

## ROBERTO CARLOS LANGE KITE SYMPHONY, FOUR VARIATIONS

Lange, better known as Helado Negro, teams with the visual artist Kristi Sword for a sprawling and inspired project paying tribute to the Marfa, Texas sky.

By Philip Sherburne — July 11, 2020



Marfa, Texas is famous for its enormous bowl of sky. Just look at it: Here it is glazed pink, here it's filled with marshmallow clouds, and here it's spattered like a house painter's drop cloth. In the 1970s, the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd began buying up property in the Chihuahuan Desert town; punctuating its emptiness with his cryptic cement and aluminum boxes, he minted the area's reputation as a locus of elusive awe. In the decades since, Marfa, with a population of fewer than 2000 people, has become America's unlikeliest cultural hub, drawing artists from around the world to grapple with its landscape and its light, no matter how quixotic the endeavor might seem. In 2016, after years of planning, the octogenarian artist Robert Irwin completed untitled (dawn to dusk), an empty building meant to channel some of the region's intangible alchemy of space and shadow. When asked what he hoped to achieve, he said mischievously, "I'm trying to grab a will-o'-the-wisp."

How do you capture such an expanse in sound? Roberto Carlos Lange, better known as Helado Negro, and the visual

artist Kristi Sword went to extravagant lengths to answer that question; the answer they came up with, a multimedia project called Kite Symphony, ballooned to such an extent that its current form is nearly as amorphous, and as difficult to describe, as the object of their investigation. The piece, still a work in progress, currently incorporates sound and light sculptures, handmade instruments, and the wind itself. It's a lot to wrap one's head around, but all began simply enough: After an initial research trip in November, Lange and Sword returned to Marfa in March for what was meant to be a three-week residency making art out of kites. But as the pandemic hit the United States and lockdown orders went into place, the couple settled in for an extended stay, and the project evolved.

They transformed mylar kites into "ephemeral sculptures" that react to light and wind. The two artists fashioned kalimbas out of gourds and disassembled toys. Lange recorded sketches on a church organ and finagled access to a baby grand in a shuttered restaurant. Armed with a sheaf of Sword's graphic scores—drawings meant to be used

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in place of traditional musical notation—he recruited Texas-raised violist Jeanann Dara and recorded her on site at the Chinati Foundation, Judd’s 340-acre outdoor museum, as she improvised responses to tactile cues: Imagine the sound of a cactus, say, or Express the feeling of wind on your skin. Working out of a local studio, Lange mixed all of these stray sounds together, along with remote contributions from cornetist Rob Mazurek, to yield *Kite Symphony: Four Variations*—a free-flowing collage that doubles as a snapshot of the project’s sprawl

Lange’s work has always resisted categorization; after making experimental beat music in the ’00s, he has evolved into an unusual sort of singer-songwriter, movingly examining the nuances of Latinx identity in songs that blur the line between synth pop and folk. But the wordless, beatless *Kite Symphony*, even more exploratory than previous albums under his birth name, sails far beyond the known coordinates of the *Helado Negro* universe. Totaling a concise 32 minutes, the album’s four movements bob and weave between purposeful form and pure abstraction. The record opens with a strange, otherworldly sound—part start-up chime, part engine turning over, it might be a radio frequency intercepted from a distant galaxy—and quickly settles into a gentle groove of bright, rounded tones tossed by an incidental rhythm, like agates rolling in the tide.

This is as clearly defined as the music will get; the only constant is that no sound or element retains its shape for long. Birdsong bleeds into dubbed-out chord clusters. Bowed tones duet with scraped metal. Timbres darken like sudden storm clouds; rustling noises suggest the presence of critters skittering in the underbrush. There are expressive, deeply lyrical passages where viola, brass, and piano layer in luminous harmonies; there are also melodies so formless it’s easy to believe that they were

created by the wind whipping through rusty gates. Like Hiroshi Yoshimura’s *Music for Nine Postcards* and *GREEN*, it is not so much ambient as environmental music, teasingly blurring focus as it slips between foreground and background.

While *Kite Symphony* is an indirect product of the pandemic, the music is ultimately marked by its lightness of spirit, as if to say, “This too shall pass.” A sense of place is implicit in crickets, distant traffic, blowing winds, and other field-recorded sounds, and perhaps a sense of humor, too: At one point, the music drops out and a buzzing insect takes an unforeseen solo, its wings brushing against Lange’s microphone. But most of the time, it’s anyone’s guess exactly how any of these sounds are being made. The whole thing is a conjuring trick. What’s remarkable is how Lange and his collaborators give shape to something so intangible.

Even when the music is at its haziest, there are submerged rhythms and hidden patterns at work. That’s true on a macro level, too: The final movement builds to a wonderfully satisfying climax as Dara’s multi-tracked viola traces the faintest suggestion of a line against a slowly oscillating drone, like a swallow barely visible against the evening sky. Dara’s playing, in fact, often feels like the music’s lifeblood. There are moments when her bowing rolls from the unmistakably physical sound of horse hair against metal strings to ghostly overtone. It’s moments like these that Lange and his collaborators’ kinship with Robert Irwin becomes clear: They, too, are grabbing will-o’-the-wisps, and *Kite Symphony: Four Variations* is alive with them.