

A BLOOD-RED FLOWER EXTENDS TOWARDS THE SKY

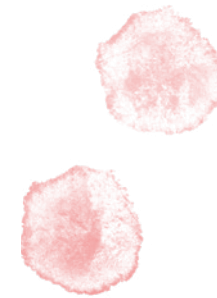
The Haunting World of Amaryllis VR

By Astrid Wang



Some of Zakarian's most trusted tools include HTC Vive Pro, Adobe Creative Suite, Substance Suite, Cinema4D and Unity, and Cubase for music. The virtual sculpture from "Ocean" is created in Cinema4D and Substance Painter.

Aesthetics, technology, and emotional catharsis merge at the heart of Amaryllis VR, the artistic project of Mariam Zakarian. I sat down with the artist and creator for a journey through the first Virtual Reality artwork exhibited by a female artist on Danish soil, a conversation about her process, and a discussion on the future of VR as a medium.



Around the middle of the 19th century, the German composer Richard Wagner published three essays in which he advocated for a new aesthetic direction, an artwork of the future that he termed the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Loosely translated to "a total work of art," the *Gesamtkunstwerk* reunites all the artistic expressions; visual art, text, music, dance, and drama. Synthesized into a harmonious whole, the total work of art appeals to every sensual as well as intellectual faculty of the viewer. For Wagner, there was more than formal aesthetics at stake; rather, the total work of art would help bring about human liberation and a new sense of unity for humankind.

While the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* has been applied to theatre, architecture, design, and more recently to videogames, few media embody the potential of synthesization as Virtual Reality. Like architecture and installation art, VR immerses the viewer in a total environment. And in doing away with the limitations of the physical world, it also takes the premise of synthesis to a degree that promises the transgression of the concept of media altogether—the age-old dream of merging art and life.

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It is unlikely, however, that Wagner could have foreseen the production of such a gloriously all-encompassing assemblage taking place from the humble vantage point of a single artist at her desk. Indeed, Mariam Zakarian, the woman behind Amaryllis VR, works alone. Holding a Master's Degree in Media Technology, Zakarian has used her extensive experience with digital design to craft one of the first publicly exhibited Virtual Reality artworks in Denmark—the haunting *Amaryllis VR: Ocean* (2016), which I had the pleasure of viewing in the cozy confines of the artist's living room doubling as a studio. →



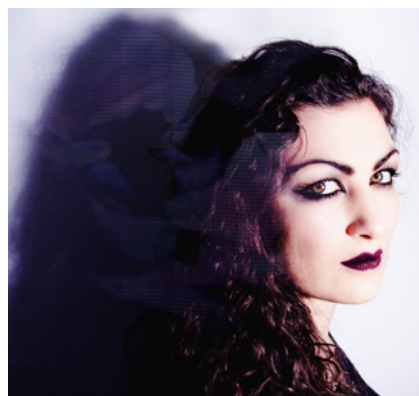
IMMERSED IN OCEAN

Entering *Ocean*, I find myself standing on a grey rocky platform. It seems to hover above a slowly undulating sea. The water is blood-red and the waves are sharply contoured against a pinkish-grey horizon as they rhythmically crash against the platform. A figure hovers next to me, a slender, skeletal body of a woman, suspended in an arch. From her bent spine, a blood-red flower extends towards the sky. The figure is static, and as I approach her with careful steps, the invisible contour of my body clips into hers. The skin of her shape recedes to reveal a heart, anatomically correct with all its chambers and blood vessels. I see now that the heart is the root of the bright red amaryllis flower growing from her back. A calm, ethereal melody plays in the work, both building on and dissolving the tension around this somewhat unsettling figure.

Barely conscious of my movements, I feel the need to sit down on the floor, not for weariness or discomfort but as an act of voluntary submission to my surroundings. Gradually, the red waves around me grow in size, and finally, in tandem with the swelling of the music, they swallow the rocky platform carrying my arched companion and me. Horizontal vastness becomes vertical, as we are

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submerged in red, and above I see the shafts of light from an imaginary sun gently waver in the water.

The work ends, and as I take off the headset, I have the sensation of coming out of a dream. “I liked that you sat on the floor,” Zakarian remarks.

