

Elysia Crampton in San Francisco

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Elysia Crampton opened for her own set at The Midway with a lecture, which was either presumptuous or gutsy. You might expect to see, say, Steve Reich discuss his intentions before performing his latest piece, but it's a different story for an obscure electronic musician performing at a dance club, even one whose music is as heady and idea-driven as Crampton's.

The Midway is a multi-purpose venue in Dogpatch, a partially gentrified district where hip breweries and boxy condos coexist only blocks from the ruins of shipyards and factories. It usually hosts big dance parties, and it took a second to register that the room where Crampton was set to perform was the same one I'd seen Call Super in a few months earlier. But instead of dancers and strobe lights, the room was arranged like a classroom, with a few rows of chairs perched perilously close to the speakers.

Crampton's 30-minute lecture concerned the Andean god Chuqui Chinchay, whose guardianship of non-binary people was erased by Spanish colonial censorship. It wasn't pretentious, largely because she came across less as an expert and more as a student delivering a low-stakes presentation. She said "um" a lot, fudged key names and didn't mind the audience wolfing down tamales as she talked. But it was fascinating.

Her set was as goofy as it was gorgeous. She introduced it with the Universal Pictures theme song, probably as a self-deprecating joke. The music wasn't as bludgeoning as it

typically is on record. Her weapon was a keytar, which she wielded with dorky aplomb and used to spell out stunning chords. There was a loose sci-fi narrative involved, and though words like "planets" and "gas clouds" were audible, the combination of muddy mixing and her strangled death growl made it hard to follow.

The performance was about as long as her lecture, perhaps even shorter, which reminded me that her work thrives in small chunks—of her albums, only 2015's *American Drift* breaches 30 minutes, and even that album contains only four tracks. When she hung up the keytar with a polite "thank you," I thought there might be another intermission, but no: burly venue guys were already wandering out from the wings to take the chairs away.

Fans miffed about the brevity of the set have a point, but part of the concert experience is actually seeing the artist in the flesh, and it can't be said that Crampton didn't make herself available. She spent most of the intermission schmoozing with fans, beer in hand, and was happy to field questions. Nobody asked any. Maybe fans were intimidated, and indeed it's easy to be a bit cowed by Crampton's fearless artistic vision. But if her show made anything clear, it's that there's nothing to be afraid of.

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