

Mariam Zakarian: "With VR art people can visit the world in my head instead of looking at it through a window"

Artist Mariam Zakarian tells about the value of VR art, making of big projects solo and the source of her inspiration



Putting on a VR headset, I find myself on a small grey island. There is a red water surface under the island. Suddenly the water level rises and then falls down. Getting used to high and low tides, I start to look around the deserted minimalistic landscape: just me, a strange posed girl and a tentacle looking plant. Grey interlaced trunks of the plant, red on the top, look like a giant formless basket. The same tentacles are growing from the back of a frozen figure, that makes her look like hanged. Coming up to the girl, I look inside her and see the red heart. Its arteries form damask flowers on the top. I need to climb on the chair to reach and see the flowers called Amaryllis.

«Amaryllis VR» - is a VR experience created by the artist Mariam Zakarian. This work is exhibited in Denmark, but I can experience it in my Moscow studio.

Being a self-taught artist, Mariam works in a gothic style, combining graphics, paintings and new media. In the first part of the project «Amaryllis VR: Ocean» she immerses a viewer into the atmosphere of an impossible world of digital death and resurrection.



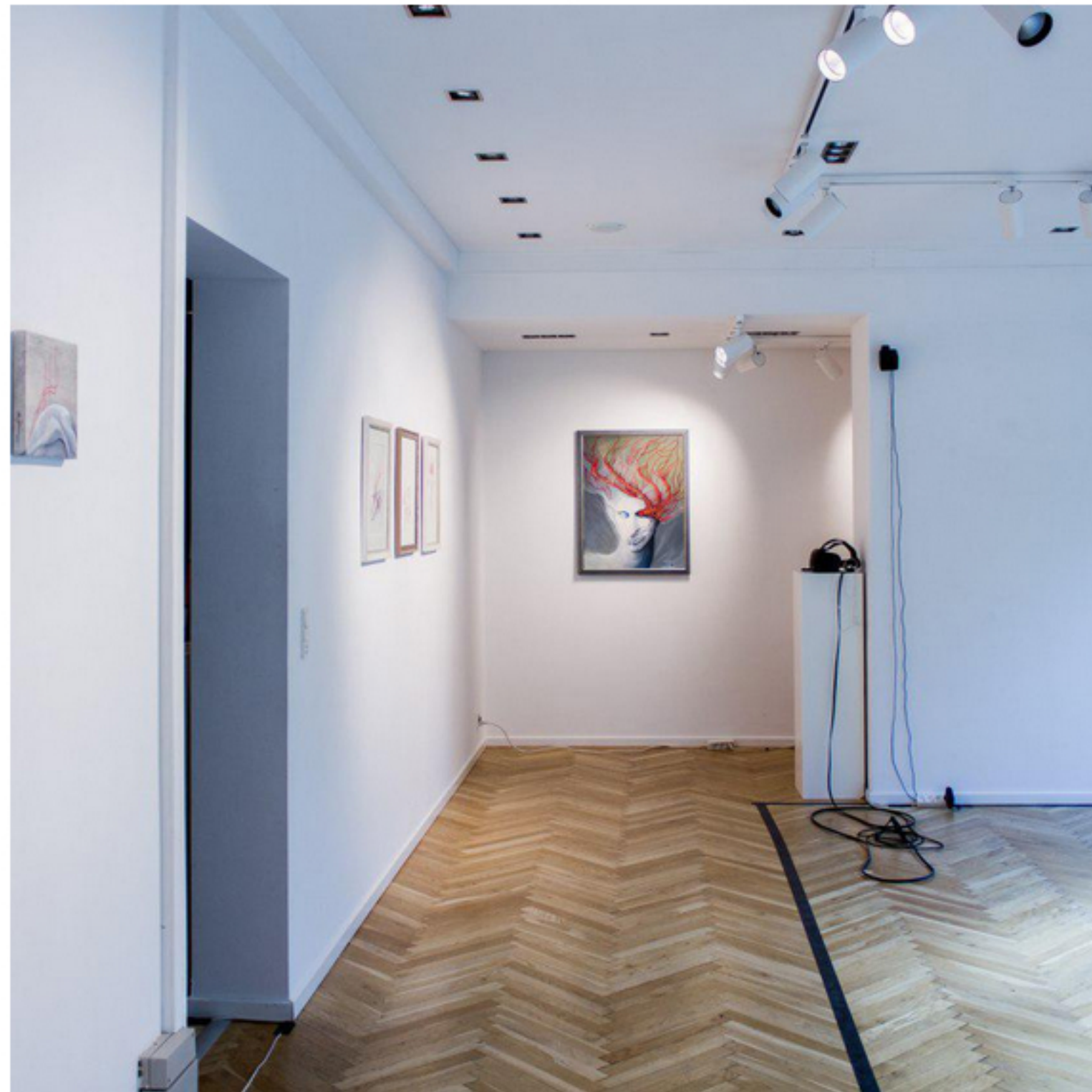
I have asked Mariam a few questions:

– When and where did you try VR for the first time?

