

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Davis, Scarlett. "Rachel Lee Hovnanian : The Women's Trilogy Project" *MUSÉE*. (May 9, 2018).



Rachel Lee Hovnanian : The Women's Trilogy Project



RachelH-GirlScout on Floor © Margaret Gibbons courtesy of the Leila Heller Gallery

On view now at the [Leila Heller Gallery](http://www.leilahellergallery.com) is Part II, titled *Happy Hour*, of Rachel Lee Hovnanian's three part collection, *The Women's Trilogy Project*, which explores the artist's formative years in the south and the complexity of trying to define herself as women in a strict environment, while also grappling with

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issues of alcoholism and the perpetuated domestic order. Rachel Lee Hovnanian is a New York-based, multidisciplinary artist born in West Virginia and raised in Houston Texas. She has exhibited in both solo and private groups around the world in the United States, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. *Happy Hour* is on view from **April 20th, 2018-May 31, 2018**, followed by Part III, *Pure*, which will open **June 8th, 2018**.

Scarlett Davis: *Musée Magazine* is a photography-based, although there is no photography in *The Women's Trilogy Project*, some of your paintings with reference to *Happy Hour* are monochromatic collages incorporating some overlay of images like Girl Scouts paraphernalia like badges. What is your connection to photography and what was your intent with this project?



Rachel Lee Hovnanian NDD Immersion Room1 © Jared Siskin and Patrick McMullan courtesy of the Leila Heller Gallery

Rachel Lee Hovnanian: The paintings in my show *Happy Hour* not only use fragments of Girl Scouts Badges, but I also have imported distinct overlays of visual memory imagery. This layering of childhood photographs are achieved through the physical buildup of translucent mediums within and throughout my composition. If you look closely at the paintings you can see particular repeated images set as if they are graphic icons trying to push through- these personal vintage images project faint memories in the background of my painting.

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SD: *The Women's Trilogy Project* is an interesting title . In Part I, you chose to feature your work under a male pseudonym. Did this yield any different results or observations from Part II, *Happy Hour*, where you were ostensibly yourself, a woman artist?

RH: Some have remarked that they felt the NDD Immersion Room installation was done by a male artist perhaps because it deals directly with the outdoors I don't know, you may have to ask them - but this has happened often enough.

I created this exhibition under a male pseudonym, Ray Lee, assigned by my friends during adolescence to reflect my interest in stereotypically masculine outdoor past-times like camping and fishing. As women, possessions, gender roles, stereotypes drive us to actions and limitations that are artificial rather than real. By producing work under a male pseudonym, I believe I have overcome the preconceptions of work being created by female artists. For me the gender is irrelevant in terms of my ability to create this work. The Creative moment of ignition touches upon the magical fluidity of gender, thought and perception on some levels while at the same time come from a place I know and have experienced as a woman artist.

SD: Trilogies are rather unique, and this one felt special in the level of dependency on the public as to its overall meaning. It was interesting to begin to make connections between Part I and Part II which shared the same space; however, certain rooms and areas began to evolve and expand upon their function in Part I. For example, in Part I “the waiting room” where people could charge their phones before surrendering them to go into the immersion room, became the room where spectators could part take in a drink before going into the barbed wine cellar, which served as the immersion room in Part I. The immersion room required a sign- up sheet, but the wine cellar was open entry. Can you elaborate more on what it was like to create three different experiences in a shared space , as well as this dichotomy between Part I and II?

RH: An objective of *The Women's Trilogy Project* work is to engage the viewer in a communicative intersubjective experience. My work implies that there is tension between Part I, Part II and Part III. There is this same tension within each show, within each room- because there is a tension in the journey from room to room and a tension within our culture between the fragility of life

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and our ever present technology. *The viewer is crucial and constitutive to all of this work- without their response to it there is no reflection. Viewers become the object of the conversation as they are surrounded by nature, or technology or wine bottles/with individual story labels or my paintings. There is a constant power relationship between the work and the visitors. In silence the barbed wired installation containing empty bottles remains a dormant formal arrangement. The Viewer enters the space to disrupt this formal arrangement by picking up the bottles, and reflecting on their own relationship to the created labels and composition of artifacts.*

SD: In both exhibits , there seems to be an aspiration to revert back to childhood , the Dick and Jane imagery, as well just the imagery alone of adults crawling into tents indoors with lanterns. In Part I , it's a need to return to nature , but in Part II it feels almost like a need to escape some of the harder aspects of life like addiction. Was childhood a kind of surface whereby to detract we the spectators from perhaps something more central?

RH: *Happy Hour* addresses how Girl Scouts and debutante traditions have influenced many of our gender and societal norms that still exist today. It was really about tracing back these traditions and finding my voice within my Southern roots.

SD: In using the Girl Scouts and the debutant culture of the South In *Happy Hour* , I was reminded of a film from 1953 starring Sandra Dee called *The Reluctant Debutant*— for some people debutant culture can be inaccessible given the modernity of this era as well as geography. Did these themes of inspiration come from your own upbringing?

RH: So much of this exhibition has come from my personal experience and what I witnessed in others around me - and within my parent's artistic community. I would hang onto my mother's painting apron while she painted. My parents exposed us to the activist community of writers and artists such as the studios of artists Janice Biala and Balcomb Green. My parents did not find the debutante culture to be particularly useful to say the least. My father was a professor of Comparative Literature and writer and mother was an editor and an artist.

SD: Do you think there is a kind of thread that can be linked between this kind of old world debutant culture and this era of #metoo?

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RH: Yes, in many ways the constraining orders placed by old world debutant culture, and other old world rule based substructures is what has lead us to the revolution of the #metoo era. I think the answer is best found within *The Women's Trilogy Project* for each person.

SD: You have made the comment that like many artists , you hope your work inspires conversation. At many art events, the artist acts as kind of Gatsby character, hiding their celebrity, so as to remain inconspicuous at their openings. Were you able to glean or partake in any interesting dialogues regarding this project?

RH: Yes I have experienced many private, emotional moments with viewers. Together we stood silent as strangers and after we both knew each other a little better.



Photo: Margaret Gibbons