

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Phillips, Lee. "Happy Hour for Humanity." Office. (April 19, 2018)

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Happy Hour for Humanity



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If modernity is the problem, Rachel Lee Hovnanian's three part, six month take-over at Leila Heller Gallery, *The Women's Trilogy Project* is the cure — and *Happy Hour*, its second installation, is our latest dose of medicine.

The first of its kind, this expansive exhibit has earned the immense space that it takes up. Somehow, Hovnanian has managed to re-open and investigate the timeless question: "What happens when we are denied what is essential to our humanity?"

Text by Lee Phillips

Part one, the *NDD Immersion Room*, reacts to our self-imposed denial of nature; a term Richard Louv coined "nature-deficit disorder". After surrendering your cell-phone, one enters the *NDD Immersion Room*, an installation forrest, immediately flooded with sensory details some of us may not be too familiar with: the crunching of leaves on the ground, crickets chirping, the smell of the trees and roar of the fire. Hovnanian's first installation unwaveringly presents us with what we have been missing, or even purposefully ignoring: nature itself.

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After releasing part one under her male pseudonym “Ray Lee,” a decision meant to depoliticize its reception, Rachel has come back to present part two under her real name and fittingly, it is her most personal show yet. *Happy Hour* deals with the disconnect between innocence and shame — the emotional labor that not only comes dealing with the horrors of addiction but also maintaining the semblance of a normal family. No doubt stemming from her own experience growing up with an alcoholic father, *Happy Hour* is, despite all odds, no pity party.

There is no cut-and-dry autobiographical element here, no easily-interpreted message; instead, Hovnanian aggressively collides opposing visual elements to evoke visceral responses, ones we feel in our chest but have trouble naming with our tongues, allowing each viewer to place the piece in their own context.

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Like all of her pieces, "Pink Lady" seamlessly combines childlike aesthetics with challenging motifs and ideas. Against a pink backdrop, classic cherries, pearl necklaces and bouquets of flowers swim in and around an image of an upside down cow, "GOOD BREEDER" written above it. Martini glasses and crossed-out beer cans provide a stark contrast to the main eye-grabber of the piece: "Questionable Reputation," written in childlike cursive.

The piece, reminiscent of a little girl's collage journal, evokes one of Hovnanian's main goals, as she related to us in [an earlier article](#): to focus on the way society depends on women, and how that dependency shapes their lives. If all art is a response to something, *Happy Hour* is a reaction to this mechanic of dependency — and as we internalize this reaction and sift through the intense feelings it invokes in us, we may eventually be able to decipher a way forward.

Happy Hour, Part II of The Women's Trilogy Project will be on view April 20, 2018 until May 31, 2018.

Photos courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery