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Rachel Lee Hovnanian: The Self and Our Mediagenic Society



View of "Rachel Lee Hovnanian: Open Secrets" at Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Italy. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy. Photo by Nicola Gnesi.

The expansive diversity within the prolific oeuvre of Rachel Lee Hovnanian has adamantly resisted a specific medium and a particular signature style, rendering a synoptic interpretation virtually untenable. *Open Secrets*, however, the current exhibition at the Museum at Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza in Tuscany, surveys the heterogeneous output the New York based artist has produced over the past decade, revealing a complex cultural enterprise that nonetheless retains a resolute continuity in addressing the formulation of self-imagery of the contemporary individual from open-ended feminist vantage points.

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The self-image of the contemporary individual presented unravels the burdens of conformity, the hollowness within dichotomous ideation, social stigmas, peer pressure, hapless family circumstances and alarming cultural changes incessantly brought upon us by technological alterations of our daily social reality. An allegorical self-portrait of the artist and a mirror image of instances of our contemporary social condition, works exhibited in Open Secrets resonantly deploy such mediums as sculpture, painting, photography, video, neon and altered readymade objects, often hybridizing them. That hybridization of mediums, indeed, circumvents their historical hierarchies, transforming them into agencies for scrutinizing the societal repercussions of selfhood within our increasingly media-driven digital era.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, FMLMBD Apé Truck, 2019. Traveling Truck. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy. Photo by Nicola Gnesi.

As an extension of the exhibition and an encapsulation of one of its dominant themes that touches upon society's current infatuation with digital communication, *FMLMBD Apé Truck* (2019) is a traveling truck that has been substantially redesigned and will roam around Tuscany in order to provide passersby the commodity of charging their otherwise "exhausted" or "dying" electronic devices. Upon the exterior of this charming white mini truck appears a tongue-in-cheek logo consisting of a minimalist battery icon above the initials of the utterance, "F*** my life, my battery's dead," presented here as an acronym. Inside the enclosed trailer, where the visitor renormalizes the psyche through the indispensable necessity of charging a given cellular device while

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gaining access to Wi-Fi, the Delphic neon sign fully enunciating the exterior acronym glows as an elusive commentary of our increasingly technologized times. At once having embraced the cellphone and critiquing it, this work of Hovnanian comes across as an incubator for a matrix through which technological advances, society and individuation—along with the very mediums and messages of art—can be probed.

Hovnanian, herself engulfed in the smartphone dependency to a given extent, discloses self-reflexivity and doubt in the legitimacy of the ongoing protrusion of technology into the social domain through an array of works within *Open Secrets*. Her projects are open invitations for the participant to reflect upon the dilemma brought forth by recent technological advances that redefine our lives, as they demonstrate a tension between nature and technologized culture. The feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, in her recently published book *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*, delves into a critique of dichotomous thinking of nature versus technology through the concepts of the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. As machines fascinated Simondon, he formulated an innovative perspective that would map the individual to society in a constructive manner within the inexorable flux of inevitable scientific transformations. Simondon considered the artist as playing an essential role in that process.

Addressing the concepts that Simondon had constructed through such terms as “individuation,” “preindividual” and “transindividual,” Grosz explicates that ideology by writing, “The transindividual subject—the inventor, the technician, the artist, the philosopher—subtracts him- or herself from the social through the mediation of the machine, technical apparatuses, the regimen of practices of the artist, the institutions, modes of operation, and habits of writing—through, that is, a return to and restructuring of the forces and orders of energy and information that render social and collective life possible.”¹



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Dinner for Two, 2012. Installation view. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

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Recalling Simondon's thinking of the artist who subtracts herself from the social through the mediation of the machine, Hovnanian presents the beholder with an excessively elongated dinner table within the gallery that has been named "Dining Room." In this theatrical setup for a fictive dinner date titled *Dinner for Two* (2012), each one of the two chairs at the far end of the rectangular table is occupied by a tablet screen that depicts an individual absorbed into a smartphone during a romantic dinner. This simulacrum of Hovnanian portrays the estranging consequences of our high-tech reality, as if proclaiming that an integral aspect of a meal entails reciprocations of esteem, proposing that a companion, guest or family member must deferentially abandon the cell phone during a meal.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Reflection Pool III. 2017. Metal leaf, aluminum cast metal, linen, acrylic, coated cotton, paper, jade glue, in artist's frame. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

