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# Jeremy Couillard Uses Virtual Reality to Have an IRL Out-of-Body Experience

“The code of any piece of software, just like sentences from a book, contains a certain amount of ideology that comes out when you use it,” says the artist Jeremy Couillard, whose virtual reality project *Out of Body Experience Clinic* (2015) recreates the dizzying, uncanny sensation of astral projection.

**ARTSY EDITORIAL**

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Still from Jeremy Couillard's "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.

In Couillard's case, some of the software used to create the experience is

also utilized by studios rendering aliens and monsters, which explains how the materials employed in this surreal and terrifying virtual reality installation—seven years in the making—feel so genuinely cosmic.



It's a relatively recent development that high-quality virtual reality has become accessible enough for artists to make good use of it, and this past year has seen some ambitious projects, including Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's gorgeous recreation of a rainforest at the New Museum Triennial and BeAnotherLab's *Girl Mirror Look*, in which VR headsets allow participants to simulate the experience of another gender's body. Couillard's project joins these ranks, blurring the boundaries between the real and the imagined from the audience's first step into Louis B. James gallery, which has been specifically designed to resemble not an art space but a waiting room.



*Installation view of "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.*





Installation view of "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.

It's unsettlingly mundane, with free coffee and couches ripped straight from a dentist's office in which stock photography might adorn the walls. Here, however, Couillard's digital paintings and 3D-printed sculptures—confounding works in neon colors that combine New Age and space-age imagery—abound. As viewers settle in to wait for an appointment, they're treated to the *Bob Monroe 24/7 Out of Body Experience News Network*, which, among other snippets, shows a talk show that recalls *The View*, dedicated to the titular figure, one of the early proponents of astral projection as a Western practice during the '70s.



*Installation view of "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.*



*Installation view of "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.*

The real action, however, takes place upstairs: once the Oculus Rift headset is strapped to one's face, it takes a moment to adjust to the odd sense of disassociation. At first, the video experience recreates the room you've just left, but soon it floats you above the stark white environment and into a wild tableau full of chunky, sculptural monsters and undulating blobs. In his creation of this environment, says the artist, he was interested not so much in the actual, potential out-of-body experience but in the ways in which it's reported. In a recent interview, he noted that, given his research, many who say they've astrally projected actually describe what, "deep down, [they] *think* should happen." But, as the artist says of his installation, "if I had a 'real' OBE, something like this would happen."





*Still from "Out of Body Experience Clinic" at Louis B. James. Courtesy Louis B. James and the artist.*

—M. Osberg

*"Out of Body Experience Clinic" is on view at Louis B. James, New York, Apr. 3–May 10.*

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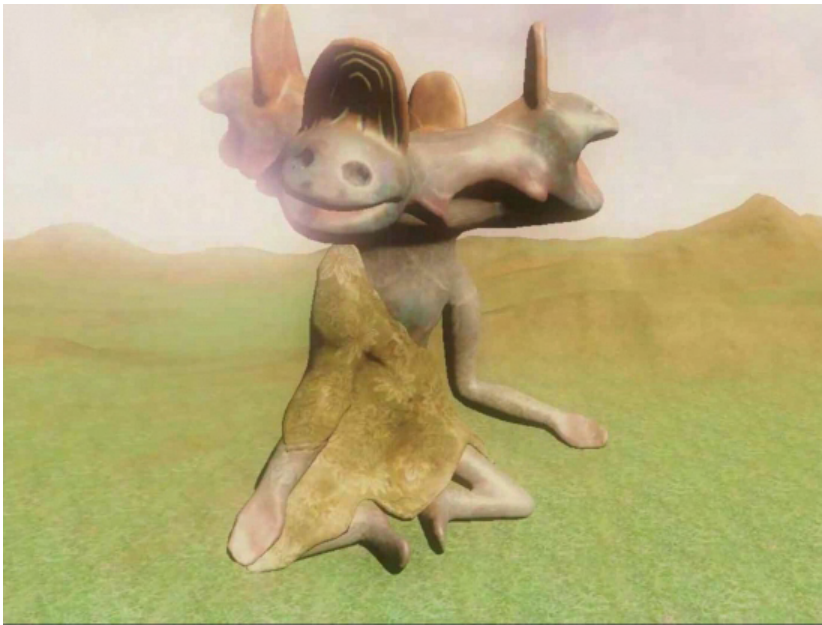
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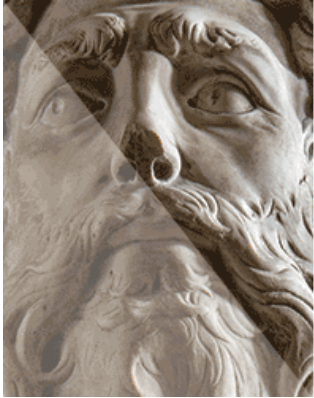


