

SURFACE

RENMINBI



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(Self-released)

*press materials can be found at
fourpawsmedia.com/renminbi

Track Listing

1. Portland
2. Toulouse
3. Set-Up
4. Then We Came to the End



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Three seconds into Surface's penultimate track, **Renminbi** has already pitted a **Polvo** guitar wobble against a sing-song **Galaxie 500** melody. Keyboardist **SMV** and guest drummer **Jenny Johnson** sound like they're winding down from a twenty-minute dirge, and guitarist **Lisa Liu** sings with **Tara Jane O'Neil**'s woozy assurance.

But this song isn't a half-hour epic. It doesn't anchor an album by **Sonic Youth** or **Mogwai**—although **Youth** cohort and producer **Don Fleming** was at its helm. It clocks in at just over four minutes. And although it's called "Set-Up," it starts in medias res and ends with a feedback whine. Like the other three songs comprising *Surface*, its terseness belies its keening arc.

Despite the EP's scope, **Liu** insists its origins are humble. After accumulating a heap of experimental rock material she couldn't use in her band **Danger! Giant Ranger**, in 2003 **Liu** formed **Renminbi** (pronounced REN-MIN-BEE) and recruited her girlfriend **SMV** to play keys. Working with a rotating cast of drummers, the duo released a pair of fractious noise-punk EPs and in 2007 explored electronic textures on its full-length *The Phoenix*.

On *Surface*, the textures remain, but the keyboard sounds more like an organ or violin and once-faint vocals come to the forefront. So why the departure from 2007's asymmetrical, electro-heavy forms?

"Well... I got a new guitar," **Liu** admitted—and she was drawn back toward more traditional structures. For her and **SMV**, traditional structures meant gutsy playing in unnamable time signatures or unusual keys, à la **Versus** ("Portland"), latter-day **Sleater-Kinney** ("Toulouse") and **Autoclave** ("Then We Came to the End").

The pair was also drawn to **Fleming**, whose work they'd admired for years from afar. After they sent him a long-shot email, he surprised them by offering to produce the EP. In May 2009, with the help of engineer **Matt Azzarto**, *Surface* was recorded live at the Hoboken, N.J., studio that **Sonic Youth** calls home.

"There was something magical about it," said **Liu** of recording the tracks live. "Anything can happen in that situation." **Fleming**'s without-a-net approach served the band's expansive sound well: "The focus was less on achieving a perfect take, and more on being present—feeling your way through the songs instead of thinking your way through," **Liu** explained.

Sonically, **Fleming** introduced "a huge palette of sounds," pushing amps into the red to give the keys and guitars a grainy ring. "There's a certain energy that's captured through the extra overtones. It's really open and raw," **Liu** added.

When it set out to record with **Fleming**, **Renminbi**'s goal was an immediate, taut statement. With *Surface*, it's made one breezily. But it's also made an EP that sounds like some early '90s double album you'd put on after everybody's left the party, distilled down to four vital songs.

-Sam Schulz