The self, its social image and the mirror: this triangulation recurs within the opus of Hovnanian, as encapsulated in *Reflections Pool III* (2017), an oval-shaped relief sculpture that embodies the mythological narrative of Narcissus, whose sensual attraction to his mirror image would ultimately lead to his early demise and metamorphosis into the narcissus flower. Placed within the "Dining Room" gallery of the museum, *Reflections Pool III* emblemizes one of the central tenets of *Open Secrets* insofar as the mythos of beauty and social norms are concerned. Constructed through metal leaf, aluminum cast metal, linen, acrylic, coated cotton, paper and jade glue, *Reflections Pool III* hybridizes the mediums of painting and sculpture in a manner that runs parallel to the contemporary individual's online imagery that is itself a form of electronic hybridization. While such a hybridity of mediums cannot but open new aesthetic venues that continue expanding the definitions and

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practice of art, the extent to which the validity of online fabrication of the individual's self is concerned remains as democratic as it is highly problematic. Alienation and rupture seem to be ongoing side-affects of technological revolutions, as simulated imagery remains a form of disembodiment that detaches itself from tangible reality.

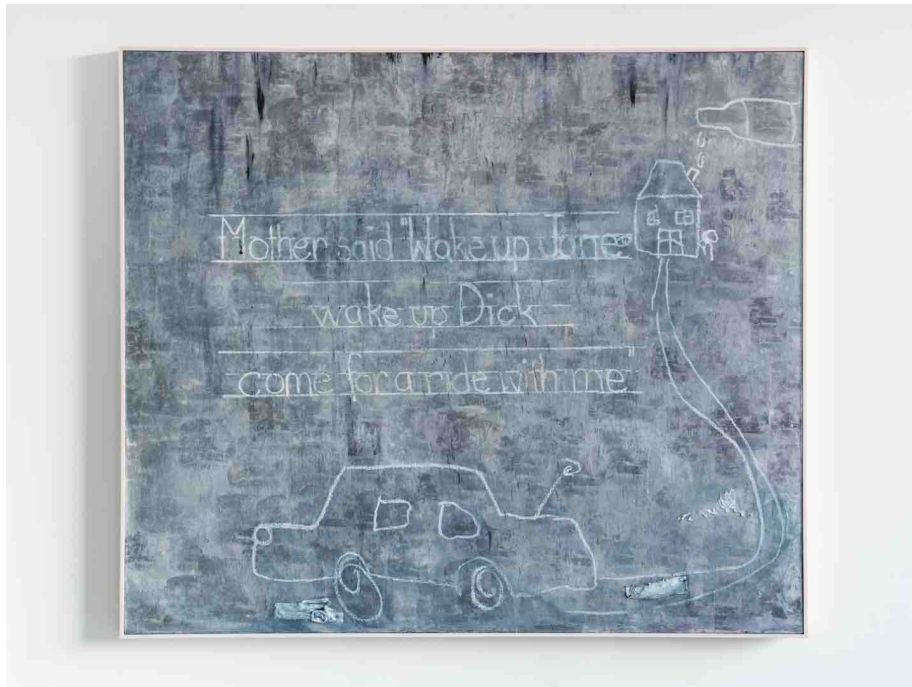


Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Foreplay (James and Emil), 2014. Video projection still. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

The gallery designated as “The Bedroom” features a mixed-media projection of film and photography titled *Foreplay* (2014), depicting young couples in bed. A deluge of sensual shades of iridescent electric blue inundates the ravishing bodies of the figures and white linen of the beds, charging the projected images with pure sensuality. However, despite a tangential touch of their arms, cellular phones appear to have consummated the impassioned attraction that had brought Helen and Travis together in the first place. Is technology in the