## Jeremy Couillard

at Louis B. James,  
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The most uncanny part of wearing a virtual reality headset is looking down and not seeing a body: the gear reduces the wearer into a gutted gaze. Jeremy Couillard doesn't take that physical disconnect for granted; he used it as the launching pad for *The Out of Body Experience* (2015)—and perhaps that's what makes this the most compelling piece of VR art on view in New York right now. Don the headset and you find your avatar sitting in a model of the same gallery basement where you're seated, before your soul drifts upstairs through a psychedelic door to a fantastical undulating landscape populated by docile monsters and fabulous sculptures. You can't control the direction of movement, as you can in most VR experiences, but it seems wise of Couillard to think of it as a trip rather than an environment—transporting, rather than immersing, his audience. Viewings are by appointment, but walk-ins are welcome, and if there's a wait the upstairs gallery is a pleasant place to idle. Temporarily fitted with the gypsum ceiling tiles and hideous brown carpet of a clinic, it has trashy magazines to leaf through, coffee to sip, Couillard's art on the walls and his custom channel on TV. Who needs a headset to feel immersed when the gallery already does it?





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BY SCOTT INDRISEK | APRIL 08, 2015





An installation view of Jeremy Couillard's "Out of Body Experience Clinic."  
(Photo by Eric White)

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Jeremy Couillard's "Out of Body Experience Clinic" is aptly named. Ostensibly an exhibition, on view at Louis B. James in New York through May 10, it's more of a journey into alternate dimensions, courtesy of seriously high-tech headfuckery. The experience, which takes up both floors of the space, is appointment-only. Single visitors are brought into the ground-level gallery, which has been expertly revamped to resemble a dentist's office waiting room on the planet LSD, circa 2098. A television streams the "Bob Monroe 24/7 Out of Body Experience News Network," a roughly 16-minute animated film loosely based around the ideologies of the [titular researcher](#), entrepreneur, and inventor. This includes a segment much like "The View," if the four argumentative women were to be replaced by cartoon aliens sitting in the lotus position while babbling in an invented language somewhere between Spanish and pig Latin. After this induction, an assistant brings you downstairs — a comparatively bare room, save for a raw computer console that resembles a teenage hacker's wet dream circa 1999. You're outfitted with an Oculus Rift headset and plunged into a sort of pastel-colored post-apocalyptic desert — created by Couillard using [Unreal Engine 4](#) — sucked out of your boring corporeality and into something much stranger.

In a recent email exchange I asked Couillard to share a bit about his aesthetic inspirations as well as his own out-of-body experiences.

