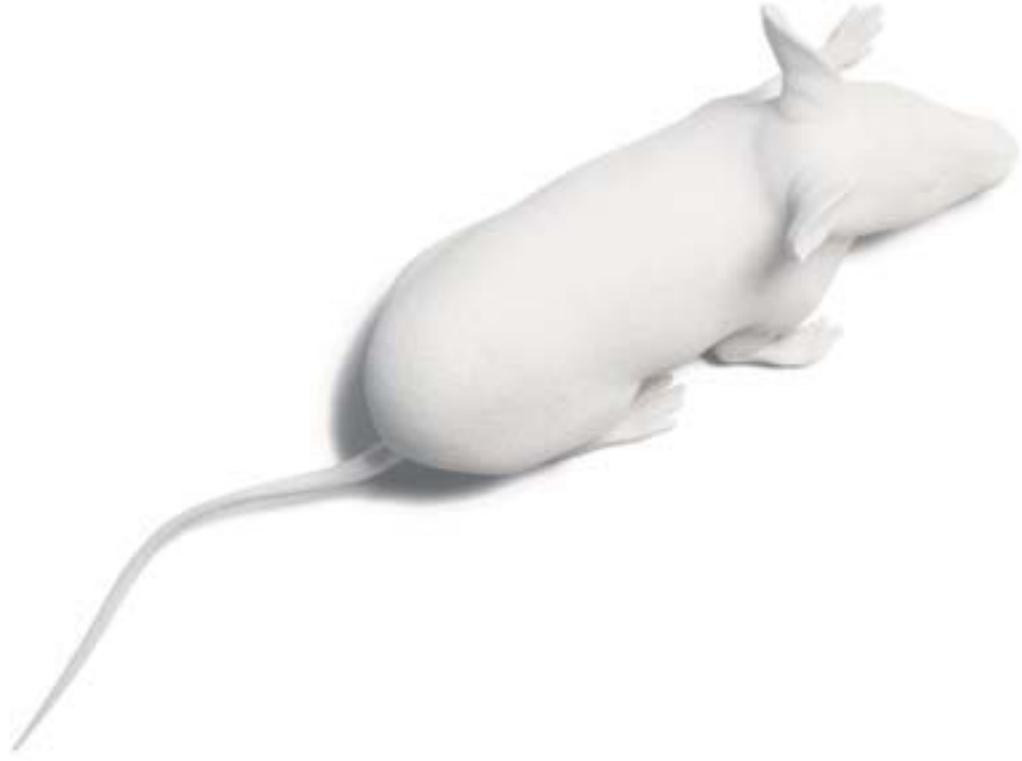
