

ART May 14, 2012 By [Sarah Coleman](#)



Texas Mud Pie, Hands and Feet (self-portrait), 2012 C-print

MUD PIE

rachel lee hovnavian

Are the Internet and social media making us more, or less social? Smarter or dumber? Are you going to make it through this review before clicking over to check your email, Twitter account, Facebook page, or blog site? How many people “liked” your status update today?

Artist Rachel Lee Hovnavian is fascinated by the social transformations wrought by the virtual world. *Mud Pie*, her new show at the Leila Heller Gallery, is all about how we seem increasingly happy to forgo real experience in favor of the virtual and artificial. This could be a dry, heavy-handed message, but Hovnavian delivers it with such sly humor and visual panache that even the most committed technophiles might have to admit she’s on to something.

Take the show’s centerpiece, a supposedly romantic dinner for two. A long dining table is elegantly set with all the expected signifiers: flowers, candles, wineglasses. But the couple itself is virtual, represented by two LCD screens. The man and woman on the screens don’t speak to each other. Instead, each seems perfectly satisfied to interact with a mobile device while beeps, trills and the Angry Birds soundtrack punctuate the silence. Oh, and those flowers? They’re artificial. Naturally.

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Fake Flowers: Living Room, 2012 Giclée print on watercolor paper

This piece, at once punchy and melancholic, is only part of Hovnavian's investigation into artificiality. In NY Lights, something that at first looks like a mirror turns out to be much more. When viewers approach it, motion sensors illuminate an interior display that features tiny vials of Botox. Each vial sprouts a waxy white flower, a symbol of the strange world of cosmetic enhancement. Mirror, mirror indeed.

Best of all, though, is Cafe, an installation/performance piece that evokes a down-home Texas café. Step into the installation and a smiling waitress greets you, offering food. But things are not what they seem. The lemonade is a chemical-tasting powder; the pecan pie arrives as a cube of gelatin saturated with artificial flavors. Digital grass waves in a video "window" beyond. "Would yah care for some more pah?" asks the waitress, whose name tag says @CafeWaitress (tweets will be answered). The most authentic object in the room is a mud pie, which sits on the counter as a reminder of simple, lost pleasures.

All of this is, of course, timely and provocative. In her previous work, Hovnavian focused on the relentless tyranny of the beauty and diet industries, and the pressure on women to maintain a perfect facade. The work was clever and stylish, but it traversed ground that has been fairly well-trodden since the 1970s by artists like Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger and others. The new work is more ambitious, and it feels fresh and exciting. It's rare to find an artist who can distill cultural flashpoints into potent visual metaphors without being flashy or trite.

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Café, 2012 Mixed media installation

Rare, too, to find an artist who uses humor so adeptly. *Mud Pie* is at once a tease, a lament, and a provocation for the YouTube age. Food for thought? You bet. Walking away from the gallery, I didn't check my email for a whole four blocks.

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