

On knowing when to take a break



Visual artist and designer Laleh Khorramian on knowing when to take a step back, and how illness gave her a different perspective on the role of art in her life.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3109 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Film](#), [Focus](#), [Adversity](#).

Why did you decide to leave NYC and to move upstate?

It was a long time coming. The last two of my 10 years in New York was a residency in Vienna, Austria, so there was a time of not really feeling like New York was the place for me—but I had a career, and things were rolling along, so there wasn't a reason to get up and move. There wasn't an invitation to leave.

The recession had happened while I was abroad, and so I came back to things being very different economically. It was a number of things. I no longer had my New York gallery. I was finding myself unable to afford living there. I had a relationship end, I had been in Europe for two years— It's completely different, and I just didn't want to be back in New York by any means. Just everything pointed to, "Time to go. This is not the place I want to be, nor can I afford to be here anymore."

I remember I had a solo booth at Statements in Switzerland, and for a year I worked on that work. But somehow things felt off. I wasn't connected to what I was doing. It was after that show that I said, "If this show doesn't go in a certain way, I'm going to stop for a while." That's what happened. It just felt like there was something I needed to recover somehow in order to move forward.

I ended up going to a place that was a friend's farm. They said, "Come here. Just heal. Get out of the city." I honestly never saw myself going back. For me, it was a permanent move to begin with. I wasn't thinking, "Oh, how can I stay? Am I going to be able to live out of the city?" I was pretty dead set on never going back. At that time, I'd opted out of making "art" for a bit. I made a complete change. I said, "I don't want to make art for a while. I want to leave the city. I want to de-complicate my life of needing a studio." I was in the process of trying to do a science fiction movie that needed funding, and I decided, "I don't want all that. I want to simplify."



Vegetation 2, 33"x46", digital print, 2016

I'd always sewn since I was kid, and it was something that was a peaceful activity for me. I needed something peaceful, something therapeutic, and something where I could regroup and not have the emotional demands that making art did-which I usually very much enjoyed, but I wasn't enjoying at that time. I was going through a difficult time of transition, and I felt like the easier way to find peace was going to be through making an edit down of my practice and the demands of my life.

Soon enough that became a clothing line, [LALOON](#), and then that became a company, and I went full force into that. I enjoyed making something that was like a disguise for a while, having this alter-ego practice. My aunt was a seamstress and a tailor, and so all my life I was around it. I just got to discover myself and discover new directions through sewing. It was a great thing.

Now I feel like I've been merging it into more of one world. From the urging of my gallery in Dubai, they said, "You should have a show again, and you should do stuff again. Don't stay away for too long." I thought I would give it a try, it was just too much a part of me to let go. It's what I want to do and love to do, but I was mad at art for a while and needed time away, and then I found a way to bring clothing into that. Textiles, or whatever it was that I'd fallen into doing, was something I enjoyed as well. I wasn't thinking of myself as now a clothing person or a fashion designer. I thought of myself as an artist who is making clothes.

The last exhibition with [The Thirdline](#) in Dubai was the first time I introduced this work in a context like that. I showed the kimonos along with two-dimensional work, and there wasn't much of a response.

I think the gallery was unsure whether they wanted to work with the textiles. It was a new medium for me and perhaps it was too soon after a long period of not showing. Honestly, I don't think I've yet had the proper platform to show this stuff since I've started making textile works.

You have a number of approaches-when there are so many things in your toolbox, how do you decide to go forward with a particular project? How do you narrow down how you're going to go about something?

At the moment, I'm working in a lot of different mediums, but I'm not always like that. I'm spreading myself a little bit thin, because I'm exploring in a way that I think is

necessary, and that feels right. I've got to create work and then read that. It tells me where to go. Shows guide that, too.

For example, about five years ago I was making a cycle of films about the five elements, and I'd come to the last one. Ether. I shelved the film. It was that science fiction film that I'd worked on for a long time. I was writing the script with the actor and then when it came to the funding, it was just bad timing. I wondered, "Maybe there's another way I'm supposed to make this." So, I shelved it, and that's when I went in the direction of the clothing. Recently, it's come back up, and some people have been saying, "Can you make the film now?" I feel like, actually, the film is still relevant even after these years. It's still a relevant topic, and I do want to make it, but I don't have the desire to make a film in the same way that I usually make a film, so I've grown more interested in collaborations, what different things I can do, and different directions of making something.