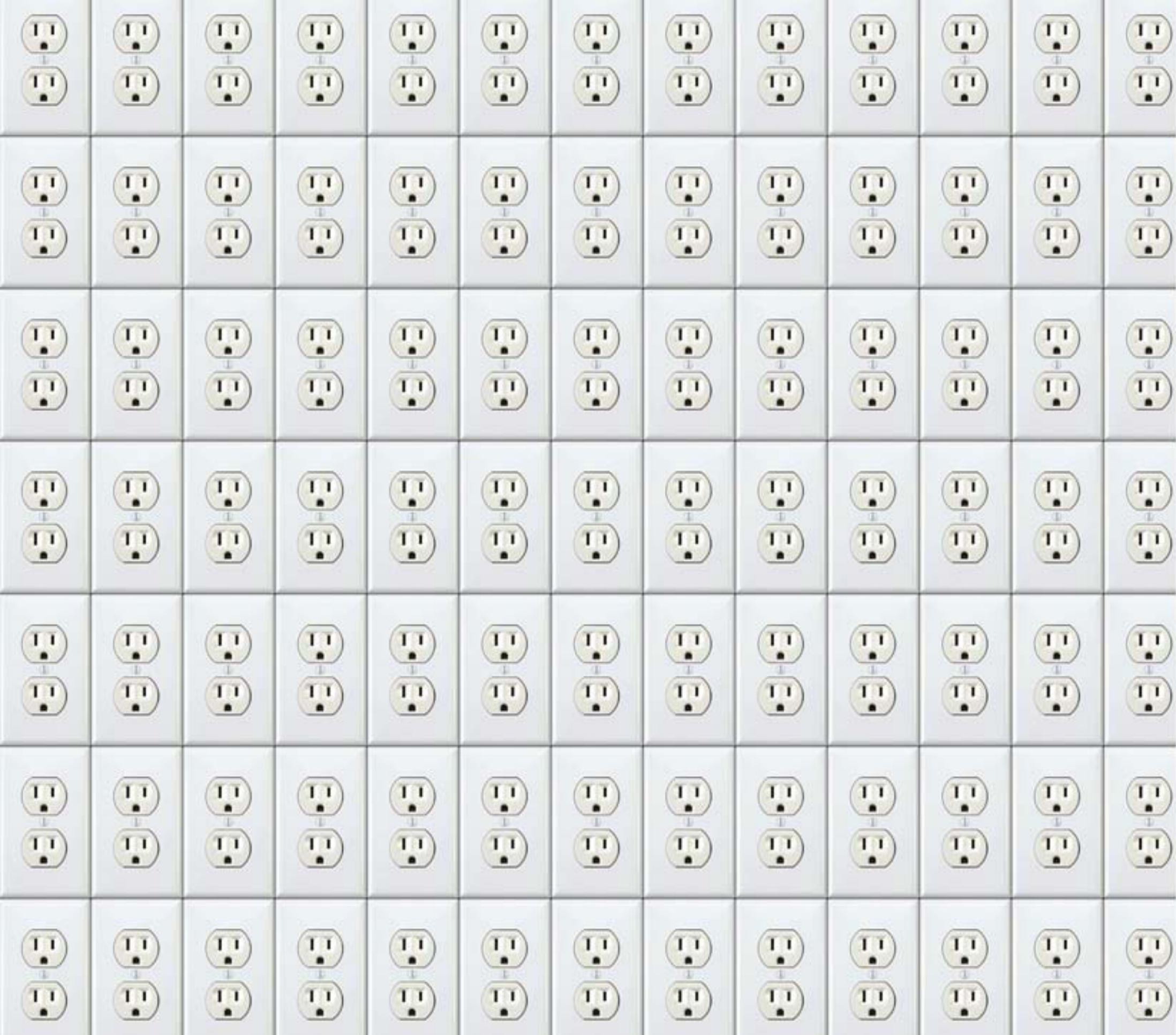


