

Cultural Daily

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Soccer Mommy Hones Melancholy Pop

John Amen · Wednesday, February 26th, 2020

With her 2018 debut, *Clean*, Sophie Allison, aka Soccer Mommy, interwove angsty lyrics and irresistible melodies, articulating themes of loss, dysfunction, and self-loathing via seductive hooks. Her latest album, *Color Theory*, illustrates a further honing of Allison's skills as a songwriter, singer, and bandleader. *Color Theory* also showcases a broader range of sonics than *Clean*, tracks alternating between stark and textured soundscapes, an effective sequencing of stripped-down or lo-fi takes and orchestral gestalts.

On the opening song, "bloodstream," Allison proclaims, "There's someone talking in my forehead that says I'll never be enough / and happiness is like a firefly on summer evenings." Like many singer-songwriters of her generation, Allison is indebted to Taylor Swift, particularly Swift's ability to mainstream personal challenges, shortcomings, and heartaches through accessible anecdotes and anthemic choruses. Her more substantive affinity, however, is to such songwriters as Elliott Smith, Cat Power, and Conor Oberst, whose sadcore or slowcore templates have served as the building blocks for what might be dubbed *thanatoid pop*, characterized by uber-pained vocals, haunting instrumentation, and, most saliently, lyrics that translate as auto-critical, often to the point of being self-flagellatory. Allison, along with Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers, and, to a lesser degree, Billie Eilish, among others, is an heir apparent to this subgenre, currently peaking in popularity.

"circle the drain" is Allison's iconoclastic take on Americana, a tip of the hat to the abovementioned Swift's early and mid-career renderings of country-inflected pop. "I wanna be calm like the soft / summer rain on your back / like the fall of your shoulders / but everything just brings me back down / to the cold hard ground / and it keeps getting colder," she offers, forging a tension (lyrical and sonic) between gray and bright tones, between a contagious melancholy and pop palatability. This is further explored in "royal screw up": "But you let me in and / you will regret it / because I'm only looking / for my skewed reflection in you." And: "Now and always I will break my own bones / til my legs stop walking and my bed is my throne." Painting a wry self-portrait, Allison reveals herself, in quasi-punk fashion, as the quintessential "princess of screwing up."

“night swimming” is notably atmospheric, bringing to mind Beach House’s brand of dreampop, echoey guitars and swirly synths complementing Allison’s crystalline vocal. On “yellow is the color of her eyes,” Allison’s voice is fuzzy, narcotized, lagging behind the beat, as if the singer is fading from consciousness; ripples of electroambience à la Lorde splash over her like warm bathwater. With “up the walls,” she seamlessly transitions to a barebones and folkish approach. Shuffling percussion potently contrasts with her otherworldly vocal. “I hate to be this person who’s climbing up the walls,” she concedes. “I’m scared the girl you love is hardly ever here at all.” On “Lucy,” Allison’s voice rises from and drowns in a jangly electric mix. The album closes with “gray light,” a rumination on death and sirenic ode to suicide (“Am I gonna be there way too soon? / because I see the noose / it follows me closely whatever I do”).

Sophie Allison's work rings as diaristic and performative, authentic and persona-driven, which is to say: the singer-songwriter adeptly navigates the lyrical and sonic clichés of her milieu, mostly occurring as freshly expressed, occasionally lapsing into familiar tropes. *Color Theory* doesn't represent an aesthetic leap for Allison; on the other hand, it features her wielding a greater command and sophistication in terms of songcraft, composition, and vocal delivery. Additionally Allison uses this set to mine and consummately reconfigure her sources while unequivocally asserting her artistic independence. With *Color Theory*, she shapes, tweaks, and expands what can now be considered a signature style.

7.9/10

Top image credit to photographer Brian Ziff

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