

# ARTslant

## Interview with Laleh Khorramian

*New York, Jan. 2012* - Laleh Khorramian doesn't recall an artistic inclination as a child. She was in her late teens when she began to paint in earnest and though she focused on the figure she admits to youthful fantasies of being a landscape painter. She tells the story with a sigh and a smirk, "It was the thing I yearned to paint, but couldn't."

Khorramian, who is Iranian by birth, grew up in sunny Orlando, Florida. She started as a painting major at RISD before transferring to the Art Institute of Chicago where she took classes in film, printmaking, and performance. In 2002 she enrolled in Columbia's grad program with the idea to be experimental. It was that attitude that enabled her to take seriously the advice of a professor who reintroduced the idea of working with film or animation, which she had previously studied as an undergrad. Just about a decade later Khorramian is exhibiting her newest film, *Water Panics in the Sea*, at Nicole Klagsbrun.

I met with Khorramian at her Brooklyn studio to discuss her artistic development, film, drawing, ghost ships, and time travel.



---

*Charlie Schultz: I understand Water Panics is part of a five-film cycle, were you at Columbia when you began this cycle?*

**Laleh Khorramian:** Yes. But it's not actually five films; it's five elements. More than five films have come of it. I started the first one, *Sophia & Goya* (2004), with the material I'd made at Columbia. There was a ton of material that had no place or structure, but belonged to the same tribe. I didn't have the element series in mind. It was only during the second film, *Chopperlady* (2005), that I realized this is something I wanted to create. I didn't want the material to just wander, but to have a kind of house and let it become a cycle that could continue by moving into the next. I could focus on certain aspects very closely, use the same story or introduce things that when watched as a whole would be connected. I can see this structure as totally appropriate now too because it resembles a life cycle. I'm at the last element and it's becoming more abstract and primordial, like going back to being a child again.

*CS: Would you talk a little about your raw materials? I notice there's monotypes, drawings, discarded bits of things. How do you make decisions in the early stages?*

**LK:** Ideas can come from years prior; I think it must be like that for many artists. You have seeds and visions, but how they should physically manifest isn't immediately understood. Sometimes it takes years for things to come together or there are things that evolve by getting used repeatedly. It's a way to find out what they are or what they are telling you. I don't think it's meant to end, or even become clearer. It's hard to pinpoint the very origin of certain works, but in the case of my animations I would say the early stages would be working with the monotypes. Imagine if you were to give yourself a map to decipher. The monotypes are my maps. I produce large monotype prints then I read into the pictures that I find in them. They can function like dowers. The images can be abundant and totally varied. Truthfully, they can be overwhelming, but the different element completely changes my use of them. Because it influences what I am looking for, I always seem to come across things that I didn't imagine finding even though the viscous quality of the print has a certain look to it. I've always produced other bodies of work side by side or independently of the large prints and animated films too. They may be diversions, but they often work into the main pieces, like miniature structures and the costume pieces I sew.

*CS: Can you give me an example specific to Water Panics?*

**LK:** Sure. The water footage I shot myself. Some of it I shot in Trieste, Italy; in Split, Croatia, and the coast of Tunisia. I shot it years and years ago and knew I'd know what to do with it someday. Some of the water is literally just oil and water in a transparent basin that I mix and splash around with my hands. There is a little bit of the same formula—even though “the formula” is not a very linear method of working—in the way I use the digital media software for the editing. It's kind of disorganized, but I decide what I want to see and produce it in a very lo-tech way myself, which is maybe helpful for not getting too carried away with effects. I'm terrible at color keying, but I prefer it that way; it's not the point to get anal about it. At least so far. Maybe I'll have a totally different approach next time. Having said that, it can be hard for me to work with people on the animations.

**CS:** *Was the sound track like that too? Did you record it all yourself?*

**LK:** No. Shahzad Ismaily performed and recorded the music. He is really interesting to collaborate with. We recorded my own voice too. The screams that you hear throughout the film are me, but it comes across sounding like a Turkish horn. It was so fun to record. I'd have to be alone or facing the wall to have the nerve to get into a screaming frenzy, but it was totally liberating like jumping into cold water. Shahzad knows what he's doing; he knew how to direct the process. After months of discussions we got together for one week and he created all the songs, performed everything and recorded it all. Then he gave me the music and said, “do what you want.” So I arrange it, cut it, manipulate it. That is when the audio process echoes the way I handle the visual material. There are places where I really manipulate the hell out of certain tracks, like take a whole ten-minute soundtrack, squeeze it, reverse it, and use that. It sounds nothing like what it was before and means something very different too. Take an old sound make something new of it, I'm into recycling.



Laleh Khorramian, *I Without End* (still), 2008; Courtesy of the artist

**CS:** *Sounds like a process that could go on for ages; did it take you long to complete?*

**LK:** I started it in 2005, but since then I've taken breaks from it. Two or three times I threw *Water Panics* out and started over. That's why it took so damn long! (Laughter) I also created other pieces, like *I Without End* (2008). But elements like the strips themselves, the ones that compose the ship; I made those in 2001. So I guess all in all, it took probably three years.