Plastic Perfect

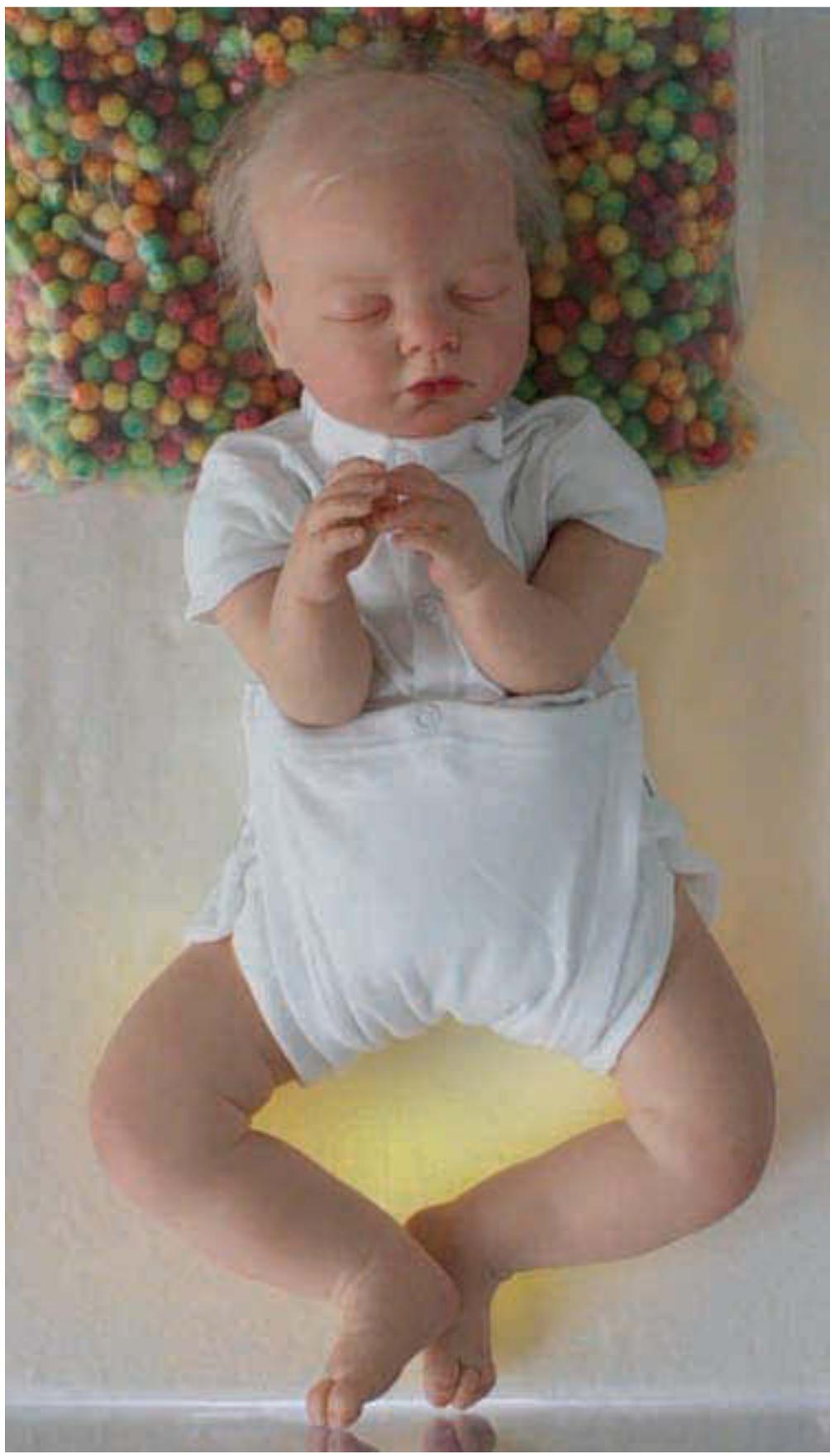


RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN



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Plastic Perfect



RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN



The Possibility of Perfection

JUDITH E. STEIN

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

—LEONARD COHEN

Baby nurseries are captivating. Pleasure compounds when we scan the rows, seeing how each little bundle of new life differs from the next, and how they are the same. In *Perfect Baby Showroom*, the first segment of Rachel Hovnanian's new installation *Plastic Perfect*, she commandeers the visual power of the nursery to propel us into the not-so-distant future.

Hovnanian's newborns are uncannily, disturbingly real. If you've never encountered the phenomenon of "reborn babies," the preternaturally still wee ones who populate her modular, plexiglass and stainless-steel bassinets, they warrant a digression. For more than a decade, do-it-yourselfers have been fashioning—and people (primarily women) have been collecting—these handcrafted, hyper-real infants. Kits for hobbyists are available online, complete with "supplies to make umbilical-cord stumps." The finished products sell on eBay for handsome prices, often accompanied by detailed "birth certificates." Some have an audible heartbeat, and a chest that rises and falls in apparent respiration. Available in regular and "preemie" size, the babies are usually "re-weighted" with pellets, ensuring they will be realistically heavy when held.