**What is the upstairs "waiting room" portion of the exhibition based on, and what kind of mood are you hoping the viewer enters there?**

I loosely based it around massage spots, fortune tellers, and Taoist temples you see in the area of Chinatown and the L.E.S., so that it



would blend in at first glance. A friend told me someone walked by the gallery the first day it was open, looked in and said, “That *used* to be a gallery.” This was a huge compliment. Once you get inside, though, and start looking around, it’s quite different. I want visitors to open up to a weird experience. Ultimately the virtual-reality thing is just a hi-res screen with some lenses on it. If you aren’t in the mood for it being awesome, it might not be. So I

want people to really think, “Am I seriously going to leave my body?” Even though they know they won’t, maybe that sliver of possibility can be really exciting. Finally you go downstairs and see a really weird, dusty machine in an empty room. Maybe get a little freaked. Then when you enter the VR world you see a lot of the same things you saw upstairs in the news video or as 3-D and 2-D prints on the walls. By the time you leave you can’t remember what was digital and what was physical — which is pretty analogous to how a lot of us live nowadays.

### **Tell me a bit more about your relationship to Bob Monroe’s ideologies and teachings.**

I first started learning about Bob Monroe through YouTube talks of someone who worked for him, Thomas Campbell. If my memory from having the talks on in my studio is right, Campbell was a young physicist at a NASA lab that was near the [Monroe Institute](#). Bob Monroe recruited a few scientists from there to work with him on the weekends. He was trying to figure out if he could reproduce his out-of-body experiences (OBEs) in others by peripherally duplicating the electrical activity they produced in the brain. The brain generates certain frequencies in hertz along the scalp depending on certain states of consciousness. Monroe’s idea was that you could play stereo beats on headphones that would pulse from one ear to the other at the same frequency as his brain did when he went out of body — and therefore get people into an OBE scenario much faster. Those beats are constantly in the background of the VR experience in my show.

Thomas Campbell told this story about how they built all these OBE binary-beat machines and took them to a hotel for a conference. Everyone they hooked them up to left their bodies and were floating around having amazing spiritual experiences. Later the Monroe Institute released all these binary-beat tapes with Bob Monroe walking you through the experience of leaving your body. I downloaded all of them and tried for months to make something happen. I wanted to have that fantastical adventure. Monroe writes about going to the outer reaches of the universe and communicating with beings of light that teach him about the origins of human consciousness. As much as I tried, nothing happened. And nothing happened either when, in a Zen-like manner, I *gave up* trying. I think why things happened to all these guests at the conference is because they believed in it; they invested time and money to go to this hotel in the woods with this weird institute that said they were going to have this experience.

So my inclusion of Bob Monroe’s name in the video is a little more complicated than an homage. I was definitely inspired by how he tried to use technology and music to induce spiritual experiences. Trying to turn such subjective experiences into an institutionalized science,



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though, becomes a little problematic, and even more so when you're charging a lot for it. It seems much more fitting in the analogical realm of art. I'm not a transhumanist or anything like that. I don't think technology is going to save us or correct all our problems. If anything it just shows us more who we are: a network of a bunch of highly imperfect weirdos who deep down have no fucking idea what the hell is going on but are constantly having to act like we know.

### **Tell me a bit about the world you conjured for the virtual-reality experience.**

During the initial research for the project I read a lot of stories of people who had OBEs and also near-death experiences. It seems to me that what happens during this type of experience is whatever, deep down, you *think* should happen. You visit beings in other galaxies, see God, head toward a tunnel of light, swim with whales, and walk around spaces that sound a bit like they are from that "Thor" movie. It is a subjective experience. But I think even in subjective experiences there is a certain physics that is limiting.

The world I created is a visualization of my subjective experiences interacting with software and hardware. The code of any piece of software, just like sentences from a book, contains a certain amount of ideology that comes out when you use it without trying too hard. I would guess the main clients of a program like [ZBrush](#), which I used for most of the objects in the world, are studios making aliens and monsters. When I make something in that program and let my subconscious take over by not thinking about what I'm doing too much, I end up getting some cartoony beast, an analog to an anxious, confused feeling inside. Then all the characters do something absurd like eat raw fish together in a big orgy of anxiety and doubt under a golden pyramid. Probably if I had a "real" OBE, something like this would happen.

