
Hovnavian's Mud Pie exhibit opens at the Leila Heller Gallery

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White walls adorned with images of flowers like in a chic Manhattan apartment. A dining table where two meet in a virtual reality. A cafe waitress who serves food in cubes of a jello-like texture. "Mud Pie" is artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian's message about society's obsession with technology.

An amalgamation of large-scale installations, sculpture, mixed media paintings, and photography, Mud Pie explores the blurring of reality and the narcissistic side of digital life.

Every piece demonstrates the dichotomy between our devices and our realities and how the former interrupts the latter, preventing connections in real-life. But nothing gives this impression more clearly than Hovnanian's 'Dining Table' installation.

A fully set dining table with a floral centerpiece and white tablecloth divides a man on a video screen on one end, a woman on the other.

They barely look at each other in these recordings because they are distracted by something that constantly draws their eyes below. The volume on the screens occasionally give clues as to what it is; an iPad each on which the two are busily clicking away. The man is engrossed in Angry Birds, and the woman in Words With Friends.

Hovnanian suggests that there is an element of narcissism to it all, channeling the ancient myth of a man who withered away fascinated by and staring at his own reflection.

"We are sucked into our screens and can't find the time to separate from technology," she said. "This is the modern day Narcissus dilemma – we gaze into screen images until the outer world disappears."

To that end, there are several large relief sculptures of metallic narcissus flowers adorning the pristine white walls of the gallery called, 'Gates of Narcissus Metal Panels, Motherboards, 2012.' All of the floral art work at the exhibit is similarly artificial, further demonstrating the ersatz quality of our existence.

The part of the exhibit that best conveys this is the interactive 'Cafe 2012' installation at one corner of the gallery. From outside the glass walls of the gallery, it's easy to be fooled into thinking it were a real cafe. Inside, it's an even more elaborate trick.

Behind the counter stands a cafe waitress with a Texas drawl that actually tends to your order; coffee, orange juice, apple pie, pecan pie, bacon and BBQ pork bits among the menu options. But therein lies the rub. While you can eat any of the above, none of it is real.

Hovnanian worked with experts to create synthetically modified bite size portions of the savory foods and drinks of the beverages that smell and taste almost like the real things but look far from it. The interactive piece speaks to Hovnanian's impression that society is often complacent with imitations of reality rather than authentic experiences.

"I feel strongly that we've forgotten what is real," she said. "Fast food chains replaced cafes; children think a package of pink powder mixed with water is real lemonade made with freshly squeezed pink lemons."

Originally from Texas, Hovnanian says that before the spread of fast food restaurants back home, she remembers daily interactions at good old cafes. Go farther back, and it all started with the first real thing she ever made with her hands—mud pie. One even sits on the cafe counter with an unusually appetizing scent.

The entire artistic experience sends a clear notion of the disconnect between society and reality. Hovnanian is the first to admit her part. She says the exhibit stemmed from her own realization that she was just as guilty a participant when she found herself walking to a gallery one day while eating a power bar and texting non stop.

I realized we all needed to recall our own childhood memories (mud pie) to preserve our earliest origins," she said. "Only when the power is down, or if we are visiting a remote place with no wireless, can we take a break."

MudPie is at the Leila Heller from now until June 2. Admission is free.