

Album Review - *Vanities* by Malibu (English Version)

Like nearly everyone on my Instagram feed, I too spent my Friday, October 3rd listening to, re-listening to, and then, through some compulsive gesture that only an overpriced psychoanalyst could properly unpack, listening once again to *Vanities*, the new album by Malibu. At some point, I was convinced I had “gotten it,” as if an album, this complex and fluid sonic organism, could ever be exhausted after two listens. Which is as logically absurd as saying, “I looked at the ocean once, I know what it is.” Spoiler: I hadn’t.

Anyway (and by “anyway,” I actually mean “buckle up, this might take a while”), here are a few thoughts. Not a professional review: I don’t have a press card, a PR contact, or that pseudo-poetic jargon critics sometimes use to say things like “the sound textures evoke the slow fall of an organza curtain brushed by a melancholic breeze.” Though, to be fair, I find that kind of phrasing hilariously fun, and yes, I’ve indulged in it myself.

No, what you’re about to read is more of a mental sediment, reflections that have stuck to my brain and that I’m now trying to peel off one by one to see if they make sense together.

So yes, this will be long. And yes, there will be digressions. Imagine an improvised academic seminar happening inside my head, where each idea frantically raises its hand to speak, and instead of a moderator we get a chorus of voices interrupting, correcting, and quoting obscure sources, until a single thought mutates into a small, suspiciously enthusiastic intellectual colloquium.

That’s roughly how it goes in here. When ideas arrive, they don’t queue neatly, they spill out like students rushing from a mandatory philosophy lecture. The result: a textual marathon.

And a small disclaimer: I will, inevitably, use a few unnecessarily complex or pretentious words. Because if you’re reading (by choice?) the barely visible blog of someone who reviews albums the way others collect bottle caps (cheers to my dad), then you probably understand that one of my remaining pleasures is sprinkling sentences with grandiloquent, twisted terms. It gives the illusion of creativity, and for about three seconds, of importance.



My review Malibu — *Vanities* (2025)

Let's start here. Malibu, also known as Barbara Braccini, a French producer working within what we lazily call *ambient* (a word so overextended it now includes both Spotify's "Focus" playlists and the most radical corners of contemporary sound art), has released with *Vanities* (2025) something less like an album than a miniature museum of sonic relics.

Not a monumental museum, but a small, dust-cleared vitrine in the home of an obsessive collector, someone who treasures a handful of seashells⁽¹⁾ found on a deserted beach and shows them to you as if each fragment of nacre held the key to a personal myth.

(1) The idea of seashells appears in the album's press release, if I'm to believe an article published on Pitchfork's website.

Malibu's music, especially on *Vanities*, isn't narrative in the classical sense. There's no story, no climax, no resolution, except perhaps the slow dissolution of a chord into infinite reverb. Instead, we find interior scenes: a voice appearing, splintering, retreating; a cello bow emerging from behind a curtain of fog; a piano tracing a few notes before drifting into ether. It's a space where memory and forgetting blur together.

That's what fascinates me: *Vanities* isn't just another ambient record. It proposes an aesthetic I'll risk calling, with full awareness of my own theoretical vanity, a kind of **archaeological narcissism**⁽²⁾: music as a collection of intimate fragments, displayed not for their beauty, but for what they reveal about the one who keeps them.

(2) The word *narcissism* here is not used in a negative sense at all. Really, it isn't. I mean it. Read until the end to find out everything :)

To place Malibu properly, we need to trace a genealogy. It begins, of course, with Brian Eno in the 1970s, who defined ambient as "as ignorable as it is interesting," music as atmosphere, as sonic wallpaper shaping space. Then came Enya, whose global success

through the late 1980s and 1990s proved you could sell millions with music seemingly alien to pop logic: endless layers of reverb-drenched vocals, modal harmonies, translucent synths evoking both the medieval and the celestial.

For years, critics dismissed her as “New Age elevator music”(3), too saccharine, too universal to deserve scholarly attention. Yet that dismissal reveals more about cultural snobbery than her actual work, because her vocal layering techniques (hundreds of stacked tracks long before modern DAWs) were radically inventive(4). Her sound world was so coherent it became a genre of its own, halfway between pop and ambient.

(3) She won the Grammy for Best New Age Album in 1993 and 1997 (and so on), remember. But well, it's a Grammy for “new age, ambient, and chant,” which still says a lot about how it was categorized.

(4) The vocal layering techniques she and Nicky Ryan developed were incredibly innovative — hundreds of stacked tracks long before that became common in modern DAWs. A thought for Nicky Ryan ♥ who passed away on September 10, 2025.