She styles her viewers as curious consumers in the market for a perfect baby. A trim attendant in a uniform of Hovnanian's design that she accessorized with face-shield and name plate, personally greets each visitor to the minimalist *Perfect Baby Showroom*. The guide points out the outsized commercial signage picturing six different "models" of sleeping cherubs with names like "The Morgan" and "The Chris." Visitors are free to move around the neat aisles of high-tech-looking bassinets, and likely have a chance to hold one of the diapered, designer dolls that represent the available options.

Hovnanian has papered the walls with a gridded pattern of commonplace electrical outlets, a print she also used for the uniforms. Inherent in the three-prong design of each socket is an abstract face, here seemingly multiplied to infinity in row after row of cookie-cutter uniformity. The image conveys an aura of sterility and alludes obliquely to our device-dependent lives. Her monochromatic color scheme nods at Hollywood's idea of heaven as a colorless place, and winks at the modernistic white furnishings and fashions in the Orgasmatron scene in Woody Allen's *Sleepers* (1973), set at a time hence when sex will not entail sweaty maneuvers.

The future conjured by Hovnanian, when would-be parents will be able to shop for their offspring, hardly seems like science fiction. Modern science already has the ability to genetically engineer our progeny to eliminate certain inherited diseases and perceived disabilities. Assisted reproductive technology (ART for short, as it happens) helps infertile and LGBT couples engender babies, a definitively positive advance. But unlike the purchasing of automobiles, when human beings are custom-engineered,

there may be unintended consequences. The end result may differ from the showroom model, and not be a case of WYSIWYG, the vintage computer acronym for “What You See Is What You Get.”

Foreplay, the next portion of the installation, is a sparsely-furnished chamber at night, its centerpiece a wall-mounted mattress that doubles as a video screen. Hovnanian is a wizard at fingering uncomfortable truths, case in point—the reality that so many of us sleep with our smart phones. *Foreplay*, her video, captures the bedtime behavior of a range of couples and singles. She shot them from above, looking down into the tangle of their sheets, a vantage point that implicates viewers as fly-on-the-ceiling voyeurs. “No sex please, we’re wired,” is the message telegraphed by the body language of her models. Indifferent to each other, they are enraptured by their computers and devices. Unlike the affectionately interconnected Etruscan couples who populate ancient sarcophagus lids, Hovnanian’s dyads don’t make eye contact. Alone together indeed, in Sherry Turkle’s phrase.

The sole lighting Hovnanian used in *Foreplay* emanates from handheld devices, very blue beams that illuminate faces while casting all else in shadow. LEDs are as bright as daylight, and have the capacity to disturb one’s mate’s sleep. In a few of Hovnanian’s vignettes, a small white mouse noses around the murky periphery of bedding; the animal goes unnoticed by the bed’s occupants. Albino mice are an anomaly in nature. As with Hovnanian’s “perfect babies,” they’ve been selectively bred for desirable traits. Such animals are used for laboratory tests because they are like us in the ways that count. It is the artist’s conceit that we humans are the new lab mice, psychically tethered to devices, our every preference scrutinized by data-mining experts.

White mice crop up in twentieth century popular culture. Douglas Adams’s *The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) posits that it was they who ordered the planet Earth to be built, and who put humans on it in order to study them. As one character explains, “These creatures you call mice you see are not quite as they appear; they are merely the protrusions into our dimension of vast, hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings. The business with the cheese and squeaking is just a front.”

When the Scottish eighteenth-century poet Robert Burns inadvertently turned up a mouse and destroyed her nest with his plough, the event prompted him to ruminate on fate. The tiny creature’s foresight in building a home had proved in vain: “The best-laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.” We humans plan to have perfect babies, and, for that matter, expect to pre-decease our children. But as Andrew Solomon so brilliantly and poignantly explored in *Far From the Tree* (2010), there is no guarantee that it will work that way.

