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Artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian Discusses 'Plastic Perfect'

By Lauren McCarthy

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A hospital nursery hosts artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian's latest exhibition, "Plastic Perfect." The set, clinical and creepy, houses two rows of newborns, each with his or her own identification. There's "Tyler," a plump baby boy with an unruly whip of peach fuzz atop his head; "Evan," a scrawny little guy with blonde spurts of hair, and six other infants, each with his or her own designated persona and look. The faux tots, disturbingly lifelike down to their tiny toes, rest in their individual illuminated cradles on a pillow of sugary cereal.

The set, called "Perfect Baby Showroom," introduces viewers to Hovnanian's show, which runs from Thursday through Oct. 8 at New York's Leila Heller Gallery, and its overarching theme: technology and its



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Rachel Hovnanian

Photo By Thomas Iannaccone

effect on our daily lives. Hovnanian's previous exhibits have taken on similar themes; last year's "New Year's Feast: Beijing, 2014" dissected global narcissism, and 2010's "American Beauty" took on our obsession with, yes, beauty. Her latest is a tongue-in-cheek but introspective take on tech, linked together by three large-scale installations, including "Perfect Baby Showroom."

"I hope people get something out of this," Hovnanian says. "The next generation is not going to know what it was like [to not be] connected all of the time. We are in a digital revolution."

"Perfect Baby Showroom," the first of the three installations, plays with the concept of ordering genetically perfect children,

which Hovnanian predicts will soon be as simple as ordering a pair of custom Nikes. "They are already doing a lot of research with stem cells, and it's wonderful because it's going to help get rid of a lot of things," says Hovnanian, pacing barefoot around her Chelsea studio. "But the other side of it is that we're going to be able to design and order up our babies. It seems so far-fetched, ordering a baby, but I've talked to a lot of doctors and researchers, and it's here. It's just a couple of years around the corner. It's a crazy concept."

The dolls in Hovnanian's exhibit are a real, marketed product called Reborn baby



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A view of Rachel Hovnanian's exhibit, "Plastic Perfect."

Photo By Thomas Iannaccone



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A view of Rachel Hovnanian's exhibit, "Plastic Perfect."

Photo By Courtesy Photo

dolls, which the artist discovered (and ordered) on the Internet. The dolls are “adopted” online — Hovnanian adopted all the babies on display — and can be crafted with whatever physical attributes the owner pleases. They are anatomically correct, although they do not cry, never need to be fed and, of course, never grow up. “They’re better than the real thing,” Hovnanian says.

To Hovnanian, the cereal further punctuates the point. “There’s a big correlation, to me, between how they market cereals and technology,” she explains. Each of the favorite, mascot-

fronted breakfast cereals makes an appearance: Froot Loops, Frosted Flakes, Fruity Pebbles, Lucky Charms. Encased in large glass frames, stacks of empty boxes (“I’ll never need to buy cereal again,” she quips) dot the exhibition. Each box sparkles with a crushed-glass encrusting — “sugar,” Hovnanian calls it — with, decorating the tops, opaque white splotches mimicking milk bubbling over. Hovnanian says that, when she was a child, “I would just beg for the sugar-sweetened cereals. Sugar was represented as a way to get energy. I see that like my relationship to my smartphone, where now I’m addicted.”

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Cheerios spill over to the next large-scale installation, “In Loco Parentis,” and cover the floor of a makeshift kitchen. The scene sees the Perfect Baby grown up: A toddler trapped inside a large iPad-like screen that sits in a high chair. The on-screen toddler is preoccupied with her own iPad, playing a noisy game on a loop. The stray Cheerios on her tray go untouched. Behind the e-toddler is a video of a monster-sized albino mouse, happily gnawing away at the contents of an open refrigerator. “Albino mice are very rare, but there are more and more and more of them to do testing. Now, we are the new test animals, too. If you think you can live without technology, you can’t. [The mouse] has grown so big because I don’t realize how much I’m constantly on my phone.” The scene echoes the artist’s own breakfast situation. “I used to have coffee in the morning with my husband, which was our time together, but now he’ll be on Google News and I’ll be checking e-mails,” she says. “I’m like, ‘Wait a minute — our little time together has completely disappeared.’”

The third and final large-scale installation, “Foreplay,” speaks to this, projecting a video of various couples — the Perfect Baby’s parents — in bed together. In each scene, the pair ignore each other, choosing the comfort of laptops or phones over that of his or her partner. “It’s about the fact that you can be 10,000 miles away [on a device] and be together in person,” says Hovnanian. “Our relationship to each other has changed because of technology, and our relationship to technology is also very different.” An old-fashioned rotary phone, found in a Brooklyn thrift shop, sits on an adjacent chair. Guests are encouraged to hold the phone to their ear while viewing the video. Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier’s 1932 rendition of “Isn’t It Romantic” plays over the line. “In the song, they say, ‘I know your profile,’” says Hovnanian.

“Today, that means something totally different.”