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process of postponing their intimate desires? A space upon the bed has distanced the striking figures of Zoe and Susie, who are fully absorbed in their wireless devices. How could such inanimate objects become superior to psychic and corporeal pleasures? Hovnanian has majestically captivated the well-toned masculine torsos of James and Emil from the back and yet their phones—their electronic companions—appear to have sadly separated them. Is an online device preternatural? While the almost fully closed eyes of Hamilton demonstrate his complete engagement with the cellular apparatus, for a moment Rebecca’s gaze becomes surprisingly fixated on the viewer, as if signaling at the possibility of emancipation from the mobile devices that seem to have subjugated our lives.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Dark and Stormy, 2018. Mixed media. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

In the galleries titled “Mother’s Sitting Room,” “Baby’s Nursery,” “Children’s Library” and “Children’s Playroom,” the grandly scaled paintings reveal a bold pictorial ambition of Hovnanian. These mixed-media surfaces incorporate photographs as substrate upon which expressionistic layers of paint build up a primarily formless ground that almost entirely conceals the photographic imagery. Through childlike drawings, partial outlines of figures and handwriting, these notable works of Hovnanian address the alcoholism of her father, a chronic disease that would occasionally culminate in unfortunate moments of violence within the family. The outline of a bottle above that of a house, hand-drawn text derived from *Dick and Jane* (Mother said, “Wake up Jane, wake up Dick, come for a ride with me.”) and the contour of a car govern the composition of *Dark and*

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Stormy (2018), generating an intertextual and pictographic narrative that is at once autobiographical and emblematic of the devastating and destructive illness of alcohol dependence that often harms the individual and family members.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Fake Flowers: Living Room, 2012. Photograph on archival paper. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

Nearly monochromatic photographs of lavish “opera-length” gloves that have been excessively elongated and distorted, pretty floral bouquets and dummies of beauty queens caught up in front of the mirror or a vitrine of donuts: while these aestheticized simulations cannot but absorb the viewer as signs that ceaselessly circulate within our culture through mass media, they simultaneously act as sharp critiques of the stereotyped imageries of beauty that continue to saturate mass communication and advertising.

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Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Foreplay (Helen and Travis), 2014. Video projection still. Courtesy of the Museum of Palazzo Mediceo di Seravezza, Tuscany, Italy.

Despite the undeniable advantages and conveniences of technological breakthroughs that restlessly accelerate, *Open Secrets* of Hovnanian points to the infrastructure of our digital era that is marked by the individual's alienating addiction to high-tech means of social communication, such as the cellular phone, a principal agent of texting and often a perpetually postponed avenue for social networking. As if that device has replaced the mirror, its presence has overtaken and reshaped the social landscape, where the individual is delved into it in one way or another: while walking on the street, riding a bicycle, driving, at a restaurant, at a gym, at a doctor's office, in a classroom, at a bar, in a nightclub, at a dinner table, in bed with a companion or by oneself. The cellular device often succeeds in rendering itself as the ultimate companion. As the reflection of Narcissus

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upon the body of water became an extension of himself, the cellular phone undeniably continues to force itself upon the individual as an extension of personhood.

Impressively orchestrated in collaboration with the curator of *Open Secrets*, Annalisa Bugliani, the nine galleries of the museum have been thematized in a manner that collectively generates diverse narratives of the contemporaneous self. Such pictorial narratives in turn become unraveled as inseparable from Hovnanian's own biography through which child development and the accelerated proliferation of hyperreality are daringly broached. That visual narrativity remains in an entirely open dialogue with the viewer, suggesting symptoms of the individual caught up within a cultural space where digitalization threatens to bankrupt the self from its vital reality. This is Hovnanian's first solo museum exhibition, a succinct retrospective that invites the spectator to engage and rethink the impact of the ever-increasing dissemination of social media by ascertaining its apparent benefits and sieving its failures within the spheres of the private and social. **WM**

Note

1. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 199-200.