– The first time I tried VR must've been when I was studying at the university in 2013. It was this ancient thing that looked like it belonged in an 80s blockbuster movie and I wasn't particularly drawn to it. At that time I was very put off by the gadgety feel of the HMD, so I didn't see an inspiring use for the technology yet until mid 2014.

– Yes, the first version of Oculus didn't look like the current. How did you come up with the idea of using VR in art? Had you seen some VR art before?

– No it was actually before Oculus -something they had at the lab since the 90s. This huge, white monstrosity. It was in 2014 that I started working with the Oculus Rift DevKits and later on when the Gear VR and HTC Vive devkits arrived, things finally clicked into place for me. I could finally see a way of uniting my interests of exploring music and visuals in one medium in a meaningful way



– Oh I see. It was hard to find any of VR art projects in 2014. Have you seen some that inspired you?

– When I started exploring VR art I had no idea that VR had already existed since the 60s and that other artists (many of whom were female) had experimented with it for many years. To me it felt like completely uncharted territory and something that I could see a lot of potential in for art. But my own inspirations come from other places. It's mostly in the form of a vision that becomes a driving force. An image and feeling together with this acute sense of importance. That becomes the catalyst and then the work starts.

– How do you create your experience? Do you have a team or make everything by yourself, including 3D modeling, animation etc.?

– I work solo. I've had a very do-it-yourself approach since the beginning. When I started Amaryllis around 20 months ago I was in a place where I needed a mountain to climb. I needed to challenge myself with something and come out on the other side. I had met this medium that I was really intrigued by, but I had no experience in making anything. I knew a bit about VR design from working on small projects as art director, and had all my previous experience with art in the form of painting, drawing, but I had no technical skills. So over the course of the past year I had to teach myself about 12 different programs and extensions and to get intimate with the hardware. It seems a bit crazy, since I could as well hire a team to produce VR art for me like other artists do, but I think a lot of the original vision gets lost when the artist doesn't get their hands dirty.

It's easier to achieve cohesion, and to transmit the vision more directly when everything from 3D modeling to music composition is done by one person.



– Wow! That's really impressive! Do you even compose music by yourself?

– Thank you. Yes, I do. Sitting in dark rooms at night and recording. Everything from vocals to piano and timing the music with the visuals. I've made music for a long time so this was one of the reasons I found VR attractive. I could use the music and visual art together to communicate the emotion in a different way than if I only had the music or the painting.

– Ok. Talking about Amaryllis project, are you going to make money on it? How exactly?

– When I started Amaryllis it was important to me to keep the work "uncontaminated" by external interests, since I had a very strong idea of where I wanted to go with it and didn't want to deal with compromises coming from investors and the like. VR projects of this size and complexity are expensive to make, especially compared to the cost of a painting, for example, so a lot of projects are funded by investors or grants with specific guidelines. This often conflicts with the idea of making an artwork, which is not inherently a commercial product. So I ended up funding Amaryllis entirely by myself, and because of this there has been no urgency to make money on it. However, since I'm working through galleries and the art world is slowly waking up to the potential of VR as a medium, I got curators to look at the piece. Amaryllis VR : Ocean has been valued at 150000DKK and the accompanying physical pieces are also sold.

Besides this, I'm luckily being invited to events and fairs where I show the piece, and these places are usually interested in paying for having a unique, site-specific and temporary experience that can't be found anywhere else.

– How do you differentiate what kind of events to participate in? Do you make any difference between exhibition and corporate event, entertainment and art?

– I try to select events that can offer an optimal setting for experiencing the work. People going to art exhibitions are in a different state of mind than drunk people at a festival, for example, but it's all about framing the experience and allowing people to understand what they are doing. That depends on how many resources are made available to me to frame that experience. It depends on many things.

– What is VR for you: just the current way to express your ideas or the main media for your art?

– I don't really believe in having a main medium, to be honest. I think that's gonna evolve as you evolve as an artist and as a human being. At least that's always been the case for me. It's extremely important to me to be open and ready for these moments of inspiration that start an art piece, and to let every idea find its appropriate manifestation. That's why I have worked with a lot of different media, from photography to poetry, from painting to VR. You can't let lack of good technique and lack of discipline get in the way of expressing the vision that shows up and knocks on your eyelids every morning and evening. But with VR I have only started scratching the surface of what I want to express. A lot of VR projects are already fully formed and just patiently waiting to be born. I see the future of my VR art moving more toward the realm of performance art.

Mariam's website: www.mariamzakarian.com

Project website: <http://www.amaryllisvr.com/>

Photos and video: Mariam Zakarian