

Varg: Nordic Flora Series Pt. 5: Crush

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July 24, 2018



We live in a cyberpunk dystopia, but it's nowhere near as cool as the movies made it look. The retrofuturism of *Akira* and *Blade Runner* is mostly mined today to suggest "the '80s" rather than "the future." The world isn't neon lights and cancerous skyscrapers; it's clean surfaces and reassuring digital voices. There are more people than ever, but the planet doesn't feel bigger but rather smaller now that we can talk to people halfway around the globe. It's a challenge for futurists. Ridley Scott has adopted the precision of the Apple aesthetic in his most recent films, and *Blade Runner 2049* had to retcon a shutdown of the Internet to indulge in analog sprawl.

If nothing else, Varg's *Nordic Flora Series Pt. 5: Crush* makes the world we live in feel a little more interesting. It takes place in our universe, but the towers are a little taller, the sky a little darker, the fog a little thicker and the lights a little more radiant. His music is unmistakably millennial, from the dubious use of Japanese characters to the poetry readings by collaborator Chloe Wise that contrast consumer buzzwords with abstract expressions of deep longing. Yet he resists the temptation to go the Daniel Lopatin/James Ferraro route and create pessimistic pieces that assault us with artificiality. His world feels staggeringly vast; it calls to us to explore.

Varg eschews uncanny-valley MIDI sounds. Instead, he gives up long stretches of the album to synth-pad drift, often leaving his vocal collaborators alone with little more than the whoosh of a distant field recording. Much of the album was composed on trains, and there's an unmistakable railroad chug to his most techno-oriented tracks, like "Rush/Tinder" and "Rush/Wickr." For Roger Ebert, trains "embody the fact of travel." A plane doesn't give nearly the sense of the frightening size of the world as rolling through endless landscapes. No wonder trains speak to this romantic whose work embodies the self-imposed silence of the solo traveler.

Crush has an interesting fixation with dating and dating apps, which Varg perhaps used on those lonely rail journeys. Refreshingly, it's not pessimistic about them. A BandCamp statement focuses on the headrush, like a "crush," Varg wants the album to give listeners. And though the album feels a little too austere to impart the rapture of puppy love (I'll stick to the Shirelles for that), there's something heartwarming about this. The emotions expressed on this album are sincere; "Archive 2 'DM Excerpts Between @skaeliptom and @chloewise_'," a poetic DM session, is heartwarming. Varg treats dating apps as nothing more than a new way to find love.

Varg's optimism towards digital communication is refreshing, and it puts this album on a different plane than other electronic music about the Information Age that looks at technology with suspicion, James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual*, for example. It'd be an easy cop-out to make an album about how romance has degraded in the digital age, but the classic image of romance we know from old movies is really just predation disguised as a cosmic good. At least Tinder, Wickr, Grindr and whatnot are honest. The message of *Crush* seems to be that even in a postmodern hellworld, love will survive: a good thing to remember going forward.