

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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## Rachel Hovnanian Immerses Us in Our Tech-Dystopia



*Immersion Room, Wood, gesso, plaster, oil paints, resin, cotton and paper. Photo courtesy of Connor Cassidy*

(The Ray Lee Project Vol. 1) NDD Immersion Room by Rachel Lee Hovnanian

November 3-December 22, 2017

[Victori + Mo](#)

56 Bogart St, Brooklyn, New York 11206

**By JULIA GRAY, NOV. 2017**

Anesthetized by the warp-speed advancements of our internet era, we've overlooked true progress. Nature Deficit Disorder, a term conceived by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child In The Woods*, posits that our intense attachment to technology drives us away from nature, causing widespread malaise. Revering the lifeless screens that hold our

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mega-source of information and feigned pleasure, we compromise our well-being and independence under the assumption that these artificial commodities will meet our needs. This dystopia is what E.M Forster warned us about in “The Machine Stops,” as well as the phenomenon Rachel Hovnanian hopes to draw attention to with her latest show, (*The Ray Lee Project Vol. 1*) *NDD Immersion Room*, at Victori + Mo through December 22.

The New York-based artist has been using her practice to question technology’s impact and societal norms for six years. Most recently, she created a “perfect baby showroom” for her exhibit *Plastic Perfect* to probe the foreseeable tech-driven invasion of natural reproduction. In 2014, she projected a video of a couple lying down, both engrossed in their phones, onto a wall-mounted bed, drawing attention to technology’s role in relationships. (*The Ray Lee Project Vol. 1*) *NDD Immersion Room* considers nature as a welcome disruption to the negative effects of technology. Additionally, it’s the first installation of *The Ray Lee Project*, a series of work under her male pseudonym, “Ray Lee,” intended to separate her art from her female identity.



*NDD Immersion Room. Photo courtesy of Connor Cassidy.*

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The exhibit began in an all-white waiting room. Neon green lettering spelled out “NDD Immersion Room” on the wall across from a table covered with Mountain Dew-filled urine specimen vials. An igloo-like structure, *Bunker*, stood in the corner, covered in white plaster and topped with faux tree branches.

“Go on in,” Hovnanian urged me.

I crawled into the cushioned area with enough space to spread out. An iPhone charging cord laid across the bunker floor; I took the opportunity to charge my device for about five minutes. I felt comfortable, like I had everything I needed: internet access and a cushy place to rest my head. This comfort didn’t disturb me until I reflected on it later: I could’ve stayed in that bunker for hours with just my phone. Hovnanian told me that the bunker is meant to emphasize and mimic the experience of being absorbed in your phone with the enclosure’s frozen-looking exterior and cozy, charger-equipped interior.

I was directed into another white room; painted-white leaves were encased in painted-white frames that perfectly matched the white of the walls. One wall had a giant photograph of a wintery landscape. I was given a handheld lantern and instructed to lock my phone in a small, velvet-lined case before leaving the white space. My iPhone sat like a large, digital jewel in the fancy box, like it was something to be coveted.



*NDD Immersion Room. Photo courtesy of Connor Cassidy.*

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Pushing aside a black curtain, I entered a space identified as the *Immersion Room*, and was hit by an unmistakable pine tree scent. My lantern revealed actual pine trees filling the dark room. Fallen leaves crumpled below my feet as I followed a narrow path. I noticed a one-person tent among the tree stumps and pine. Sitting in it after having spent time in the isolative bunker induced a sort of meditative awareness of my surroundings. Past the tent, the path led to a small synthetic campfire. “It looks real and draws you in, kind of like our phones,” the artist later noted. Emerging from the faux forest and back into the white room was somewhat jarring. It felt colder than before. I was given back my phone and re-entered the digital map.

The exhibition’s structures present aspects of our technology-based culture, examining its flaws but suggesting hope as well. The igloo-like *Bunker* is world hyper-focused on digital connections lacking in human warmth and interaction; Mountain Dew vials are emblems of our toxic, artificial environment. The white pre-immersion room shows what we have forsaken -- under the sterility of the white paint, we see what still exists, but what we've been separated from by a digitally-guided existence; we see ghosts of leaves and trees, reminding us of the natural world we tend to reject in favor of manufactured stimulation. The immersion room brings you out of the cold and into the warmth of nature. With *(The Ray Lee Project Vol. 1) NDD Immersion Room*, Rachel Hovnanian draws us into reality through nature, offering it as a means to a more authentic life. **WM**