

Listening to Pictures (Pentimento Volume One)

Jon Hassell

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At 81, trumpeter Jon Hassell continues to push his patented Fourth World sound forward.

Listening to Pictures (Pentimento Volume One) is his first album since 2009's *Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street*, and if that album felt like a well-earned victory lap, *Listening to Pictures* pushes forward with a fearsome hunger; it even presents itself as part one of a series. It's not a culmination but a launching point.



Hassell was there at the birth of ambient, and his two *Fourth World* albums with Brian Eno in the 1980s spawned and titled an entire subset of the genre (surveyed on Optimo Music's excellent *Miracle Steps* compilation from last year). On *Listening to Pictures*, it seems like the master is taking lessons from his students, or maybe it's just an incident of convergent evolution. "Picnic" has some of the same hallucinatory, gauzy sheen we can hear in the music of Gas, Tim Hecker, or Rafael Anton Irisarri. The way the sounds on "Manga Scene" seem to bump around in dead space brings to mind the dub abstractions of Vladislav Delay. Cool synth chords imply the creeping influence of club music, which spawned its own separate ambient tradition from the more classical-minded school Hassell and Eno exemplify.

Earlier albums like *Aka/Darbari/Java* and *Power Spot* seemed to move linearly, with Hassell and company grooving over slow, deliberate hand drums and eclectic samples. *Listening to Pictures* is more interested in what Hassell calls "vertical listening", which in the trumpeter's own words entails "letting your inner ears scan up and down the sonic spectrum, asking what kind of shapes you're seeing". *Listening to Pictures* makes prodigious use of the stereo field but also uses dynamics to create the illusion that some sounds are "closer" to the listener than the others. This is a 3D record with depth in addition to breadth, and listening to this music can feel like staring into a void where gravity is meaningless, and objects bump around willy-nilly.

Hassell's trumpet tends to disappear for long stretches of time, and the ambient ebb and flow he generates with his lungs is more distant than ever. Maybe he's more interested in composing than physically exerting himself on an instrument, like his hero Miles Davis during his ragged electric period in the '70s. Some fans might be disappointed how little of the man

himself we can actually hear, but his long absences create tension and make it even more thrilling when his trumpet emerges from the murk. Besides, his personality is there in spades, and despite its newfangled conveniences, *Listening to Pictures* sounds no less hot and humid than anything he made in the 1970s or 1980s. It's amazing he took this long to name an album *Listening to Pictures*, a neat mission statement for ambient music itself.

In other words, this is very much a Hassell album, down to the slightly dubious exoticism. Hassell's "Fourth World" philosophy melts together Western traditions like classical, jazz, and rock with musical traditions from around the globe. But blurring together non-Western musical traditions isn't particularly helpful when, to many occidental listeners, the rest of the world is all a blur anyway. Hassell craves stereotypical associations with the steamy jungles of the East, and even though his music isn't so much offensive as quaint, it's more useful for stuff like this to pack some kind of subversive punch—like Mike Cooper's *Raft*, an album that deconstructed Hawaiian exotica by rejecting any notion of a tropical paradise.

Hassell's music doesn't really benefit from this philosophy, especially because it succeeds by being so unmoored from associations with time, place, and past musical tradition. Hassell is an acknowledged acolyte of Miles Davis's experiments with Teo Macero in shepherding chaos in the editing room, but his music doesn't often sound, feel, or function like jazz. Nor is it really rock, though he's most closely associated with egghead former rock stars like Eno and David Byrne (the insectoid hum of his trumpet can be heard deep in the Talking Heads' *Remain in Light*). And the dance-inspired elements he throws in on *Listening to Pictures* don't suddenly mean his work's going to be on sale in the "electronic" racks of record stores. It's just another ingredient in a slow-simmering pot.

Rating:

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