Virtual reality can't handle a lush forest or glistening oceans convincingly. So in the end I generated this weirdly barren landscape populated by monsters and blobby things. It's subjective but it also must adhere to a lot of limitations. You leave your body but you're not going to go anywhere you couldn't already imagine.



*A still from Jeremy Couillard's video. Courtesy the artist and Louis B. James*



## Have you ever had an actual out-of-body experience without the influence of any technological prosthetics?

I've tried a lot of things, from the Monroe Institute tapes to meditating with a decaying dead body in Thailand. All interesting experiences but I never have really felt out of my body. The only thing that comes close is when I'm working in front of a computer all day and all of a sudden it's six o'clock and the only evidence I existed that day is a little monster dancing samba in a perfectly lit room on my computer screen.

## What do you think about the Oculus Rift becoming a more commonly used artistic tool?

One thing that seems hopeful is that when guests who are very well-versed in talking about and making art take off the headset, their first question is, "How long did this take you?" These are people who have been in the arts for decades, who have MFAs, run galleries, and write about art. They are asking the same questions that my undergraduate students ask me when I show them weird art they've never seen before. And I think they're asking it for the same reason: It's a new thing and no one knows what's going on with it and how it might fit in to everything else going on in contemporary art.



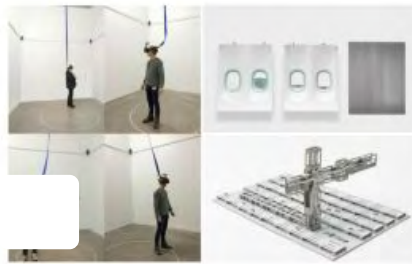
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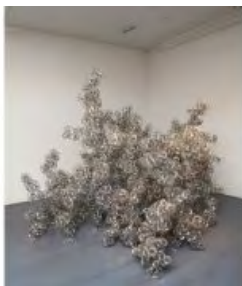
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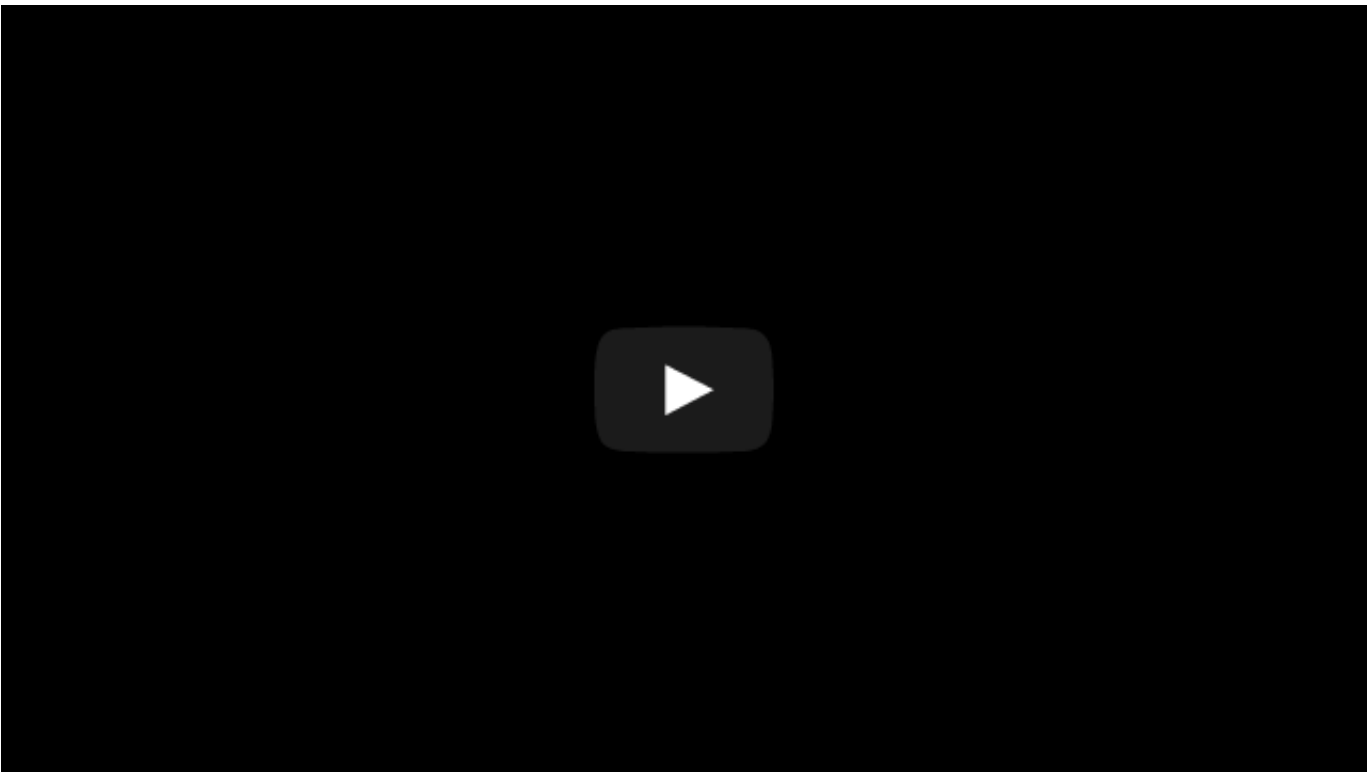
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# I Had an Out-of-Body Experience at an Oculus Rift Art Show

