic. When every element vies for centre stage, the outcome is a wall of sound that leaves the ear yearning for respite and contrast.

The title track “Gush” is among the album’s most playful, with crackling beats, 8-bit nods and an off-kilter rhythm recalling both The Knife and early James Blake. Here Smith proves her knack for kaleidoscopic, technicolour worlds. Yet even here the flaw persists: when every detail is shoved into the foreground, the music loses depth.

A more successful moment arrives with “Almost”, which at first hints at dynamic range, though this promise ebbs once the vocals enter. Still, the track holds an intensity and a dramatic streak that offers a glimpse of just how powerful Smith could be if she allowed more silence and shadow into her sound.

As a whole, *Gush* is driven by invention and an almost manic urge to probe the Buchla’s every possibility. Smith’s voice – often processed with pitch-shifts and effects – is distinctive yet grating; the sharp sibilants and its constant prominence in the mix can grow wearying. Matters aren’t helped by a mastering job that pushes the levels so hard it can make sustained listening a chore.

In fairness, one can’t entirely fault Smith’s approach. This insistence on a tightly packed, legato-saturated world has been a hallmark of her music since day one. Yet here it tips over into excess. The album comes across like an over-embroidered canvas, where the artist has struggled to put the brush down. The ears soon feel saturated, and what might have been a vibrant journey becomes a pressed-flat experience.

*Gush* is anything but lazy; if anything, it’s trying to do far too much at once. Like the kid in the playground forever demanding your attention, it grabs you at first but soon becomes exhausting. The craftsmanship and daring are there to admire – but for the patient listener, the reward is regrettably limited.

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