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VOGUE

In "The Women's Trilogy Project,"  
Reckoning With Addiction (and  
Appearances) Through Art



Photo: Margaret Gibbons

Rachel Lee Hovnanian in her Brooklyn studio.

Photo: Courtesy of Margaret Gibbons



# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

“The Women’s Trilogy Project,” Rachel Lee Hovnanian’s three-part, six-month takeover of Leila Heller’s Chelsea gallery, marks the first time in recent memory that a single artist will have three sequential exhibitions in a New York gallery. It is a lot of space to fill and a lot of time in which to do it, and it is sure to draw a fair amount of attention in terms of what exactly she plans to do as a female artist given free rein in the age of #MeToo in an industry that’s never been particularly subtle about its attitudes toward women (quoth Picasso to his lover, Françoise Gilot: “Women are machines for suffering”). For her part, Hovnanian, whose Part II opens to the public on April 20, has been using the time and the space less to chase the crashing wave of retribution or the headlines and trending topics, and instead to tackle one very big, very old question: What happens when what we consume begins to consume us?

Hovnanian’s art reveals in the particular discomfort of the stretch between our stated beliefs and our actual behavior—her work tends to focus on narcissism, obsession, gender, and our relationship with technology. Her previous installations with Leila Heller include 2014’s video work, *Foreplay*, in which couples lie in bed together totally immersed in their glowing devices, and *Plastic Perfect*, in which hyper-realistic robotic babies were laid out in incubators on plastic sacks of sugary cereals for visitors to pick up and pose with, provided hashtags gave an idea of what type of future each baby would have. In 2009, her show “Power & Burden of Beauty” at Jason McCoy’s gallery featured a series of sculptures of beauty-queen trophies who had turned to substance abuse and homicide, and a swimsuit changing room with a warped funhouse mirror and audio recording that suggested visitors lay off snack food, or try more Botox.

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So what happens when the facade starts to crumble and you've been taught that the surface is all that matters? "The Women's Trilogy Project" takes three different tacks. Part I, the *NDD Immersion Room*, was named for what the writer Richard Louv dubbed "nature-deficit disorder" (symptoms include "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses, a rising rate of myopia, child and adult obesity, Vitamin D deficiency, and other maladies"): What Louv calls the result of the rapidly decreasing amount of time human beings spend outside. Hovnanian presented that work—which included an installation (a woodsy campsite at night, replete with fragrant fir trees, crickets, an empty tent, a handheld lantern, crunching leaves underfoot, a roaring fire to sit beside) only accessible if you surrendered your phone—under a male pseudonym, Ray Lee, a choice that she told *Untitled Magazine* enabled visitors to accept her premise "without hesitation." For Part II, entitled *Happy Hour*, Hovnanian posed for promotional materials as a bleary-eyed Girl Scout (in uniform), and a soused debutante (in lace and pearls) in front of a large-scale painting called *Pink Lady*, which reads "Questionable Reputation." This time she's not using anybody else's name.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, *Pink Lady*, 2018.  
Photo: Courtesy of Margaret Gibbons



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*Happy Hour* looks specifically at the insidious manner in which addiction tears at the fabric of a family preoccupied with maintaining appearances. It's one of Hovnanian's most personal exhibitions yet. "My father was incredibly smart," she said during a February walk-through of her Brooklyn studio, surveying the large-scale canvases done up like 1950s children's handwriting workbooks, and an installation that mimicked a kitchen pantry (if that pantry was topped with barbed wire and filled with empty liquor bottles plastered with doodled-on pages torn out of the Girl Scout handbook). Her father was an alcoholic who could occasionally get violent, a fact that her family spent years trying to conceal from their friends and neighbors, though drinking—and drinking too much—was hardly an aberration from the norm. "My mother would have friends go to the club and drink, and then they would play cards and drink some more, and drink some more, and drink some more," said Hovnanian. "And you know, it was just a way for them to relax under these societal pressures. And still, to this day, how many people have something to drink before they go out, to relax a little bit?" Family lore included stories of booze-addled friends getting into fender benders en route to do the school pickup, or memories of being shaken awake by her mother trying to hustle her and her brothers out of the house and away from their drunken, raging father. They were good at hiding it, most of the time, the artist remembers, though there were some exceptions. "A friend of mine's mother came to visit, and my parents had had a fight, and there was spaghetti on the wall. And I mean, what do you say — how do you explain spaghetti on the wall?" She paused. "That stain represented violence to me, in that way."