In Loco Parentis, the Latin phrase meaning “in place of the parent,” is Hovnanian’s title for *Plastic Perfect’s* third and last segment, a kitchen. There’s a central refrigerator with its door ajar, a potent symbol of America as the land of promise. In *ET* (1982), Steven Spielberg’s camera peered into the cavity of a full refrigerator as the dear alien explored and plundered its contents. Conversely, the gaping, empty appliance at the heart of Sam Shepard’s play *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) embodies the promise unfulfilled.

Two video projections frame Hovnanian's open fridge like parentheses. On the right, a twitching, man-sized white mouse, by turns cute and repulsive, stands on its hind legs to nibble plundered cheese. Messy mounds of Cheerios carpet the floor. The rodent on film never turns to paw through the actual cereal, but the juxtaposition is unnerving. Cheerios have long been a go-to snack for Americans with restive young children. Yet the two-year-old girl projected onto a highchair to the left of the refrigerator, has no need of appeasement. She's fully absorbed by the iPad in her hands. Although Hovnanian's footage lasts little more than three minutes, the artist was able to observe the child for a full hour, during which time the little one gave her unbroken attention to the device and never looked up. Scientists don't yet know the long-term consequences on our kids—for good or ill—of such fixed concentration, the very mirror of adult behavior.

Cereals marketed primarily to children are both subject matter and art material for Hovnanian. Most of these products have artificial, "kid-friendly colors" and can be cloyingly sweet, with no resemblance to the hearty porridge breakfasts of yore. But there's no likelihood of returning to that fare in the future. In her *Perfect Baby Showroom*, the artist's faux little darlings rest their heads on transparent pillows stuffed with cereal that is nearly as artificial as they are.

In a group of stand-alone works framed in plastic boxes, Hovnanian plays with her food—in this case the packaging it came in—and the result is creepily terrific. Chalky effervescences have bubbled up from inside boxes of sugar-coated flakes whose exteriors glitter with granular glass. Everyone pictured flashes a smile on the front panels of another group of current and vintage cereal packages that the artist has arranged in a grid. The collection of boxes is more than the sum of its parts. As with the rows of the showroom's "reborns" who nestle in identical containers, we enjoy shifting our gaze from one uniformly-shaped box to the next, noticing each variation in the overall design.

The medical advances we take for granted today were unknown when earlier artists imagined what it might be like if life were artificially created. In *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley enlivened the dead through the magic of electricity, and no good came of that. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) visualized a dystopic time when the state had control of procreation, and life quickened in mechanized hatcheries. Mercifully, we're in no imminent danger that such nightmares will come to pass. Yet scientific discovery after scientific discovery inches us forward towards mastery of the variables when we create an embryo, gaining the power to eliminate unwanted traits, and factor in the desirable. Inevitably, ethics and aesthetics collide.

We may fool ourselves, as did Voltaire's *Candide*, that we know how to define "the best of all possible worlds." But our "never-resting mind," in Wallace Stevens's phrase, will not stay content with faultlessness. "The imperfect is our paradise," he wrote when weighing the short-comings of perfection. Rachel Hovnanian's *Plastic Perfect* allows us to run ahead for a glimpse and a shudder at an all too perfect future.

Perfect Baby



Our babies better look fast and grow even faster.
A Perfect Baby is the ultimate choice.
The guaranteed parental experience will be without compare.

Each Perfect Baby is meticulously designed,
Anatomically accurate, furnished with the finest
selection of artificial parents.

There's a Reason for Perfect Baby.
Our parent offers Perfect Baby a chance to
experience a moment of joy.

Perfect Baby.
A natural choice... enjoy the money.