It's no coincidence Malibu cites Enya as a major influence, in interviews including one with *The Fader*. *Vanities*, then, doesn't just descend from Eno's intellectual lineage. It rehabilitates a so-called “impure” branch of ambient: the sentimental, emotional, perhaps even nostalgic kind, whose visionary blend of feeling and technology remains deeply contemporary.

Between those poles, Eno and Enya, lies a whole constellation: Juliana Barwick's celestial loops, Grouper's spectral songs dissolving into reverb, Oneohtrix Point Never's haunted digital archaeology. Malibu belongs in that line but adds something of her own, an obsession with miniature. Where Eno built vast soundscapes, she crafts vitrines; where Barwick raises cathedrals of voice, Malibu shows us broken shells.

Each of *Vanities*' thirteen tracks is brief, two to four minutes, an anomaly in a genre known for sprawling pieces. Each is a self-contained micro-epic, opening and closing quickly, like glimpses from a train window: the illusion of movement through stillness.

“So Sweet & Willing,” co-written with Florian Le Pris   (also known as D  tente, Malibu's long-time collaborator), layers disembodied vocals over synths and strings that seem to float without gravity. Simple structure, repeated chords, fragmented motifs, and the effect is haunting: it feels less like a song than the memory of a song, a pop fragment eroded by time and forgetfulness.

“Spicy City,” featuring cellist Oliver Coates (listen to his *skins n slime* or the *Aftersun* soundtrack), grounds the record in texture and touch. It's both urban and intimate, like wandering through a city whose streets exist solely to lead you, irrationally and beautifully, to a beach you never knew was there. There's sand, horizon, mist, and that uncertain edge between dream and recollection: are these waves real, or just mental projections of our need to let things disappear?

Shorter tracks like “Nu” or “A World Beyond Lashes” exemplify this miniature logic, vignettes that establish a mood and withdraw before it solidifies.

Paul Corley's mix (of Sigur R  s and Ben Frost fame) is crucial. It gives the album its airiness, its sense that every silence is a room, every resonance an architecture.

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Here's my central thought: *Vanities* treats music as a collection of intimate relics. The word "vanities" itself evokes both baroque still lifes, skulls, flowers, hourglasses, and the cluttered top of a dressing table. Malibu plays with that duality: each track is both precious and mournful, a token of presence and absence.

This gesture echoes a long tradition. Aby Warburg assembled his Mnemosyne Atlas as an archive of visual fragments. Walter Benjamin described the collector as one who rescues objects from oblivion. Malibu transposes that ethos into ambient: she presents fragments not to narrate, but to compel us to look at what we ourselves keep.

This "archaeological narcissism" isn't exhibitionism, it's a way of framing one's scars. Malibu doesn't say, "look at my pain." She says, "here's an object that once belonged to my pain, and I've decided to keep it."

And *Vanities* feels profoundly of our time. We archive everything: photos, messages, playlists, half-forgotten conversations. We've all become curators of our own digital relics, unable to delete. Malibu's ambient becomes the soundtrack to that contemporary condition, not Eno's external ambience but an interior one. This is not the music of waiting rooms, but the music that fills your bedroom at 2 a.m., while you scroll through your own past.

Compared to Grouper's pure melancholy or Barwick's spiritual ascent, Malibu builds furniture for obsession: sonic cabinets for our small relics.

Vanities doesn't seek to seduce. It lingers, like an image you can't erase. Malibu proves herself not just another ambient producer, but an artist building a singular aesthetic, that of the exposed fragment.

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I kept staring at the album cover, and I'll end there.

A figure, back turned, facing a city and a sea we can't identify. It's an image that encapsulates *Vanities*: refusing the frontal portrait, privileging the space between the gaze and what it gazes upon. That's precisely where Malibu's intensity lives, in the tension between what we reveal and what we keep.

The still body, the misted sea, the straight architectural lines framing an indistinct horizon, all echo the album's aesthetic of fragments. One person, one frame, one landscape. Nothing spectacular, and yet it persists, like a memory we can't tell is ours or something we invented to justify a loss.

Listening to *Vanities* is standing in that exact posture: silent, motionless, contemplating something external that endlessly mirrors our interior. Each sound object looks back at us as much as we look at it. It's the realization that pain, memory, and solitude can become fragile sculptures, not to glorify sadness but to learn how to live with it.

Music, then, becomes that private museum, and each track, a sculpted fragment watching us, questioning: What do you keep? What do you show? What do you erase?

And, as with all great works, you eventually realize it's subtler than you thought. That figure facing the sea isn't just Malibu, it's us. The image becomes a mirror. The album, a reliquary. And in that play of reflections, between landscape, memory, and solitude, it's no longer just about music, but about how we turn our own relics into art, and our fragilities into forms that endure.

(Album and press photos by Igor Pjörri.)