By Kate Messinger — Apr 3 2015

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Artist Jeremy Couillard (<http://www.jeremycouillard.com/>) has tried everything to have an out-of-body experience—meditation, psychedelics, even listening to hypnotic cassette tapes from Bob Monroe, the father of altered consciousness who coined the term in the early 70s. However, when Oculus Rift started popping up in developmental stages, Couillard saw it as the perfect medium to explore and manipulate another state of being. “Maybe I’m just not sensitive enough for a real ‘out-of-body experience,” Couillard tells The Creators Project at his studio in Sunset Park, a heap of wires engulfing the large computer system running the virtual reality program he’s created. “But with VR you just open your eyes and you’re in another place!”

Couillard's newest multi-dimensional project, the *Out of Body Experience Clinic* (<http://outofbodyexperience.clinic/>) opening today at Louis B. James Gallery (<http://www.louisbjames.com/>), uses computer generated paintings, 3D-printed sculptures, and Oculus Rift to take the viewer on an immersive art experience beyond the walls of a gallery. Through appointments or walk-ins, Couillard gives you the freedom to explore a seamless virtual world in a personal way; a choose-your-own-adventure of metaphysical proportions made possible through cutting-edge technology.



*Characters from Couillard's Out of Body Experience Clinic. Images courtesy the artist*

It took Couillard over a year to design the 8-minute-long virtual simulation, and an upgrade to his entire computer system to be able to run its software correctly. "You have to get it perfectly simple," says the artist, a self taught programmer who also teaches computers at Laguardia Community College. "You get sick if the frame rate isn't perfect, and no one wants people puking all over a gallery." Those long hours in front of the computer, creating a world that is rendered in realtime as the viewer moves their head, were Couillard's closest feeling to having an out-of-body experience.

"Computers are the most psychedelic things," he says, and the images and themes of his work reflect this feeling of personal transcendence, coming alive in both the VR experience and other elements of the exhibition. The characters and landscape that Couillard created are surreal yet oddly familiar, a representation of his subconscious as well as artistic process. "I just gave into the technology and let the

characters come out of an unconscious state.“ The sages, as he calls them, mimic a childish 90s claymation aesthetic with a touch of adult psychosis: a Gumby body with an empty TV head, a colorful fish-humanoid, and a character that is basically just abstract art wearing a dress.



