

Out of



Ectoplasm Girls' Tanya (left) and Nadine Byrne

"**Ectoplasm Girls functions** almost as a shared energy field between us." From their base in Stockholm, Tanya and Nadine Byrne are reflecting upon their work as artists and musicians, and on that special duo identity where their practices merge. "The foundation of our work together is a continuous flow of shared ideas, memories and references," they continue. "It's dependent on both of us, our relationship as sisters."

The duo's recently released second LP *New Feeling Come* sustains the compelling projection of inner states initiated on their 2011 vinyl debut *TXN*. In place of stable compositions or conventional songforms they conjure up shadowy, enigmatic and often unsettling evocations of recurrent dreams and haunted recollections, suffused with anxiety, obsession, fascination and desire. "We've never known what genre our music fits into but that hasn't really bothered us," observes Nadine. "We use synthesizers, drum machines and a lot of different delay pedals, and we use our voices as sound more than singing. But on *New Feeling Come* there are also field recordings of a breast milk pump and a steel-cutting machine. Anything goes, really!"

Woven into the looped fabric of their first LP were samples from *Sesame Street* and a 1990s film adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. Such chosen ingredients resonate with personal relevance, significant snippets retrieved from a shared past. On their latest release they sample a melody from a folk tale they used to listen to, on cassette, while growing up. "The story is about a princess who can see for miles. The words she sings are fine, but the melody is uneasy, somehow. We thought so as children, and now and then we both find ourselves singing this melody to ourselves and we still get that uneasy feeling."

The cover photograph of *New Feeling Come* shows the hands of their mother, who died prematurely after a long, harrowing illness, while the sisters were in their early twenties. Following her death Tanya and Nadine lived together in relative isolation for several months in a small apartment. As part of their grieving process they recorded unusual sounds onto cassette tapes, making up strange little songs, as a way of reaching out through their loss. They're included in the library of sounds they have made together since childhood.

"We really like the thought of our former selves hanging around," they explain. "We still identify with those former selves. Part of creating together is to go deeper into those past identities and to morph them with our current selves." Their growing archive constitutes an expanding catalogue of intimate echoes and a steady supply of raw materials for their music. Some of these traces surface over and over in their work, altering character and taking on different significance according to the settings.

From the outset, Ectoplasm Girls have made a virtue of their low tech approach, although Tanya has recently begun a formal study in sound design for performing arts, and she has also been refining her use of modular synthesizers in her solo and duo work. "For a long time we only used synthesizers we'd been given by our father as children, and we were very late with computers," Nadine points out. "We are evolving, and Tanya's education is bound to have an impact on our practice, but at times until now we have accepted our incompetence and used it as a way of working. Our intention is to try to hang on to that. When you don't really know how things are supposed to be, there is no right or wrong and you are totally free in creating."

Bound by sisterhood as

Ectoplasm Girls

Nadine and Tanya Byrne use childhood tapes and film collage to map their private spirit world. By **Julian Cowley**. Photography by **Märta Thisner**

As artists who place high value on creative freedom, the Byrne sisters have evolved ways to move fluently between media. "I've been pursuing art in different ways for several years," remarks Tanya. "But when I use sound and video there's a sort of direct line from my brain to the artwork, so I find that an especially effective way to process emotions and to explore psychological defence mechanisms."

In recent years she has provided audio and visuals for various theatre and dance projects, mostly in Stockholm. Prior to that she had travelled restlessly. After some time in the US, she settled in Paris. "I lived there for a year, making videos and sound pieces for a performance art club in Pigalle," she recalls. "Then I moved to Berlin for two and a half years and that's when I started to put together the Hypnotower album."

Hypnotower has been a productive solo venture, an audiovisual exploration of Tanya's own sensitivities, tracking her psychic bearings as an individual in the world. The 2015 album *Unlearn* bears a family resemblance to her work with Nadine, but seems to arise from darker, edgier and more menacing recesses of the psyche. "Most of those pieces were actually made during a period when I wasn't living anywhere permanently, travelling around by myself from city to city, trying to escape from everything, including myself," she confides. "This is quite the opposite of how we work as Ectoplasm Girls, where we embrace and explore ourselves and our past. Hypnotower is a journey away from myself; Ectoplasm Girls is about returning."

"The visuals for my Hypnotower show started out with slides that I made from old film negatives which I dipped in bleach, cut up and stitched together or drew on," she continues. "I used two projectors that overlapped, but they kept breaking down and I got tired of looking for new ones, so I started doing video projections using footage of those slides morphed together with other things that I had shot, mostly faces. My visuals are usually layered to the point where you can hardly see what is depicted. It's like the layers of a person; the more you live the more layers are added and the more complicated and multifaceted and rough and ugly it gets. Still, I think that is beautiful."

Nadine meanwhile has nurtured her own solo projects, investigating the nature of ritual and issues of transcendence as The Magic State, and accompanying screenings of her collection of collage slides in her current live show *Gretta*. Her 2014 LP *A Different Gesture* features some of her film soundtracks. Both Byrne sisters have a shared fondness for vinyl: it was what they grew up with, along with cassettes, and it lends itself to art for the eye as well as the ear. Since graduating in Fine Art from Stockholm's Royal Institute in 2011, Nadine's artwork has gravitated increasingly towards sculpture, further developing a longstanding interest in textiles. "I've been working a lot with fabric

inherited from our mother, focusing on the material as an emotional reference point," she says. "It's similar to how we use our old recordings in Ectoplasm Girls, to explore personal history and memory."

Nadine's artworks have been publicly shown for more than six years, and at present she is involved with a project commissioned by the Prison Museum of Sweden, creating temporary works of art for a site where public executions were once staged. Despite such institutional exposure, creative independence remains her priority. "Stockholm needs more alternative spaces for art!" she asserts. "Galleries, even when they are free, may not be very inviting for someone who is not already comfortable in the art world. There's a special feeling you get, being among a crowd of people and knowing that something you did made them all come together, right this moment."

With artist Björn Engberg she now runs a summer book fair on an island park in central Stockholm. "Any independent publishers and artists who make books are welcome to participate," says Nadine. "The only rule is that you display your books on a blanket, so it is like a mass picnic – which is really great."

Engberg and Nadine have also launched Moon Space Books as a publishing house for artists. "Some of my works were just floating around and didn't really fit anywhere until I put them together in a zine. But my zines weren't getting distributed," she explains. "I wanted to start a publishing house but never really had time or energy. Björn had. He published his own book first; then I produced one and we've just continued."

Meanwhile, Tanya has set up a cassette label with electronic musician Anders Enge. "Our first cassette release party took place in a tiny medieval cellar," she recalls. "Anyone who brought a tape recorder got a free cassette. A number of people turned up, and we blasted the tape full volume in the cellar on all the players at once. It was way better than listening to just one tape, so Anders and I decided to make some new music using tape players as individual voices in a kind of choir, but with much weirder noises than the human voice. The great thing is that it's super imprecise."

The label is called Potos Cryptophasic Mission – "a name intended to evoke the feeling of a world where language and communication is secret, personal and all-encompassing", Tanya reveals. Poto is borrowed from Jean-Pierre Gorin's 1980 documentary *Poto And Cobengo*, about two American sisters who converse hermetically in a private and self-invented language – a story with singular resonance for the finely attuned, and spiritually entwined Ectoplasm Girls.

"We are both fascinated by alternative modes of perceiving the world," they acknowledge. "Fascinated by people who create their own worlds and by the resistance to normative society that implies. Everything we have done, artistically and just living our lives, has been aimed at creating a world of our own." □ *New Feeling Come* is released by iDEAL

The Past