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## Hearts Of Glass: Still House Plants' Fast Edit

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by Robert Barry

The new album by Still House Plants is a fractured, fractious thing, twinkling like glass in the light



*Photo*

*credit: Amy Gwatkin*

Forty-three seconds in to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's groundbreaking 1982 hit 'The Message', at the point where the laidback electro boogie of the opening chorus gives way to Melle Mel's first rapped verse, the sound of breaking glass erupts onto the stereo field. The appearance of the sound at this point is at once illustrative, dovetailing with Mel's first line of lyrics ("Broken glass everywhere/ People pissing on the stairs/ You know they just don't care"), and percussive, functionally effecting the transition between sections in the way one might employ a chime tree or vibraslap.

Two years earlier, Kate Bush had plugged in her new Fairlight CMI audio workstation to add a digital sample of glass shattering to the end of her top ten single 'Babooshka'. In the years that followed, the sound of breaking glass would show up on multiple records, popping up almost any time someone stole a break from a spun disc or fired up their sampler. 'You May Be Right' by Billy Joel, The Prodigy's 'Break & Enter' off *Music For The Jilted Generation*, 'Nasty' by Janet Jackson, multiple Lil Wayne songs.

In the '80s and '90s, the sound of breaking glass was metonymic for an entirely new approach to making pop music. Not only did its clinking, splashing timbres match agreeably with the 'glassy' new sounds of FM synthesisers; it was emblematic of an approach to hit song production able to appropriate any kind of 'noise' and smoothly integrate it into the warp and weft of a production thanks to the new possibilities opened up by record scratching and digital sampling. It was at once metaphor and metonym for a music assembled from jagged shards of sound, sharp-edged fragments and the smallest digital slivers, each one carefully coloured and sharpened, then reassembled, bit by bit, like artworks by Cassandra Blackmore.

There are no samples on the new record by Still House Plants. But everything sounds sharp, splintered, cracked, and distinctly, brittlely vitreous. Guitars smash, drums crack. And the whole thing feels like something broken and reassembled, arranged haphazardly from disparate fragments. As alluded to in the title of an older Still House Plants release, these tracks are less songs or strains or numbers – monolithic and unidirectional; they are 'assemblages', composed multiply and explosively from what Deleuze and Guattari called the "cutting edges of deterritorialisation." An intermingling and a breaking apart, a vortex at the heart of signification.

Finlay Clark, Jessica Hickie-Kallenbach, and David Kennedy met as freshers at Glasgow School Of Art in 2013. The following year they started making music together. For their first show, as part of Glasgow's Open House festival, they performed for half an hour in a tenement flat, surrounded by Kennedy's own paintings and a small forest of pot plants. The band moved as they played but the house plants remained still.

Since then, their practice as a group has never been easily separable from their work as visual artists. "Our music has been a part of our studio art practice pretty heavily from the first day," Clark confessed in a 2018 interview with Kraak. At Glasgow International festival in 2016, they performed in their own 'pavilion' installation. Their name contains a sly allusion to New York's Still House Group of artists. Their sound evokes the collage of Kurt Schwitters and Hanna Höch without doing any of the cutting and

pasting. They have left all the edges exposed, laid bare their own devices. Inhabiting the gaps between forms and genres, Still House Plants have made their home in other, equally interstitial spaces: Glasgow's Green Door studio and Counterflows festival; London's Cafe Oto; Brooklyn's eclectic non-profit curatorial platform, Blank Forms.

Listening to *Fast Edit* is an immediately startling experience. Hickie-Kallenbach's voice has a burnished, tremulous tone pitched in an ecstatic mid-range, somewhere between Ari Up, Lewis Baloue, and June Tyson. She sounds by turns imperious and shamanic then soulful, entreating. Clark's guitars and Kennedy's drumming seem to fall over each other, as if on the point of breaking, as if they are not really instruments at all but ordinary domestic objects – toasters and cheese graters, perhaps, a filing cabinet and a sewing machine – press-ganged into sounding. Sounds stutter and tumble, jitter and jerk. The listener is forever being thrown off-balance – by trips of time and metre, but also of style and sensibility. You can imagine some of these songs rubbing shoulders with the cast of *No New York*, but also, at times, with the new breed of woozy lo-fi soul from the likes of Liv.e and KeiyaA.

This is fractured and fractious music. It's a collage and a collision, a pile-up, a chance meeting on a dissecting table of Scritti Politi's early EPs and a 2-step 12" by Lady Legs, a *maqam* sung to a factory siren, a disturbance in the air or on the line, a cloud of angry bees chasing a man with a limp. It's morning as I write this, but listening to these songs it feels late, somewhere dank and smoky, deep underground. Somehow we can still see the stars, twinkling like glass.

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