

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Laffey, Kelly "Escape the Room-If You Want to" Avenue (March 14, 2018).

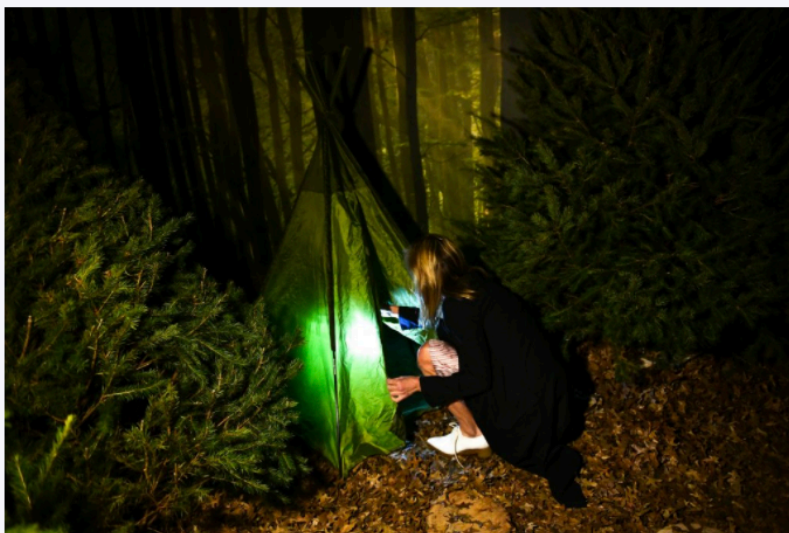
AVENUE

## Escape the Room—If You Want To

by KELLY LAFFEY

*Photographed by COURTESY LEILA HELLER GALLERY, JARED SISKIN, AND PATRICK MCMULLAN*

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Friend is a verb. Being followed is a good thing. Contrary to childhood advice, we now summon strangers to our home for the specific purpose of getting into their cars.

Technology is comfort.

“Phones are the new teddy bear,” says Rachel Lee Hovnanian, who explores the impact of the digital age in her latest installation, *The Ray Lee Project, Vol. 1: NDD Immersion Room* on view now at Leila Heller Gallery. “Whenever you’re feeling out of sorts or awkward, you pull out your phone.”

The gallery has white walls. There are two rooms to the right, each with white chairs and white chargers. There’s a white tent in one. Visitors can lie inside, their faces illuminated solely by their phones. It’s a technology cocoon.

There are a multitude of outlets. A red cross, the universal symbol of assistance, is painted around them, metaphorically screaming, “Help is on the way—for your phone!” Neon signs display what we’ve all thought: “Fuck my Life. My Battery’s Dead.”

The faint smell of pine needles detracts from the perception that the spaces are sterile. The scent is too natural for visitors to assume it’s from disinfecting wipes. They are correct.

Adjacent to the white waiting rooms is the essence of the installation. Just behind a black curtain, inside two other gallery rooms, nature awaits.

“I created my own forest,” said Hovnanian. The installation invites visitors to walk along a dirt path lined with real trees into a campsite with a fake fire and a cot. Cricket sounds—some real, some on an audio loop—drown out gallery noise. The ceiling is covered in twinkling lights.

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Before they enter, visitors pick a lantern to guide their way through the forest. They must enter alone, one at a time. And, they must agree to lock up their phone, and leave it in a clear box just outside the forest space.

The process is overwhelming for some. An executive had a meltdown when she saw that someone was calling, but was powerless to unlock the box to talk. “I’ve also had people come out crying,” says Hovnanian. “They say it reminds them of their childhood memories.”

Visitors can spend as much or as little time as they want in the space. “I know people start to really think about how reliant we are on technology, and how it’s important to take notice of the small things in life,” says Hovnanian of what she believes visitors take from her work. “Technology is important. It’s the most amazing thing. But we also need to be able to look at each other. To really communicate.”

Though Hovnanian’s past work has also explored the impact that technology—and the resulting addiction—has had on society, the idea for the Immersion Room was spurred by a visit to her local deli for breakfast. She grabbed a power bar, took out her phone to send a Tweet, and realized how “people were not connecting as much through [community places and restaurants]. You used to get your gossip at the deli...now, I was eating a power bar because we don’t even have time for breakfast, and I [was] talking to a bot through Twitter.”

*NDD Immersion Room* was inspired by reading the blog Positive Prescriptions by Dr. Samantha Boardman. Hovnanian came across a piece that asked, “Do you have NDD?” Exploring further, she found out that NDD stands for Nature Deficit Disorder. “Richard Louv coined the term,” she says. “He’s seen people with anxiety, and he’s realized that people need to be in touch with nature because it can help relieve a lot of their [issues].”

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Two years ago, Hovnanian felt the effects of social media in a very real way when Instagram's official account started to follow her. "It was a part of a campaign where they followed [about] 20 artists for 10 days," says Hovnanian. "It was like being on heroin," she recalls of the experience. "I got 35 new followers every five minutes." In addition to getting a high off of checking on her followers, Hovnanian felt like she had to constantly post on the platform. "A friend joked to me that, I wouldn't be making art, I'd just be doing Instagram."

Soon, the experiment ended, and Instagram unfollowed her. But the experience of being addicted stayed with her.

"As an artist, my job is to create a conversation," says Hovnanian, who signs the project Ray Lee because of how gender can impact how people view art. "[The impact of technology] is a conversation I'd like to have—and to remind myself that I sometimes have to get off social media."

Because visitors aren't allowed to bring their phones into the Immersion Room, Hovnanian doesn't benefit from the potential marketing exposure that social media brings. But, she explains, that exposure has two sides to it. "Now it really feels like everybody is all about having the same experience." People post on social media just to say "Oh, I've been here. I've seen that."

On the contrary, the Immersion Room invites everyone to have their own organic experience, instead of viewing the art through their phone. She equates the practice with musicians who have banned phones at concerts, as people tend to watch the show through their screen, instead of truly enjoying being there live.

"We're in the middle of a technological revolution, Hovnanian says. "It's just like the Industrial Revolution, in that it happened so quickly, in the way that people's jobs and lives changed. It affected people's personality and how they lived. That's what we're going through right now."

If you dare to try, the studio space in Chelsea provides an escape from it all.

*NDD Immersion Room* the first is a part of Hovnanian's *Women's Trilogy Project*. *Part II: Happy Hour* opens on April 19; and *Part III: Pure* opens on June 7.