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## **Mark Flood, as compared to Hüsker Dü**

If you are reading this article, then it is safe to assume you know who the artist Mark Flood is. Conversely, most readers are probably not familiar with Hüsker Dü, a midwestern band that was part of the 80s American hardcore scene that developed into an experimental art band of sorts, daring to bring in acoustic guitars and piano as part of their musical repertoire. The connection these artists have is a shared punk aesthetic and the defiant willingness to offend supportive fans.

Mark Flood grew up embracing the Houston punk scene in the late 70s and 80s. He even had his own band, Culturecide. Flood's early visual work seems to have much in common with the ransom note quality and defacement of punk flyers, Raymond Pettibon's cool cynicism, and the nuclear anti-establishment attack of Black Flag. There was angst and a deliberate stance for bad-boy painting. Every time I do a Google search for him, his yellow spray-paint image with two floating heads and the words "masturbate often" comes up. Maybe that says it all. The initial works, scrappy and obstreperous as they are, found themselves in less than high demand.

Like Flood, the members of Hüsker Dü had a strong interest in punk and hardcore music and started a band in 1979 to explore the potential of this burgeoning scene. They practiced and toured relentlessly, producing a slew of records, several of which were on the fiercely independent and highly influential label SST. They weren't afraid to offend or experiment and made a name for themselves doing that. Hüsker Dü evolved into one of the most innovative bands from that era. And they had an arc, having more to do with artistic progression than financial success. The band formed in St. Paul, Minnesota, and eventually relocated to Minneapolis. Minneapolis is a creative place that, like Houston, is not located on the east or west coasts, and if you didn't live there, you probably would never hear anything about it. If you have been there, you might understand the depth of creative endeavors emanating from these cities. If you can't make it in NY or LA, you *can* make it where you are at: that's DIY.

Mark Flood's storied career took off once he decided to dive into the beauty of color and give his spin on the Modernist "void," juicing it up significantly with decorative lace at the picture's edges. The luscious, crowd-pleasing, and lucrative "Lace paintings" had been born. Making these pictures was a smart move; they look great and exude powerful, complex color relationships. There is a push and pull of thickly applied color fields and a lot of microactivity at the edges. It was a hit. Another hit series is the "Another Painting" works. Mostly done with spray paint and cardboard cutouts, these too rely on strong graphic use of color and applying paint in unexpected ways. However, we are now getting closer to the insouciance that is Flood's mannerism. These paintings scream, "It's another painting, but you will buy it anyway." And the paintings started to sell a lot. It's fun to make hit records and watch the money roll in. As all of this is happening, one might get wayward about losing street cred or perhaps hear the dreaded cry of "selling out". Flood's answer was to churn out new work that acts like the old work — nasty,

aggressive, and a dare to would-be collectors as he makes fun of them. I've seen some of this over the years and have pondered moments for its existence. There is one video of his I saw online, narrated in a droning robotic voice about an emerging artist ascribed in the most self-loathing teen vulgarities with repeated emphasis on body fluids (puss, cum, urine) used as descriptors of how depressed he felt. How deliberately transgressive can you be to your audience and get away with it? That's punk. The video shared a singular art-historical quality with Duchamp's urinal: it was as artless as possible while displayed as "fine art".

The arc of Hüsker Dü has a similar trajectory. The 3-piece band established itself immediately as playing faster, albeit not better, than any hardcore band in America (see *Land Speed Record*). I found it unlistenable. The following two records were gruff and angular, but a worthy listen if you like the genre. Like every other hardcore band in the early 80s, they were broke. Record sales were thin, and gigs barely paid. Still, they soldiered forward believing in themselves. Eventually, the band became jaded with uniform hardcore stylization and began writing songs with actual melodies. They experimented. Grant Hart started playing piano and keyboards while gobbling up a lot of acid, and the band interspersed hardcore with psychedelic tints, repetitive drone, and emotionally toned punk rock before Emo existed. They made an impression in 1984 with *Zen Arcade*, which notably received college radio attention; songs like "Never Talking to You" and "Turn on the Radio" were some of the first alternative hits. For subsequent albums, they upped the ante in pushing song craft. Their material became more polished while the band produced at a frenetic rate, a lot like Flood.

It's hard to say which Hüsker Dü album is their best, but I'm choosing *Flip Your Wig*, their last album for SST. Great songs poured in. If "Green Eyes," "Makes No Sense at All," and "Private Plane" had been released in the 90s, these guys would have been punching it out with Pearl Jam, Nirvana, and Green Day for who was the biggest influence of that generation. Other songs drive the album forward. But no matter how staggeringly good the record is, they intentionally stuck in a couple of tracks of dubious purport. "The Baby Song" is a goofy filler tune played on a bad-sounding plastic flutophone; every time I hear it, I cringe. In the days of tapes and records, you had to listen to it; you couldn't delete or remove the song, just like you must experience an irreverent work of art (intentional or not) at an opening. Worse is "The Wit and the Wisdom," a doomsday instrumental consisting of guitar dirge and noise soloing. I'm pretty sure these guys could have written two other tracks more in line with the rest of the album or just left these songs off the record, but they didn't. An album is like an artist's show; you typically get about 8-12 songs/artworks. *Flip Your Wig* had 14 songs, so I think it's fair to say they wanted them in. The reason for leaving these songs on the record is the dire need to hold onto their F-you stance or perhaps be found guilty of punk heresy. I think Mark Flood's work can be viewed in this light; what kind of randy risk-taker are you if you're not daring the audience to make their way to the door?

One last binding quality these artists share is a deliberate lack of personal visibility. Hüsker Dü never posed the band members on album covers. Their albums showcase simple black-and-white graphics in the early days, then psychedelic color landscapes and odd, surreal images of vibrating guitars and melting cake decorations. To quote Bob Mould, "What the band looked like didn't matter." The band's view was in stark

contrast to most 80s records that pictured band members looking cool or sexy, with big hair and men wearing women's makeup to create hype. Mark Flood's own preferred anonymity was infamously solved by hiring select assistants to show up at his openings claiming to be the artist. It was part joke and a way to avoid answering questions he didn't wish to entertain. Compare that attitude to an entire generation of young people, including artists, who can't stop posting pictures of themselves on social media. Flood and Hüsker Dü sought to let the art speak for itself without a fabricated cult of personality to stand in for content.

I have admired Mark Flood's work for years, and of course, I'm a fan of Hüsker Dü. Every artist has the right to do what they want and not be hemmed in by one style or idea that defines them for the rest of their career (I think too many artists do this). I also support the right of artists to take chances and piss off their fans; sometimes, that's necessary, and it keeps people on their toes. Flood is still meandering creatively, doing what he wants. Some works achieve expressive greatness, and other paintings feel deliberately dry and naive. Hüsker Dü didn't make it to the 90s as the band members fractured and could no longer tolerate one another. The last chapter of their story saw the band joining major label Warner Bros to produce their final two records. They inked a good deal. The band members had enough money to buy houses, sit in them, and not talk to each other. They didn't tour as much and lost some of that edge. What happened to Hüsker Dü once they rid themselves of all hardcore-punk and experimental vestiges, writing nothing but pop songs for their last recording, *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*? They broke up.

Maybe it's good to keep that edge. Hail Mark Flood and Hüsker Dü for doing the right thing... taking chances.

"If you don't like it, there's the door" — Ian McKaye (Minor Threat, Fugazi) describing punk's ethos and code of honor.