Perfect Baby Showroom, 2014

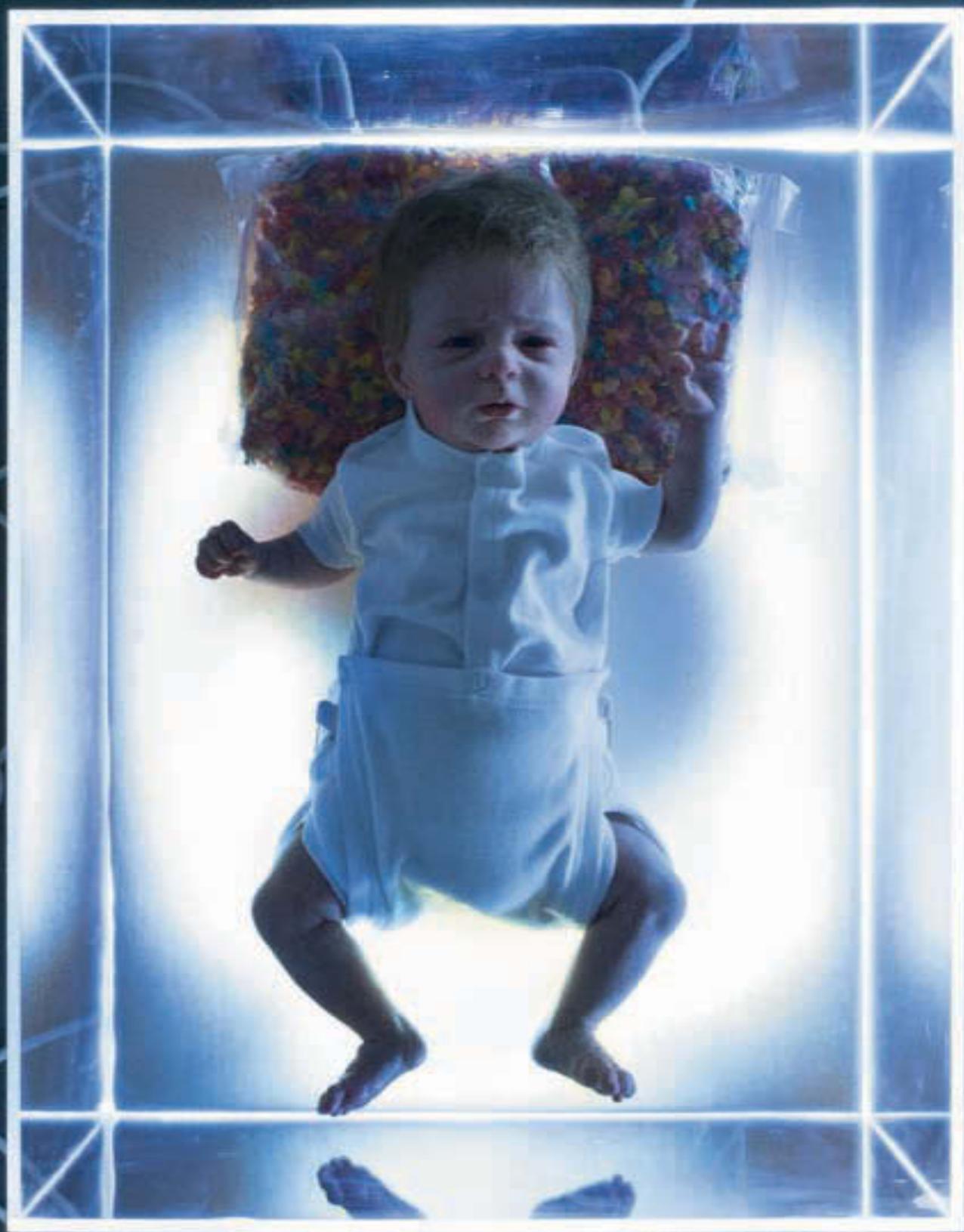
















Poor Teddy, 2014









White Narcissus Panel with Mice I, 2014







White Narcissus Panel I, 2014

Foreplay, 2014















In Loco Parentis, 2014







Breakfast of Champions II, 2014





Magically Delicious, 2014



Fruity Delight in Every Bite, 2014



They're Gr-r-reat, 2014

Snap, Crackle, Pop, 2014



List of Works

Pages 8-17

Perfect Baby Showroom, 2014

Installation with wallpaper, baby dolls, extension cords, metal, acrylic, wood, neon light, foam, cotton fabric, LED lights, cereal

Dimensions variable

Pages 19-21

Poor Teddy, 2014

Nylon, oil, teddy bear, knife, silicone

Dimensions variable

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White Narcissus Panel with Mice I, 2014

Linen, acrylic, porcelain, nylon and waxed cotton in artist's frame

46.5 x 71.5 in. (position of mice variable outside panel)

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White Narcissus Panel I, 2014

Linen, acrylic, porcelain, and waxed cotton in artist's frame

61.5 x 97.5 in.