I think somehow the textile work is going back into the science fiction realm, but almost just by virtue of making the artifacts that go into that world for the film. The film itself hasn't happened, and maybe it won't happen, and maybe it will, or maybe it's going to happen in another way. Maybe it'll be an opera or an amusement park ride. I have no idea. I'm in this place where I'm experimenting a lot and also working with other people, which is really something I've always wanted but never quite knew how to do.



M-GOLIS, 2013, installation view

Since you do have all these approaches and mediums, I imagine if one thing feels blocked, you can move onto something else.

I do get creative blocks now and then, but then, like you said, I have other things. I do like to have a few balls rolling at once. It's innate. I work better when I can pinball between mediums a little.

Also, as non-musicians, I have a band, Bauch Bein Po, with two artist friends. It's a really ridiculous band, and we just make really stupid fun music, and we don't take ourselves seriously at all. We started it when I was in Austria. We made a YouTube channel with a couple of our videos. We just like making fun songs that are actually quite political although sung entirely in German. It's completely meaningless, but when I'm blocked and I don't know what to work on, I make a video or song or something, and it's a breath of fresh air. It's fun and it puts me in my place.

How did you go about figuring out how to work with people, how to start doing the collaboration?

I always wanted that, but never quite knew how. Even when I made animations, I just did them all myself. I didn't work with anyone except for on the post-production or the music. I did animation because I couldn't ever get people to do what I wanted them to, like continuously whip themselves around a tree branch. I didn't know how to direct people.

A recent collaboration started accidentally. I work in a building with someone who builds speakers. The cutoff of what they throw away, I use. I have permission to use these, so I take their remnants, and then I start to make things out of that. I started making wood pieces and objects connected to the light pieces I was making. Then I did a show at my building, "I need to make some work, and I want to show it, and I don't have a show coming up, so I'm going to just do it right here." So then the different people in the building were involved in helping me make my vision happen here. That was one of my first tastes of getting to work with other people. It wasn't a very planned. I was really open to whatever they brought, and they were enthusiastic about helping me realize my vision.



The Historian. Permanent ink on raw silk LALOON, 2017

Recently I started something new in my studio. I do portraits, so it's this evening thing where people can come and they get a portrait, and they also get a tarot reading. It's more like an event or party. I'm learning more about how to share and let go.

Collaborating with other people, starting the clothing line, and all these other things are good survival techniques for existing as a creative person. It feels less like the archetypal solitary artist who's chiseling away by themselves.

I think I'm a person that—for my work for and myself—the emotional content and the emotional investment was always the thing I worked towards. As far as survival goes, I've been through cancer and the treatments two times in my life. The demands that I had to go through with that were devastating and formative. It doesn't matter who's around you, or how much support you have—it's a very solitary process. I think that going through that, contributed to, "I don't give a fuck. I don't need to prove myself to anyone."

The things I felt like I had to prove before, I don't feel the same way about. Not that I think I have to subject or want to subject anyone to art that's shitty or not thought-out or meaningful or something. I just don't feel like I have to prove the same things. Life is hard enough. That's why I was also mad at art for a while. It was just too emotionally demanding, and I needed to step away and do something that wasn't as emotionally consuming, and that's why I was sewing. Sewing was a reprieve. And I am in love with sewing. It's steady, it's graceful, and it can be full of invention.

I learned so much about myself and about creativity and about being an artist and being involved with that thing that you care for and you want. It had a huge impact on me, in a good way, to step back. What I discovered coming back was a lightness and shift in perspective in how I approach working in certain ways. Did I compromise? I don't know. I still have the same standards of what I expect from my work, but I think that I look at things a little differently. I don't know if I'm making more interesting work or less interesting work. I'm just doing it for now.

When you had the show that didn't go well, and you thought, "I'm going to take some time off," that could have been a positive or a negative experience. When that happened, did you feel right away this could be turned into something positive? Or were there moments where you thought, "Maybe I will never make work again."

