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Virtual Reality Has Arrived in the Art World. Now What?

By JASON FARAGO FEB. 3, 2017



A still from Rachel Rossin's "Man Mask." New Museum

When the world outside looks frightful, you might be tempted to put on the blinders [...]

Last month, the New Museum, in partnership with its new media arm, Rhizome, opened an exhibition of six newly commissioned digital artworks, to be viewed wherever you like, on an Android or iOS device, at no cost. The works in this exhibition, "First Look: Artists' VR," all make use of animation — far cheaper than filmed virtual reality, which requires 360-degree camera rigs — and all employ a more or less surreal vocabulary: Objects float in space, spaces collapse into one another [...]

The most intriguing work in "First Look" comes from **Rachel Rossin**, an artist who oscillates between painting and virtual reality projects. Her work "Man Mask" plops you in a hazily defined, whited-out world, derived from scenes from the video game "Call of Duty" — and she has distorted the game's soldiers and mercenaries into translucent shades while a woman's voice recites an EST-style mantra of "happiness, peace and cheerfulness."

Ms. Rossin's obscure figures and cynical voice-overs find an echo in "Transdimensional Serpent," by the virtual reality veteran Jon Rafman, which places you amid white humanoids, satyrs and snakes in an empty space, a forest, and a ruined interior [...]

What works for video game designers may be less applicable for fine artists, for whom the creation of images is supposed to be a means to something larger, and not an end in itself. That was the great lesson of modernism: Art is more than mere illusion, and it gains further meaning by pushing media to the limits of their capabilities. Virtual reality, by contrast, is a medium without limits — a medium that tries to parallel life itself. The wonder I felt when I first put on an Oculus Rift, and lost myself in Mr. Steegman Mangrané's rain forest or Ms. Rossin's floating world, is undeniable. Now the challenge is to put virtual reality in the service of something more complex, for it would be a pity if wonder was all we got.

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