

whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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THE FASHION ISSUE

WADE GUYTON - JOHAN LINDBERG - CAROL LIM & HUMBERTO LEON

LEILA HELLER

FOUNDER OF LEILA HELLER GALLERY

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PHOTO BY STEVE BENISTY



<p>Top:</p> <p>Rachel Lee Hovnanian</p> <p><i>Perfect Baby Showroom</i></p> <p>2014</p> <p>Wallpaper, extension cords, baby dolls, metal, acrylic, wood, neon light, foam, cotton fabric, LED lights, cereal</p> <p>Dimensions variable</p> <p>Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery</p>	<p>Bottom:</p> <p>Rachel Lee Hovnanian</p> <p><i>In Loco Parentis</i></p> <p>2014</p> <p>Installation with rear projection video, HD video, acrylic, Cheerios, refrigerator, high chair, metal, diamond dust</p> <p>Dimensions variable</p> <p>Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery</p>
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WHITEWALL: Last spring you opened a multifloor exhibition and gallery space on 57th Street. Tell us about your move to Midtown.

LEILA HELLER: I think 57th Street is very exciting. When I started my career, it was like the center of the art world, and I feel that it's coming back. I feel there's a lot of interest here with new developments around, and at the end of the day it's only three blocks from the Museum of Modern Art.

WW: A big part of what you do as a dealer that is a bit unique is that instead of letting artwork naturally flow from popularity with collectors, then auctions, and finally to museums, you first pitch to museums. Why?

LH: I feel like I've done something really great for that artist for long-term, and people will view that work long-term if it's at a museum. So to me, that is the ultimate. I get very excited. It's almost like a game for me—how many artists can I put in good museums? It's a challenge, and I don't give up!

WW: In an interview you did for Harper's Bazaar Art with Arsalan Mohammad, you discussed how women are really at the forefront of what's happening right now in art in the Middle East.

LH: Absolutely! It's all women who are in charge! I remember one interview I did where the first question to me was something like, "Well, you're a Middle Eastern woman, that's such a rarity."

And I said, "No, it's not." If anything, the entire Middle Eastern art world is run by Middle Eastern women. Rita Aoun-Abdo is head of the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, the head of Art Dubai, Antonia Carver . . . You even look at the curators in the western museums that have to do with Middle Eastern art, from Melissa Chiu who just did "Iran Modern," from Linda Komaroff at LACMA, Venetia Porter at the British Museum—they're all women!

WW: Why do you think then that there is this misconception?

LH: I think that it's a false message that people in the West have that Middle Eastern women are not powerful. If anything, they are the heads of households; they make every decision. In Farsi, we have a term, "the lion woman," she is the strength of the family, of business, of everything. I remember even growing up—my mother is from Azerbaijan, my father is from Uzbekistan, but, you know, my mother led the family! My father had no say. He managed the business, but even my mother had opinions on how to run his business.

WW: And your mother was a collector as well?

LH: My mother was a collector, yes. She took me around to museums all over the world. From MoMA to LACMA to the Louvre to the Tate to the British Museum to every museum in Rome—we traveled everywhere! I remember

knowing every museum by heart in the south of France.

WW: In the new 57th Street gallery, you have a special projects space and a screening room. Why did you want to make sure those two things were here?

LH: We wanted to have an events space for museums and nonprofit organizations to come and bring their boards or audiences together to do presentations or film screenings. In terms of the art project space, whether it's a group show or it's a curated show, the hope is that they can use that space and make it extraordinary.

