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Rachel Lee Hovnanian's "Open Secrets" at Palazzo Mediceo

Currently on view at Palazzo Mediceo in Seravezza, Italy, is Rachel Lee Hovnanian's solo show "Open Secrets." The location for the exhibition, which showcases work from that past decade by the New York-based artist, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Curator Annalisa Bugliani selected 14 paintings, sculptures, installations, and video pieces to be displayed within and outside the historic space.

Whitewall caught up with Hovnanian to discuss her ongoing investigation of society's addiction to modern technology.

WHITEWALL: What was the starting point for "Open Secrets"?

RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN: My work has long been attentive to the effects of technology and media on our perceptions of ourselves and on our interpersonal relationships. "Open Secrets" began from my humanist approach that emphasizes our autonomy within this digital age of addiction to perfection. I wanted to highlight the irony of society's infatuation with hyper-connectivity, drawing attention to the phenomenon without necessarily pointing fingers. I ask viewers to question whether, despite all the new digital means of communication, are we connecting with others as closely in this post-internet age? With "Open Secrets," I seek to reveal the dual realities fostered by our new virtual lives that have evolved online through the rise of the digital revolution.

WW: Will we see any new materials or medium explored by you in the exhibition?

RLH: Much of my sculptural work has been in marble. For several years, my sculpture studio has been located in Carrara, Italy, so it is exciting to be able to exhibit my marble works in the Tuscan environment in which they were realized. The first piece that viewers will see as they approach the museum is my 2009 work *Beauty Queen Totem*, an eleven foot tall sculpture in Carrara marble. My new interactive installation *Shhh* also features a Carrara marble bust of an angel with its mouth taped shut, representing the suppression of truth.

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I am also debuting a new interactive video work, *Swipe Left, Swipe Right*, which considers the newest overlap between interpersonal connections and technology – the rise of dating apps. In our contemporary society built around marketing, we are conditioned to react to products based on their packaging. *Swipe Left, Swipe Right* plays upon the idea that smartphone dating profiles allow users only one image to communicate the complexity of who they are. Other users then make a judgement about who people are based largely on that one image. *Swipe Left, Swipe Right* features different Animoji characters as bleach bottle labels. The labels allude to the notion that just as we judge products by their packaging, we have begun to judge people by one image. *Swipe Left, Swipe Right* explores how users invent ways to assert their personalities on image-based dating apps that otherwise reduce their profiles to solely their looks.

WW: How does the location, the Palazzo Mediceo, impact the show?

RLH: The Palazzo Mediceo was commissioned in the 16th century by Cosimo de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, as a temporary residence during his visit to the marble quarries and silver mines. In 1982, it transitioned into an exhibition space for modern and contemporary art, becoming the Palazzo Mediceo Museum. The princely history of the museum space speaks well in conversation with *Open Secrets* in that both stand as symbols for the pursuit of perfection and for the display of power.

WW: What inspired the Carrara marble sculpture, *Beauty Queen Totem*?

RLH: The work that thematically anchored my 2009 exhibition *Power and Burden of Beauty* is the monumental *Beauty Queen Totem*, which stands some eleven feet tall on a victory platform that is archly suggestive of a wedding cake. Crowned, gowned and sashed, this beauty contest winner is immediately recognizable, looking at once perfect and perfectly wrong. With her ramrod posture and a stony blankness in her anonymous gaze, she appears to be stranded in victory. She appears to conceal a secret – rather than finding success in her victory, she is trapped under the pressures of competing as a perpetual contestant while pitting herself against others. Rather than a bejeweled tiara, she wears a blank headpiece formed around a single narcissus bloom, a touchstone for the impermanence of beauty and the inevitability of decay.

WW: Your work explores our relationship with technology and the digital world. How would you describe your own relationship with the digital sphere and communication therein?

RLH: My attention to the effects of digital technology on our daily lives started early. My husband was one of the first people to have a mobile phone, back in the day. When we went on family vacations, I wanted to throw his phone away. Then I stopped noticing that he was on it – because I was on mine. That's when I realized I was addicted. Now, we look to our phones for just about

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everything. In Open Secrets, my FMLMBD Apé Truck features my proprietary phrase FMLMBD (F*** My Life, My Battery's Dead) to engage with this societal addiction. The Apé travels around Tuscany, providing participants with free Wi-Fi and a phone charging station that doubles as a bench. The space is illuminated by my neon work FMLNW (F*** My Life, No Wi-Fi). The Apé is an S.O.S. for the SMS age. In the glow of this sentiment, visitors are asked to activate the charging station bench, marked with red crosses, by charging their "dying" digital devices. By transforming these acronyms into an occasion for viewers to enter a power relationship with digital technology, the work implies a tension between the fragility of life and the immortal nature of the digital revolution.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian

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Installation view of Rachel Lee Hovnanian's "Open Secrets" at Palazzo Mediceo, Seravezza, Italy
Photo by Riccardo Ghilardi/Getty Images for Rachel Hovnanian



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