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Rachel Hovnanian Takes Conceptual Piece to China

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BEIJING — Conceptual artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian's Chinese New Year dinner table is laden with food and filled with family, but none of them is speaking to the other.

This isn't a family feud. It is Hovnanian's newest take on global narcissism, China-style. In "New Year's Feast: Beijing, 2014," eight Chinese family members, represented by actors on individual video screens, are engrossed in conversation and activity — with their electronic devices. As they

utterly ignore each other and their lavish holiday meal, three digital mice chew away at the banquet, unnoticed and undisturbed.

The message, Hovnanian said at the exhibit's opening on Friday, is universal: People have become so enamored of interaction through electronic means that valuable personal contact very often takes a backseat. And though the festive Lunar New Year table, food and family are Chinese, the same situation is happening at holiday meals worldwide.

"I feel more and more like we are the lab mice," she said. "We're just learning the effects of all of this. I think they're going to study us later."

Hovnanian, whose earlier though-provoking exhibits, like "Mud Pie," captured audiences around the world and made them ponder the cost of non-stop connectivity, was pleased to open her first China exhibit in Beijing at the Joyce Gallery. She first visited China in 1987 as a tourist, and became enamored of the place and people.

Plotting out a Chinese festival meal, complete with rubberized and clay food — a Peking duck, Longevity Noodles, a whole fish, dumplings and greens — took months. A Chinese chef made the red dragon that adorns dessert, a cake nearly hollowed out by a ravenous mouse.

The exhibit is topped off by sounds, those universally familiar dings and beeps of ringtones, computer games and calendar reminders. Absent is the cacophonous conversation and laughter of a family holiday meal — a silent reminder of how the electronic age has changed us.

The exhibit will be on display at the Joyce Gallery in Beijing through March.