

Brainwashed - Nicole Oberle, "Skin"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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I know very little about Nicole Oberle and I suspect that suits her just fine, as she self-describes as a "digital recluse." What I do know is that she is based in Texas and that she has recorded quite a prolific stream of self-released material over the last year or so. One of those releases was last fall's *Skin* EP, which has since been picked up and reissued in expanded form by Whited Sepulchre. That is great news for a couple of reasons, as I would not have encountered her work otherwise and this new incarnation of *Skin* is a significantly more substantial and compelling release than its predecessor. In fact, the newly added songs are some of my favorite ones on the album. As such, I suspect this incarnation of *Skin*

will rightfully go a long way towards expanding Oberle's fanbase, as there are appealing shades of both Grouper and erstwhile labelmate Midwife lurking among these eleven songs. The most fascinating parts of the album, however, are the ones where those influences collide with Oberle's divergent interests in ghostly, downtempo R&B grooves and unsettling, diaristic sound collages.

[Whited Sepulchre](#)

The album opens in supremely creepy fashion, as the murky, brooding ambiance of "Shipyards" resembles a grainy and enigmatic video tape that that a serial killer might send to taunt the detectives on his trail. Granted, evil-sounding dark ambient drones are far from my favorite thing, but such an opening is extremely effective in setting a dread-soaked and nightmarish tone for the album. Also, Oberle does quite an effective job of further deepening the sinister atmosphere with distorted and mostly indecipherable bursts of speech. That said, I was both relieved and surprised when that oppressively dark and claustrophobic mood opened up into the warm and undulating dreamscape of "Self-Speak." Oberle's aesthetic is quite a varied, unpredictable, and evocative one, as all of the songs on *Skin* feel like they occupy the same shadowy, twilight state of hallucinatory semi-reality, yet they all seem to evoke very different scenes within that unsettling and hypnagogic world. In the following "Unnamed," for example, a lovely progression of piano arpeggios unfolds in a heavenly haze of chopped vocal fragments, cinematic string swells, and buried snatches of warbling psychedelia. "Cold Metals," on the other hand, feels like a ghostly and deconstructed bit of gloomy pop that makes extremely effective use of a blurred vocal hook. That piece also highlights Oberle's unusual and intuitive feel for dynamics, as it unexpectedly gives way to a brief breakdown of ringing, subtly dissonant

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chords before the beat kicks back in for the final act. The final song from the original EP ("A Knot in Twos") is yet another spectral pop foray, calling to mind an instrumental outtake from Slowdive's *Souvlaki* before blossoming into a brief spoken word interlude that feels like a cryptic fragment of an overheard phone call.

The second half of the album, which is composed of entirely new material, opens with another teasing instrumental approximation of melancholy pop ("Cigarette Burns"), then segues into a surprisingly strong and seductive dive into spectral, soft-focus R&B ("Stay With Me"). At only two minutes, "Stay With Me" is woefully brief, but it is the closest thing that the album has to a great single, as it calls to mind Tri-Angle's brief run of killer witch house acts like Holy Other. That piece is followed by a hazy, beat-driven interlude ("Tired of This") that abruptly cuts out to give way to the album's most sustained passage of poignant, eerie beauty: the one-two punch of "Nobody Knows" and "I'm Just Stuck." The two pieces segue together into what is essentially a single sound collage, but the character of the underlying music differentiates them, as the more melancholy first half transforms into something akin to heavenly (if fatalistic) beauty. The music mostly just provides coloration though, as the truly haunting heart of that diptych is the spoken word recording that runs across the two pieces, as it feels like the final voicemail left by a woman who is about to vanish forever. In fact, it is easily one of the most heartbreaking and unsettling passages that I have heard on any album this year. I cannot think of much that could follow such an emotional wallop and Oberle wisely does not try, opting instead to close the album with just a floating, bittersweet coda ("Separation"), granting me a few comparatively peaceful moments to process what I just heard before abruptly breaking the spell with the final click of a tape machine.

If *Skin* has a weakness, it is only that several pieces feel more like sketch-like vignettes than actual songs, but that may very well be intentional, as the album has the uncomfortably voyeuristic feel of flipping through the journal of a troubled friend. Or, put more poetically, it feels like a supernatural fog that occasionally parts enough to reveal fleeting, decontextualized glimpses of various eerie, mysterious, and disturbing scenes. Another notable aspect of *Skin*

is that Oberle seems like she is being pulled in a number of different stylistic directions at once, which would normally be a real issue for me. However, she has an uncanny talent for weaving together seemingly disparate threads into an arc that feels organic and unforced. Very few artists can pull off such a feat. Aside from that, Oberle shows a real knack for small, unexpectedly poignant touches that give the album a beautifully raw and intimate feel, as *Skin*

is filled with great textures and details like exhalations, lighter clicks, distressed and warbly voice recordings, and the audible starts and stops of a tape machine. All of those fragments combine into quite an impressively absorbing and emotionally resonant whole that is quietly heavy in a way that few other albums can match. I am not sure if this quite counts as a formal debut (Oberle has previously released a few physical tapes on her own), but it will be an incredibly strong contender for the best debut of the year if it does.

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Samples can be found [here](#) .