Rachel Lee Hovnanian Unveils Second Exhibit of the Women’s Trilogy Project

The artist’s “Happy Hour” work is on view at Leila Heller Gallery.

BY KRISTEN TAUER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE CHINSEE

“The rest of my barbed wire was supposed to come yesterday, but my barbed wire got stuck doing something else,” Rachel Lee Hovnanian says two days before the opening of her second exhibition for the Women’s Trilogy Project at Leila Heller Gallery. “So he’s going to come today at 11 with the barbed wire. The artist was putting finishing touches on “Happy Hour,” a series of new large-scale paintings and installation being shown for the first time. It’s the follow up to “NDD Immersion Room,” in which viewers had to hand over their phones before entering a dark cloud, which is fantastic. So you won’t have a crumpled up picture like that, but then I started thinking about well, then who owns those photographs? And then I looked at what was going on in my mind at that time.”

The series draws heavily from Hovnanian’s childhood, influenced by everything from the culture of growing up in the South to her father’s alcoholism and her own dyslexia. The paintings feature sayings written between lines, many of which were taken from the “Dick and Jane” book series she grew up with.

As a kid and the kid of an alcoholic, you generally don’t want to make waves — you want to stay within the lines,” she explains. “So you don’t want him to start drinking, and maybe blame a lot of things on yourself. There was a lot of pressure as well for women to behave and act are highlighted by her own drawings. Hovnanian has been creating the labels for three years, and continues to add more as she gets inspired by passages in the book.

“We wonder where we’re getting these rules — where does it say that the woman has to clean the table?” Hovnanian says. “You start to read, oh, maybe this is where — how to look good, why you have to look good, how to set the table?” an extension of cultural ideals being passed down in gender lines.

Alcohol plays a role throughout the work, a reflection of the permeasiveness of drinking in American society and heritage. There are martini glasses, flasks, bloody marys, cars hitting trees, perfume bottles. A side exhibition room facing the street contains a collection of rose-toned prints with words like “albat” (the title of the exhibit), “nasty woman” and “good breeder” with neon-framed clock permanently ticking past four o’clock on the wall — happy hour. The artist hopes that the work inspires conversation and transparency and that it gives people permission to escape the confines of the lines she felt compelled to stay between as a child. “The number of people that I have shown the work to, I’d say three-quarters of them had something in their family,” she says. “As an artist, creating conversation is what I’m supposed to do. It’s why I do what I do.”

Through May 31 at Leila Heller Gallery, 568 West 25th Street, New York, NY.