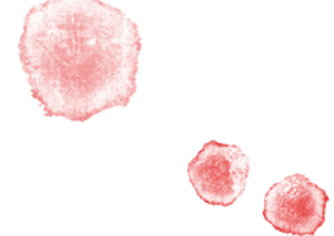
CYCLES OF REFINEMENT

Ocean was not created in a single application, Zakarian explains, as we take a seat after my viewing. “My process includes 3D modeling, sound, environment design in a game engine, making textures, user-experience design,

VR quality optimization, testing, and physical installation. There is a reason that the production houses have teams of specialists.” However, the artist has chosen to work alone in every step of the production. With a process similar to concept design and world-building, Zakarian begins by sketching to pinpoint an idea. “I work with emotional narratives—communicating a particular emotion and concept via a self-contained virtual space, and not necessarily a linear story. I start by asking myself what the space feels like, what it sounds like, what you can and cannot do, and why,” she says. The next step is prototyping in VR, during which



“According to an ancient origin story, the first Amaryllis flower was born when a woman drew her own heart-blood. To me, this flower and its intense, red color are a link to the primal forces, and a reminder of the creation/destruction cycles in nature, life and art.” — Mariam Zakarian



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A room-scale VR art installation accompanied by physical paintings, *Amaryllis VR: Ocean* had its international premiere at Galleri Oxholm in the Summer of 2017.

the artist leans on the visualization from the studies. “The sketches are necessary, because prototyping can be a cold process, and without a clear vision you can easily get lost. I go back and forth between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional work in a constant cycle of refinement.” Finally, a large part of the subsequent work consists of testing with viewers, as well as exhibition design. *Ocean* can be shown alone, but it is also thought out as a solo exhibition, which includes works on paper and canvas that supplement the VR installation.

We pore over a large folder of paper sketches. Inside, drawings show various writhing bodies that seem to merge with botanical elements—all meticulously rendered and highly technical. Independent pieces in their own right, they expand and elaborate on the concepts in the virtual portion of the project. Aesthetically, they articulate the expressive and personal nature of her visual universe, but they also speak to the artist’s hybrid position between a design-based methodology and working in the tradition of studio-based artistic practices. As new media emerge, artistic methods adapt, and artists wanting to work with VR may outsource the production to the production houses. For most this is necessary, as the majority of visual artists are unlikely to have received training in this area, but Zakarian emphasizes the advantages of controlling the process from beginning to end. “If I were to hire a production house to help me, I’d have more of an art director role than the role of an artist,” she points out. “It’s not exactly the romantic idea of the lone artist in her studio,” I reply. “Personally, I am somewhat attached to that romantic idea, because the thought of involving strangers in executing something so personal to me feels weird,” she laughs. “*Ocean* was my first piece. There were no tutorials about making VR art, so I had to develop my artistic method from scratch.”

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BEAUTY AND VIOLENCE

Having studied medicine before immersing herself in media technology, Zakarian’s realistic renderings of human anatomy are informed by the legacies of figurative and symbolic art: “Studying the human body and nature is a huge passion of mine. I grew up admiring traditional art. I’ve been learning from Michelangelo since I was 12, obsessed with how he could make bodies express so much emotion.” With the possibilities of VR, there is much to be gained beyond faithful, mimetic representation. Here, the artist’s detailed iconography translates into dreamlike spaces in the virtual that invite affective and embodied responses from the viewer. Taking the Surrealists of the early 20th century as another source of inspiration, every element in *Amaryllis VR* is at once literal and symbolic. Zakarian explains: “To me VR is the ideal medium to create the impossible, blending the real and surreal. 1:1 replication of reality is not my goal, accurate expression of the concept or emotion is.”

Neither does *Amaryllis VR* shy away from the darker extremes of emotion. The artist’s project takes its name from a lily-like flower that is usually bright red. Immortalized in Virgil’s *Eclogues* in which a maiden named *Amaryllis* dies for her unrequited love to a shepherd, and praised in the work of the romantic poet Alfred Tennyson, it has a history of signifying both beauty and tragedy. For Zakarian, the evocative flower serves as an emblem for the thematic content as well as a natural allegory for the creating process itself: “The amaryllis taught me how everything has a life-cycle, how something that appears alive may be dead and vice versa. It spends half its life in dormancy underground, half above ground, and only a few weeks in bloom. Just like the necessary phases of introspection/input and expression/output in the creative process.” →