Pages 29-33

Foreplay, 2014

Installation with HD video projection on projection screen, mattress, sidetables, lamps, LED lightbulbs, linen

Dimensions variable

Pages 34-37

In Loco Parentis, 2014

Installation with rear projection video, HD video, acrylic, Cheerios, refrigerator, high chair, metal, diamond dust

Dimensions variable

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Breakfast of Champions II, 2014

Cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood

66 x 119 x 5.25 in.

Page 40

Magically Delicious, 2014

Cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood
67.5 x 59 x 4.5 in.

Page 41

Fruity Delight in Every Bite, 2014

Cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood
67.5 x 59 x 4.5 in.

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They're Gr-r-reat, 2014

Cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood
46 x 44.625 x 4 in.

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Snap, Crackle, Pop, 2014

Cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood
46 x 44.625 x 4.75 in. (side view)

Rachel Lee Hovnanian

Born in Parkersburg, WV

Lives and works in New York, NY

EDUCATION

BFA, University of Texas, Austin, TX

Post-Grad, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *New Year's Feast: Beijing 2014*, Joyce Gallery, Beijing, China
Plastic Perfect, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013 *Rachel Lee Hovnanian: Power, Beauty, Narcissism and Other New Work*, Imago Gallery, Palm Springs, NY
- 2012 *Mud Pie*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
Too Good To Be True, Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2011 *American Beauty: Too Good To Be True*, Foundation Pons, Barcelona, Spain
- 2010 *American Beauty: Too Good To Be True*, Aina Nowack/AAC, Madrid, Spain
Too Good To Be True, Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago, IL
Too Good To Be True, Collette Blanchard Gallery, New York, NY
Power and Burden of Beauty, Galerij ARTRA, Kalmthout, Belgium
- 2009 *Power & Burden of Beauty*, Jason McCoy Gallery, New York, NY
Power & Burden of Beauty, Meredith Long & Company, Houston, TX
- 2007 *Rachel Hovnanian: Preservation of the Narcissus*, Jason McCoy, Inc., New York, NY
- 2005 *Preservation of the Narcissus*, Meredith Long & Company, Houston, TX
- 2001 *Isolation Beauty*, David Beitzel Gallery, New York, NY
- 2000 *Isolation Beauty*, Meredith Long & Company, Houston

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Look At Me: Portraiture from Manet to the Present*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013 *Dis-semblance: Projecting and Perceiving Identity*, 21c Museum Hotel, Cincinnati, OH
Bass! How Low Can You Go? Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
Transparencies: Contemporary Art and A History of Glass, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA
- 2011 *Tender is the Night*, Marine Contemporary, Venice Beach, CA
Leila Heller Summer Show, Southampton, NY
January White Sale, Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, New York. Curated by Beth Rudin Dewoody
Public Exhibition, Manarat al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi, EU
- 2010 *East Meets West on the East End*, Tripoli Gallery of Contemporary Art, Southampton, NY
Black and White, Jason McCoy Gallery, New York, NY
Think Pink, Gavlak Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida, Curated by Beth Rudin Dewoody
- 2009 *Parades and Processions: Here Comes Everybody*, Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London, England
- 2007 *Flowers*, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY
Options within Realism, Jason McCoy Gallery, New York, NY
- 2006 *Black and White, Old and New*, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY
Winter, Gallery Group Show, Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, Texas
- 2002 *Landscapes*, Gallery Group Show, Meredith Long & Company, Houston, TX

