

It's not hard to see what drew Olivia Louvel to the intertwined lives of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. "They were two queens in one island at the same time – two cousins also. But they never met," she says, explaining the genesis of her newest project *Data Regina*.

Between the paintings adapted from fashion magazines that inspired 2011's *Doll Divider* and the reimagining of Louise Brooks's bobbed femme fatale for 2008's *Lulu In Suspension*, the iconography of femininity has been a rich source of material for the French born, Sussex based producer and visual artist to rip apart and papier-mâché back into brooding electronic pop. Instead of crowns and ruffs, however, *Data Regina* focuses on psychic chainmail and swords – far from becoming allies in a male-dominated landscape, the threat the two queens posed to each other fuelled a power struggle that led to years of imprisonment for Mary and her eventual execution.

It's not always true that history is written by the victors, however, as Louvel drew extensively on Mary's writings – her essays, correspondence with Elizabeth and heartfelt poetry – when crafting the album's songs. "Initially it was going to be 50/50 between Mary and Elizabeth, but it became more of a project about Mary," she says. "I could identify more with her myself, mainly because she was constantly displaced."

She felt a growing sympathy for Queen Mary, who fled Scotland in 1568 and arrived in England hoping for assistance from Elizabeth, but found her status evolving from that of protected guest to prisoner. "There are times when I feel she may not have made the right decisions," says Louvel. "She appears to follow her emotions, whereas Elizabeth appears in control of hers. But I don't want to make a judgment, because it was such a different era and context."

Mary's and Elizabeth's writings provide glimpses of their inner lives, but *Data Regina* suggests how any alliance that might have flourished was quashed by the era's rigid yet brittle power structures. The refined melodies of Louvel's intimate vocals and Fiona Brice's lyrical violin stand in fragile opposition to a backdrop, based largely around processed tambour samples, of harsh percussive rolls and looming reverberations. It evokes not only the brutality of the battles that peppered the UK in the 16th century but the sense of surveillance and paranoia that both women must have experienced.

To further illustrate this, and following in the multimedia vein of Louvel's previous albums, *Data Regina* comes with a website featuring text excerpts and a map plotting the locations where Mary was held captive. Several tracks are set to CGI animations by Antoine Kendall, in which Louvel's face is composited onto a stiff-limbed avatar, endlessly circling empty

castle corridors or commanding an army of similar chess piece-like figures in a barren landscape of grey polygon mountains. Despite their contrasting characters, the voices of Mary and Elizabeth often blur and overlap in *Data Regina*. "I like the idea of multiple identity, because they were from the same blood so they can merge," says Louvel. "In the animation, you don't know which one is which. They are cousins, from the same heritage, so they almost become a double of themselves."

Although two queens are at the heart of *Data Regina*, the surrounding atmosphere of misogyny is pervasive and stifling, from the shame-driven concealment of "Elizabeth Song" – "Dress the body, hide your body/Dress to disguise your wickedness" – to the website's referencing of *The First Blast Of The Trumpet Against The Monstrous Regiment Of Women*, Scottish Protestant John Knox's attack on Mary's rule as an affront against natural and biblical law. "Women in power have to face the same thing now, in a way," Louvel muses on Knox's polemic. "On a certain level we've progressed a lot as a society, but for other things... I'm still bamboozled when I look at my Twitter feed and see all the things that are happening. So have we progressed? I don't know." □ Olivia Louvel's *Data Regina* is released by Cat Werk this month dataregina.com

Abi Bliss



Game Of

A multimedia suite by composer **Olivia Louvel** digs deep into the psychic warfare between two 16th century British queens

Thrones

Murray Ballard