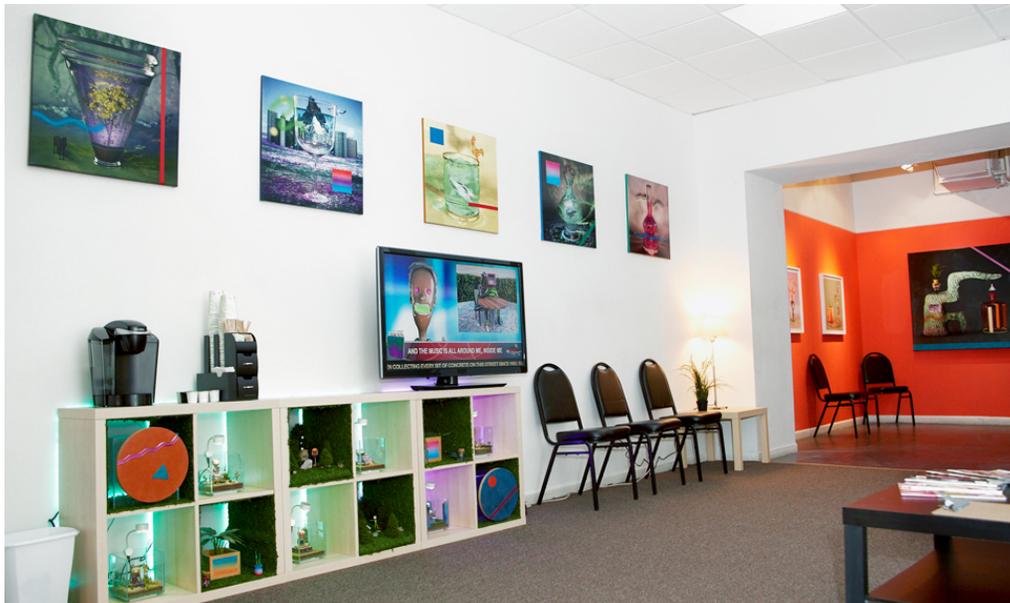An Out of Body Experience on the Lower East Side
BY SCOTT INDRISEK | APRIL 08, 2015

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

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, 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 fore 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.