*the Out of Body Experience Clinic installation at Louis B. James gallery*

Though the main event of the exhibition is Couillard's virtual simulation, the experience actually starts, whether you realize it or not, as soon as you walk into the Lower East Side gallery. "I wanted to make it like a real clinic, to blend into the neighborhood like any other business or psychic or restaurant," says the artist, showing me a rendering of the gallery-turned-waiting room, complete with bad furniture, a TV and free coffee. At first glance, it looks like a pediatrician's office from another era, with animated artwork of colorful virtual world, some small toy dioramas with 3D printed alien characters, and a cartoon playing softly on the television. But as you look closer there is something slightly off. The program on the TV, streaming the words "24/7 Bob Monroe News Network" across the bottom, show those sages from Couillard's unconscious looking anxious and a little evil, reporting surrealist news in gibberish.



On a closer look at waiting room, you start realizing those characters from the TV are also in the pictures on the walls and hiding inside the small dioramas at your feet. They are hints of things you will see during your appointment once the docent leads you downstairs and straps on the goggles; the gun above the mantle at the beginning of the play that you only remember after it goes off in the third act. “We are in front of a screen more than we’re not now,” says Couillard, “this is an experience that you get out of and you forget what was digital and what was physical.”



*Inside*

*the Out of Body Experience Clinic installation at Louis B. James gallery*

The *Out of Body Experience Clinic* begins the same for everyone. You are sitting in a mostly empty white-walled room with nothing but a plant in the corner, a virtual rendition of the room you are sitting in for your appointment. But suddenly, you start to drift up, the visual sensation causing the psychosomatic physical sensation of floating, prompting you to look down and realize you are leaving your body—well, it’s not your body exactly, more of a digital version of yourself reimagined as one of Couillard’s characters, getting smaller and smaller as your mind leaves the room. From here, each person’s experience is their own, dictated by where they look and allow themselves to go. Maybe you’ll drift through a psychedelic purple desert and meet

its huge sand creature, or visit a dinner party of giants (hey, there's the empty TV head guy!), or hang out inside a whale before looking around an art gallery in the sky, before returning back to your body at the end of the 8-minute simulation.



*Screen shot from Couillard's Oculus Rift VR simulation*

"It's so different for each person," says Couillard, who hopes all types of people will let themselves be open to the journey. "Some people are sweating, some people just think it's cool, some nerdy people get super into it," he explains, "and some people can't finish it because they get too scared." I don't scare easy and, like Couillard, find it hard to allow myself into a state of altered consciousness. But during my experience in the virtual world, I surprisingly got a sudden rush of fear, gasped, and started to sweat. I felt the urge to pull my floating virtual body down to solid ground and reached out for the virtual tree in front of me. But as soon as the fear came, it turned into embarrassed laughter. There was no danger! My real body was on solid ground, just sitting in a gallery basement swiveling around and grabbing at nothing. Yes, the visuals had tricked me into feeling weightless, and my out-of-body experience was real.





*Screen shot from Couillard's Oculus Rift VR simulation*

Using this new technology, Couillard has created a seamless multi-dimensional world, from the waiting room to the artwork to the virtual experience. To be able to leave a place without ever actually moving, to experience a world of that is both an artist's subconscious and a viewer's own experience, must be similar to how an audience felt seeing one of the first moving pictures. "It's a brand new thing that might go anywhere," he says of Oculus Rift technology, and its potential for artistic uses are just as exciting. However, Couillard hopes that *Out of Body Experience Clinic* will feel like more than just an art show "I want this to not so much be an art experience as just as experience," he says. "I want people to feel like they went somewhere other than a gallery." One thing is sure, no matter your experience, it's not going to be a normal day seeing art.

Make an appointment online (<http://outofbodyexperience.clinic/>) or walk into Louis B. James gallery April 3rd-May 10th, Wednesday through Saturday 11-6, and Sunday 12-6. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

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