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One year after Ghost Ship, Chasms return to SF

By Kaiya Gordon | December 1, 2017 | Comments Off on One year after Ghost Ship, Chasms return to SF



Photo by Jess Garten

Much has changed since the last time I spoke with **Chasms**. Last October, I met the duo of Jess Labrador and Shannon Sky Madden in a San Francisco taqueria next door to the venue hosting their album release show for *On the Legs of Love Purified*. Now, I dial their LA number from the shelter of my Columbus bedroom. In the year since their debut album dropped and we chatted amidst warm clouds of tortillas, the band has, along with moving to Los Angeles, experienced deep periods of grief and loss.

These days, Labrador tells me, their debut album feels like a dream. The songs on *On the Legs of Love Purified* "just feel like songs from a different era," she says. "I feel like they've taken on different meanings. Some of the themes that get explored in those songs, especially death, manifested themselves in real life."

On December 3rd, Chasms will be back in the Bay Area to play at the Swedish American Hall, as part of Felte's Everything is Going According to Plan label tour. Chasms will be joined onstage by Odonis Odonis and Houses of Heaven, both of which are also signed to Felte. Along with signifying the label's 5th anniversary, the tour will be an opportunity for Chasms and the accompanying musicians to showcase new music; many of the songs that Chasms has developed

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in the past year have never been played on tour.

Coming one year after the Ghost Ship fire, which devastated an Oakland DIY venue, the December 3 show will also be a chance for Chasms to reflect on the ways that fire irrevocably changed the lives of many in the Bay Area music scene, including themselves.

After losing both Madden's brother, Griffin, and their close collaborator Cash Askew to the fire, Chasms buried themselves in work, playing shows even the week of the tragedy. But they are both still figuring out how to talk publicly about that time. "I honestly don't know if I've figured out what my own boundaries are with that," says Labrador. "Because it's just this massive event that's altered our lives...it's hard to process that while living it. What was important to help me figure out was really connecting with others that were effective, and showing up for each other."

Madden agrees that support from the community was invaluable in the months following the Ghost Ship fire, saying that she couldn't have imagined her community's response before it happened. "One of the positive things to come out of the fire is that it has been an invaluable experience being on the receiving end of so many people that helped to carry Chasms through a nightmare, and helped us to keep going," she tells me.

Back when they were still writing the debut album, Madden says that she was "really obsessed with sharing ancient texts that have to do with preparing yourself and others for death to make it less scary." The connection between that interest and her personal losses has not gone unnoticed. "I've been feeling more and more that time is non-linear," she says. "It's so strange looking back at how obsessed I was with the Tibetan book of the dead."

Labrador, too, has sometimes felt that their work on *On the Legs of Love Purified* foreshadowed trauma to come. "When I wrote ['Beyond Flesh']," says Labrador, "it was this idea about what life beyond the physical body is — [in] this realm and also beyond this realm," she explains. But the song has taken on new meanings with time. "I wrote that song while I was staying at a family member's house, who [passed away] away earlier this year, suddenly, in an accident. And then we also made the video with our friend, Cash Askew."

Askew, who was a prolific Bay Area musician and 1/2 of Them Are Us Too, stars in the video, which Chasms describe as a "living document." Madden tells me that, while filming, they spent 10 hours with Askew. "I still remember things about that day," Madden says. "Cash was just so free, hanging upside down from rocks, and being a total maniac — there were certain things that happened that day, crows [we saw] etc., strange things, premonitions that happened." She tells me about how long that day felt — how the group saw the sun set and rise, spent time driving along the coast, playing in the water, moving on land.

But, Madden says she isn't sure whether she'll ever be able to watch the video all the way through. "It came out a few days before the fire," explains Labrador. "It's really hard to watch."

Onstage, the duo have been dedicating "Beyond Flesh" to Askew when they play it. "It feels so good to recognize Cash when we're playing," says Madden. "I can remember Cash going to every Chasms show in the Bay Area. I can still hear her speaking so clearly, talking [about the video]. 'Beyond Flesh' has become a spiritual anchor."

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Now in LA, the band has been working at fostering a new community. “It’s been great,” says Labrador. “You don’t feel so much like the odd man out here.” Along with DJ’ing, the two have picked up a new hobby in Southern California: basketball. “It’s really helped us a lot,” laughs Labrador. Madden agrees. “It’s brutal, it’s so competitive,” she says. “Jess and I have just been more active [...] we both just feel so good. I feel great on stage.”

Along with playing basketball, Chasms has been working on their upcoming album, which they hope to record in January with engineer Lauren Grubb. While recording has been interrupted by yet another fire — Grubb’s space is in Northern California, which was ravaged by fires in October of this year — Chasms is eager to share their new work. “Being down here, we’ve managed to make music more of our priority in our lives,” says Labrador. “We’ve [poured] so much of our energy into it.”

One thing that hasn’t changed since the last time I spoke with Chasms is Madden’s approach to Labrador’s lyrics. “I still don’t know what she’s saying,” Madden laughs. But I suspect that Madden has more of a hand in the bands lyricism than she admits. She tells me about bringing words to Labrador’s house as she prepares to write lyrics. Sometimes, Madden says, the two will inexplicably come to the same ideas without speaking. “It’s bigger than Jess and I,” she explains. “It’s bigger than the band.”

On the new album, Labrador tells me that they’ll be developing some of the ideas that permeated the band’s debut. “It’s almost like the last record was a precursor to all of this tragedy,” she says. “Now it’s like reacting to that, and processing, and so I do feel like they are linked. A lot of our songs explore the theme of death.”

Musically, Madden says that “the experience with the new record has made me feel more comfortable with my style, which is totally minimal, minimal minimal bass [...] I’m just trying to practice judicious decision-making.” At the same time, says Madden, “I always kind of want to get loud and distorted. There are definitely some weird things that happen on this record.”

And always, Chasms strives for growth, looking to better their craft at every opportunity. Right now, Labrador says, getting better looks like “really focusing on sound design, and elevating that. Collaborating with talented people who can do things that neither I nor Shannon could do. Focusing on creating the best possible quality, in terms of sound [and] just writing whatever we really want to.”

First, Chasms is preparing for their return to San Francisco. Madden tells me that her relationship with the city reminds her of “being in a long-term relationship. It was really good for seven years. And then I spent three years in denial — and I almost married him. That’s how I was, committed. We had plans.” But once she realized the relationship wouldn’t work out, Madden says, she and Labrador began looking at moving to LA. They were in the middle of that process when the Ghost Ship fire broke out.

But, says Madden, as horrible as the end of her time in the Bay Area was, she's "on talking terms with [her] ex-boyfriend." When they get to the city, Madden hopes to leave flowers for Griffin. "We have so many friends and so many people we love there," she says. The two plan on spending as much time as they can with those who are still alive.

Along with the communities they've built in the Bay Area and in LA, it's clear to me that Madden and Labrador have built a community with each other. I admire the way they advocate for each other, and the number of years they've poured into Chasms and into their friendship.

"I'd like to really drive home [how] patient Jess has been with me as a collaborator," says Madden. "I do think that Chasms saved my life. I want the world to know that I feel very intense gratitude about being in the project."

Chasms, Odonis Odonis, Houses of Heaven
Swedish American Hall
December 3, 2017
8pm, $12 (21+)

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Kaiya Gordon is a writer and poet from the SF peninsula. Kaiya believes that impact is more important than intent, and is not interested in listening to your normcore noise band. Follow them on twitter @ayobaio

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