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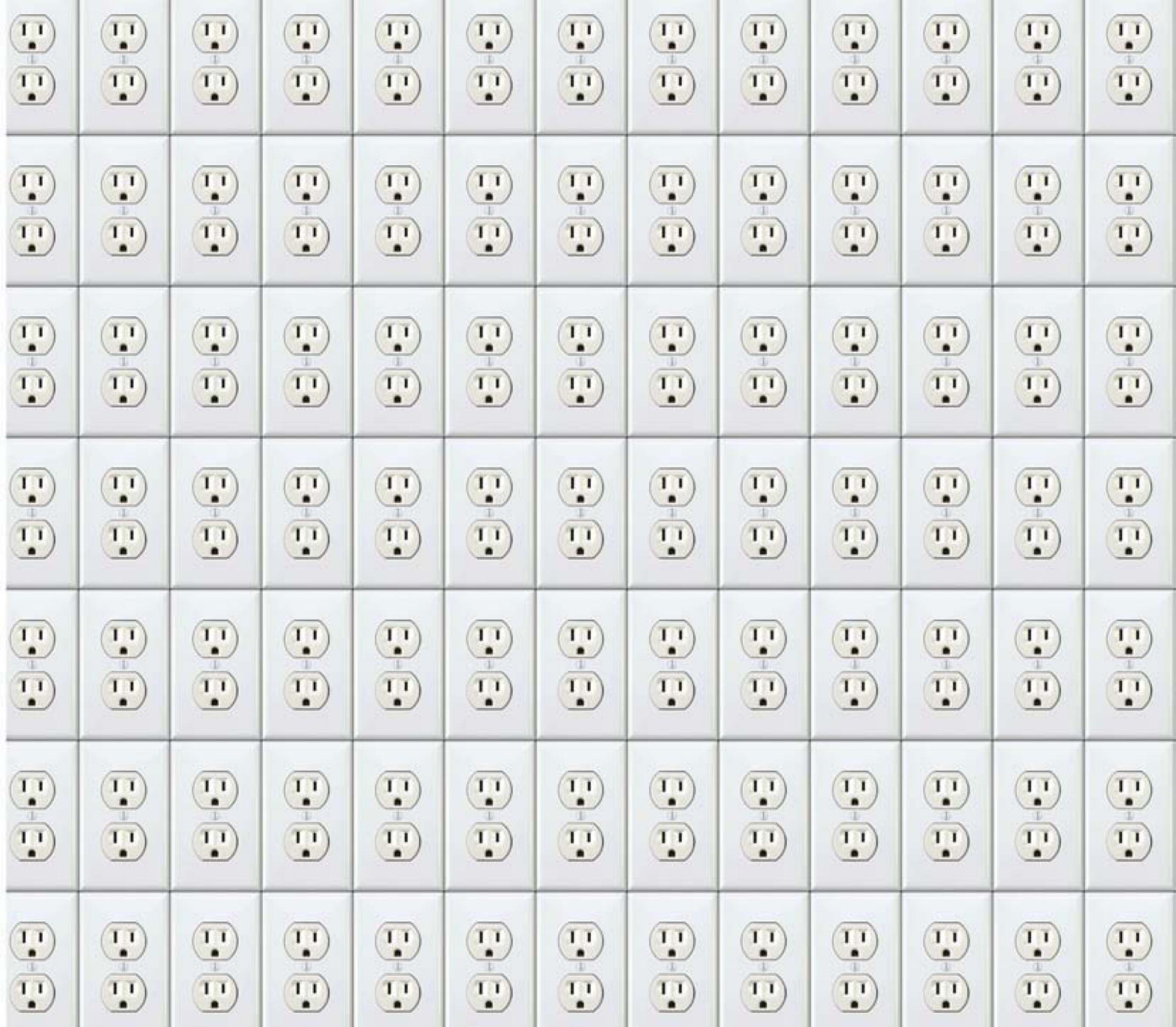
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