**CS:** *I remember those strips. It looked like there were figures drawn on them, which of course gave the impression that those figures made up the ship itself.*

**LK:** Well that's the point. I wanted this imprint on the memory. There are tiny figures drawn on them, but I extracted the figures most of the time, so it's mostly silhouettes. I was thinking about Mayan codices and looking at the ship as the lexicon of a past civilization. I had hundreds of feet of the strips, full of drawings I've done. Actually, when I made those I sold them by the foot and that's how I moved to New York. (Laughter)

**CS:** *Can you tell me about the poem in opening section of Water Panics? You drew the title from the poem too, right?*

**LK:** Yes I did. I've known the poets for a long time. One is Andrea Martha, who goes by the name Mumtaz, and the other is Antonio Poppe. Both are artists in their own right. They wrote the poem together. When I started out on this film I knew right away that it would have this title. Afterwards, when the film was finished, I noticed how synonymous they were in structure—the film and the poem—so I got their permission and included the entire text in the film.

**CS:** *It was nice to have it, but it flashed by too quick. Even watching three times I could never get through the whole thing.*

**LK:** Hmmm. Maybe I should provide everyone a pause button.

**CS:** *(Laughter) That would be great. It would be nice to read the poem at the poem's pace. Tell me about the mixed media pieces, the drawings that were in the back room. What's their relationship to the film?*

**LK:** I made countless images of the ship years before I made *Water Panics*. That was something that has been a reoccurring form for the last twenty years. I am obsessed with the ship form, the peril and history associated with the ocean and voyages, the aspects related to human development, progress and suffering, and fathoming the kind of time humans dealt with and still do, that many don't really experience anymore...



**Laleh Khorravian**, *MW-095 empty vessel*, 2010, mixed media on paper, 38.5 x 50 inches; Photo courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun.

**CS:** *You refer to the ship in Water Panics as a Ghost Ship Time Machine. The ghost ship is easy for me to grasp, but I couldn't get a hold on the time machine component.*

**LK:** I used a lot of major shifts in scale to carve fictitious spaces from the landscapes. Going between various scales in a brief amount of time was like zooming between past and future or moving from one reality to another. Certain parts are subterranean, even sub-body. So for me this was a sort of time-traveling device. All these things can't possibly happen on one plane. My imagination doesn't feel like it functions on only one plane. I know it may not make a whole lot of sense, but it does for me and even I can't properly put it into words. I'm really interested in how viewers experience something that they think they see all at once. Whether that drawing is two-dimensional or projected. And obviously it's connected for me because I'm using both and going back and forth between mediums. I began making animated films as another means of experiencing the two-dimensional. I like the idea of everyone creating their own film.

**CS:** *The scenes in Water Panics move in so many different directions and at a range of speeds. I think that brings out the idea of multiple planes of being in a very visual way. I also remember that the film opens and closes with a shot of open water, so the idea of a return seems to be there as well. But of course the question is to what does a time-traveling ghost return too?*

**LK:** Well, I don't know if I would think of it as a return. There is no such thing as a return. There is no repeating. There is home and memory. And in this case there is water but that is because there's a ship. You may return to the water imagery, but I think of it more as a continuation. The water is the entity containing all the various elements in the film. So maybe it's a return to what's essential to a ship, to the sea or human necessity. In the film, water is the being that can nullify and sanctify, destroy and provide. It is the one leading us somewhere. Or perhaps the entire film is the memory of this ship. The water could be the protagonist as much as the ship. The pinkish-orange scenes could also be some sort of sanctity. They are mine at least, my Never-Never Land. The return, as you say. But all in all it's not about what I say. I don't want to project anything, since it may not mean the same thing to someone else, or have any meaning at all. It's to each its own.

**CS:** *There were a few scenes where you took us into the stomach of the ship, and it seems to be alive. Something is thrusting downward, kind of chugging along, and there are these gyrating parts on either side. How did that come about?*

**LK:** That thing that looks like a firing piston inside a rib cage? I found that image on a monotype six years ago. It looked to me like entrails lassoed into a super highway. I was wowed and thought I was an ant in a whale belly. To me the ship is very much a living thing. Showing its insides made it seem more like an organic body, which it is. Perhaps those are its sexual organs that connect to its torso. I like the idea that this ship is living and it is somehow continuing and regenerating and procreating...it definitely has to have this aspect.



**Laleh Khorramian**, still from *Water Panics in the Sea*, 2011, single channel digital stop-frame animation, 14 minutes; Photo courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun

**CS:** *The colors were another strong compositional element. What drew you to the colors you used?*

**LK:** Some of the choices were purely instinctive, and I know I can have a really awkward sense of color, but they are definitely meant to be evocative. I mean, colors are wavelengths; they're universal, but also personal and psychological. They don't just affect humans, insects and animals are even more. Colors can trigger things too. Like for me that pinkish-orange color is what I always imagined infinity would look like.

**CS:** *I'm always curious about how artists choose to present video or film. How do you conceive of the spaces in which you'll screen your work?*

**LK:** I've gotten so much more open about that, and am planning to experiment more with environments. But I also like the simple cinematic environment—a nice dark room with proper sounds and resolution, like there is at Klagsbrun. I

actually think the most important aspect is having a place to sit, otherwise the experience would imply something different.

**CS:** *Looking to the future, what are you most excited about for 2012?*

**LK:** I'm so excited to put *Water Panics* away! (Laughter) I'm really looking forward to the film now in progress, which is a sci-fi.

**CS:** *Well I look forward to seeing it. I hope it doesn't take five years to make, but I'll wait if it does.*

**LK:** (Laughter) No no no...no way it's going to take that long!

*ArtSlant would like to thank Laleh Khorramian and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery for their assistance in making this interview possible. Portrait of Laleh Khorramian by Erin Kornfeld/[Elk Studios](#).*

~[Charlie Schultz](#)