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Death seems ever-present in the universe of *Ocean*—the skeletal figure on the platform somewhere between a sculpture and a corpse, and more importantly, the impending metaphorical doom of the viewer is built into the narrative of the work, as we always end beneath the blood-red waves. Yet the atmosphere is seductively calming, and the aftermath of the experience feels personal and cathartic. Compelled by my own inability to articulate it verbally, I ask how she approaches the tension between the uncanny and the serene. “Depth and nuance and a larger capacity for empathy and kindness can come from life experience, from pain. I try to honor both in my art,” Zakarian says, “exploring the subjects of beauty and violence, life and death, and when these intense opposites meet.”

THE ETHICS OF SLOW VR

The aesthetic movements of Modernity are characterized by ideals of art’s transformative power. When Wagner formulated his vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it was with the belief that cultural producers must address the social, political, and existential problems of their time. The development of new media, then, is always accompanied by an ethical responsibility. Conscious of this, Zakarian’s work is informed by an underlying philosophy of *Slow VR*, a concept that emerged through her observation of the industry. “In the beginning, it was heavily focused on videogames because that was the easiest market for VR to break into. The result was that particular aesthetics and norms were transferred to VR,” Zakarian says and adds: “I saw that a large part of the audience wasn’t interested in the spectacle, the flashy and action-packed games, so I wanted to address that group.”

While *Ocean* seems to take certain cues from the videogame industry, its penchant for high production value, intricate worldbuilding, and well-designed interactivity, Zakarian wholly jettisons the break-neck pace of mainstream entertainment. Opting for an almost therapeutic approach, Amaryllis VR aims to create spaces for contemplation and catharsis, a cocoon for the senses. She says: “It’s the main reason I’ve turned towards *Slow VR*. The pace of contemporary entertainment is so fast. We are so used to being blasted with images and have to switch focus all the time. However, VR allows for a slower pace simply because you’re sensorially apart from the outside world.” She adds: “My philosophy is to allow people to take their bodies into this foreign space at their own pace. I detest VR experiences where the viewer’s

physical and emotional comfort is not taken into consideration, which in turn end up causing VR sickness. Unfortunately, there is still this notion among some in the industry that the user just has to get used to physical discomfort and overcome it with training.”

But the responsibility that comes with VR goes beyond the subjective experience, Zakarian emphasizes. With the ability to gain biometric data in quantities hitherto unseen, VR is central in accelerating the issues of privacy: “All this biometric data is extremely sensitive and valuable information, and collecting and selling user data is, unfortunately, a very well-known business model,” the artist remarks. “One of the VR giants, Oculus, is owned by Facebook. And just this week [August 2020] they sparked outrage in the VR community for making it mandatory to link your Oculus VR devices with your private Facebook account. They can track biometric data about VR users, and also user data via Facebook.”

A larger conversation on the questions of privacy and the capitalization of user data, then, needs to take place. “The ambition in the industry is to make VR as ubiquitous as smartphones, and this may sound odd coming from a VR artist, but I don’t want VR headsets in people’s homes before we have solved these issues.” Working in the intersection between art and technology means simultaneously addressing multiple areas, each with their own sets of challenges. The contemporary art world is, despite its claims of progressivity and love for novel forms, known for being a slow mover on institutionalizing new technologies. “I made the conscious choice to create my works for public spaces to avoid having to rely on at-home VR. It’s a challenge, since so many galleries, museums, and art spaces don’t have the experience or the equipment,” the artist admits.

Even so, a critical approach to VR is likely to find fruitful ground in the artistic community, Zakarian believes. “The art world is uniquely positioned to challenge and debate controversial topics. It’s much harder for people working in VR to have an unbiased conversation, and to say anything critical about the VR industry.” I ask what we as art professionals, artists, curators, critics, administrators, and consumers not least, might do to better receive VR. “Learn about it and engage in the discussions about it, since it’s such a seriously exciting medium, and it’s here to stay,” she replies. ■



“The first time I tried virtual reality was with a very old, heavy, pre-Oculus Rift head-mounted-display at Aalborg University in 2013. Amaryllis originally started as my master thesis project in which I developed and refined my techniques for creating VR fine art for public spaces.”
— Mariam Zakarian