

FLAUNT

THE FRANKENSTEIN ISSUE

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RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN

GET A LIFE



"FOREPLAY: HELEN AND TRAVIS," (2014), ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 60 1/2 X 43 INCHES.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.



"IN LOCO PARENTIS," (2014), INSTALLATION WITH REAR PROJECTION VIDEO, HD VIDEO, ACRYLIC, CHEERIOS, REFRIGERATOR, HIGH CHAIR, METAL, AND DIAMOND DUST. DIMENSIONS VARY. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.



"THEY'RE GR-R-REAT," (2014), CEREAL BOXES, ACRYLIC, CRUSHED GLASS, AND WOOD, 46 X 44.625 X 4 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Written by
Lilly Ball

Consider breakfast. You're scrambling eggs from a package of 18, eggs mass-produced through biotechnology at a high-density factory farm somewhere in Middle America, an enormous manufacturing plant filled with tanks and pumps and pressure vessels, itself a vertically integrated company cloaked in a quaint moniker like Oak Grove Farms and operating under the ownership of an overseas conglomerate. You consider the hens, hatched among tens of thousands of other chicks inside gigantic incubators and raised in cramped cages suspended above manure pits that are rarely cleaned, the excrement building up and causing skin infections and pestilence and respiratory diseases. You add salt.

Subject in question: Technology. And art. And breakfast. Rachel Lee Hovnanian is a seeker, exploring in her work themes of obsession, narcissism, intimacy (or lack thereof), addiction (to, say, sweetened cereal—sweetened everything), our dependence on technology and the accessibility it provides, and our complacency with workaday danger. She challenges us to reevaluate our relationships with our phones (while speaking with Rachel, she asked—nay, chided: “Actually, I have a questions for you. How often are you on your phone?”), to reexamine our marriage to convenient technology. She's not here to provide answers, but rather takes a Socratic approach, asking questions that help the audience find answers for themselves.

Hovnanian wants to know you, me, what makes us tick, and why a Facebook account has become an essential passage into society—a second birth, second life. Her latest work, *Plastic Perfect*, is a compilation of three large-scale interactive installations involving video, photography, and sculpture. In conjunction is *Instant Gratification*, a social experiment held off-site concurrently at different venues and spaces.

In Plastic Perfect and Instant Gratification, you seemed to have combined humankind's favorite loves in life—sugar, technology, and our own selves. It's interesting to see our culture boiled down in this way. Do you feel it's an exclusively American state of mind, or does it transcend into human nature in its entirety?

I grew up in Texas, so my experiences certainly reflect an American sensibility. For example, I went to school in Houston with children of astronauts around the time General Foods Corporation began promoting a new instant breakfast drink called “Tang.” At the time, the company branded the drink as space food. My mom, a gourmet cook, deemed “Tang” orange-flavored chemicals unfit for consumption. The same was true for genetically modified, sugary cereal. Although she was ahead of her time in forbidding us to eat these types of foods, I did feel a bit deprived. All of those crazy cartoons with huge bug eyes selling fun cereal and my mother saying *no* was hard for us, as it would be for any child who does not know any better.

While this was my experience, I bet the early TV commercials (by way of Hollywood and Madison Avenue), linking technology and food, made their way to all parts of the globe. One advertisement proclaimed, “Man's destiny lies somewhere in the stars and two things will help man keep that rendezvous... the space shuttle and Tang instant breakfast drink.” Reading that statement, one could argue that despite the proliferation of cell phones and digital devices, we have always been ahead of the curve in terms of selling cereal, sugar, and narcissism.

Instant Gratification, a pop-up cereal bar and café installation exhibited in SoHo, New York, privatizes the act of taking a selfie by enclosing the participant in a room. Can you elaborate on the idea of the “Selfie Station”?

In many ways, *Instant Gratification* was a bit of a social experiment. While my installations encourage viewer participation, like *Perfect Baby Showroom*, they often exist in the confines of the gallery, which prompts a certain type of social behavior. These unwritten rules become less prominent in a pop-up café that moonlights as a public art installation. Everything about *Instant Gratification* prompted social media engagement—we were giving out free cereal and providing complimentary Wi-Fi access—an environment begging for digital documentation and subsequent social dissemination. I needed a separate platform to round out my ideas about technology and intimacy that were on view at Leila Heller Gallery in Chelsea.

In this context, the Wheaties “Selfie Station” became another touch point for visitors to interact with the installation in a way that is familiar—the

selfie. We privatized it to further play on how we negotiate intimacy in a tech-driven world. The selfie starts as a private act, but within seconds, it is public. The response was overwhelming and the ongoing interactivity was exhilarating to watch. People walked into the installation and knew exactly what to do: reach for their phones.

There's a bleakness in the installation Perfect Baby Showroom, in that the floor-to-ceiling plastering of outlets, exposed cables, cereal-stuffed pillows, and plugged-in baby chambers provide us with a stark perspective of our complacency in convenience. The idea of the perfect human also sparks the idea of humans as a product to be showcased. What repercussions are involved in creating the perfect human commodity?

My aim is to compel people to think about their relationship to technology and how it may affect our collective ability to be intimate in the future. The *Perfect Baby Showroom* is an example of what may happen because of our reliance on technology. I tried to demonstrate how the laboratory and the shopping mall govern us as parents, determining the lives our babies will inherit. The babies in *Perfect Baby Showroom* have come a long way. Before arriving at their bright, safe, clinically optimized environment, they began their gestation with the help of fertility science, perhaps by way of artificial insemination or hormone therapy. Undesirable traits, such as genetically inherited diseases, were screened out; desirable ones, such as height, hair color and key aptitudes, were screened in. They are primed for healthy growth and development: Nobel Prize winners, Oscar, Emmy, Grammy, and Tony winners, Olympic stars, Concert Pianists—pick your child's future. The perfect baby is a must-have accessory for increasing numbers of today's high achievers.

In creating the perfect baby, spontaneous, unpredictable processes are non-existent. Instead of the intimacy of the bedroom, we have the laboratory's controlled environment, and what was once a natural and joyful culmination of family life is now a matter of technology and mass production. Digital technology has replaced intimacy in the perfect baby's world (and ours), and there is something frightening about that.

Do you feel technology is winning over the tactile comforts of human relationships? What does this mean for future generations?

I think digital technology substitutes for the intimacy we have lost, replacing sensual experience with information on a glowing screen. However, for the perfect baby, this loss is especially marked, since the baby is fresh from the most intimate and sensually rich existence of all: nine months inside the dark, wordless warmth of the womb. Being cast out of the uterus is like humanity's exile from Eden—the loss of an environment of perfect pleasure. Where does the baby go from there? To her mother's arms? Perhaps. But, maybe not. As these babies mature, will high-res screens substitute for real parents? I do not know what is next. However, I think we should at least pause and think about it. These parents are lonely even when they are together, and they are distant from their baby even when they are close. Like their offspring, the parents are in exile: having partaken in the knowledge of iPhones and iPads, they have been cast out from their own life experience.