It didn't feel positive at first. But I wasn't surprised, which is why I quickly shifted my thinking about it. I've had basically three different stops in my life, whether it was from illness or whatever, where everything stopped for a good year or two. That was a very weird, not-weird thing—not being able to make anything. For sure, I thought, "It's over, now maybe I won't work with anyone. I'm written off. Maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't. It could go either way." It can always be bittersweet to leave something half done or have to change

course. But in creativity it's also par for the course.



Guardian Green. 30 x 72 ink, oil, crayon, mylar, polypropylene, collage on watercolor paper, ink, oil, paper on polypropylene, 2016

There are so many dimensions to life that now I don't give this career some kind of overarching importance. It's clear that I'm supposed to do this and it's always been church for me. I'm making it and I'm doing it, and that's a good thing. That's the important thing. Whether the work gets seen is another thing that maybe I do or don't have control over, but I don't feel that that needs to happen in order for me to feel the legitimacy of being an artist or doing something important. It's like having a child. It's like your baby, and you want to give your baby the best.

I never had any bad feelings towards the art world. I love to be involved. To be completely honest, I want to be recognized, and I want to have my work out there. I still desire those things, especially when you have a lot of productivity. But I definitely have a different attitude. The art world is the art world. It is what it is. In my mind, I'm serving the work that I'm doing. I'm not blowing off the art world or saying fuck that, or that I don't care, but I do have a different proximity to it, because I'm not in the city, and so I'm not as exposed. But this life works for me, because it's here where I do what I do, and that makes me much more happy than being somewhere else. I like where I am.

When you're sick, you gain perspective, and a new way of viewing the world. You're still ambitious, you still work hard, you still want people to recognize your work and see your work, but you realize if you're happy outside of that, that's ultimately the most important thing. It's finding a certain balance.

For sure. It's like becoming an insect. That's actually a metaphor I used a lot during my first illness. I felt like an insect, and it was really interesting feeling that way, and literally living like this insect that I was. I felt like I was made of metal and iridescence and was tiny tiny with enormous eyes. Whether that was going to come through in my work, I don't know. I had no idea how to reflect that in any creative capacity. I did something else, but it wasn't about being an insect. It was when I made that erotic orange peel film. The insect era was the orange peel film that came out of that. I made that in my bedroom.

Sometimes it takes time, even years, to find that balance. I'd call it acceptance, actually: what to fight, when to fight, and what to accept. I certainly don't think I have anything figured out.

Finding ways to scrape stuff together, and to keep going, feels useful. Not everything is a master success; it's just ultimately this through-line of work that keeps going.

Yeah, but you know what? I don't think that it was always this thing of, "Well, I'm just going to keep making stuff, no matter what." I think at my core, and no matter what I want to think, I do have that commitment, and love, but I didn't want to think that. I really thought in some ways art betrayed me, because I put so much of my emotion and soul and gut into it and it created more pain in some ways, when I didn't sell it, or it didn't go anywhere. I didn't always feel like I had to make something.

I really wanted to learn how to not make anything and not give a shit. I tried, "I am not going to make anything." Of course, I wasn't capable of that, but I really wanted to try to let go of that idea that I had to make things. Also, people say, "Oh yeah, I heard you came back from adversity, you can conquer the world, and you're a warrior!" and this and that, and that's such bullshit. I dealt with so much self-doubt after that last illness. Art (or adversity) doesn't necessarily bring these miracles of spirit that people often think it does. Sometimes you're just like, "No, man, I feel crushed, and I don't necessarily feel like art is going to save my soul or take me out of this." But, somehow, I do in the end believe that it kind of can. It's very powerful, our own creativity. It can be very restorative and sometimes it's your only companion on very solitary roads.



WATER PANICS IN THE SEA, 2011. Digital stop-frame animation, 14 min, Color w/ sound, Dimensions Variable

Laleh Khorramian's current and veteran obsessions:

pam hogg - one of my favorite artists. having an exhibition at the moment. her recognition is long overdue

at age 20, federico fellini changed my life. his scenes still haunt me. sergei parajanov as well.

dameiselfrau is badass

ardeshir and bahman mohasseb (cousins) two iranian artists and unique people who had strong early and continual influences on my work.

what you can find me listening to almost always. italian film composers of the 70s and early christian polyphony

Name

Laleh Khorramian

Vocation

Artist, Designer

