

INTERVIEW: Rachel Lee Hovnanian on Her New Year's Feast

by Belle Zhao 22/01/14 10:36 PM EST



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "New Year's Feast: Beijing," multi-media installation, 2013

(Courtesy of the artist)

New York-based conceptual artist **Rachel Lee Hovnanian** recently presented "New Year's Feast: Beijing" at **Joyce Gallery** in Beijing. In Joyce's white space, a round white table is laden with Peking duck, longevity noodles, dumplings, and other traditional Chinese delicacies. Eight chairs surround the table, and each carries a screen with a video of a family member immersed in his or her electronic device. All visitors hear is the familiar sounds of social media applications. A side table covered in a white tablecloth bears fruit and a three-layered white cake. A white mouse has already greedily eaten away a corner of the cake, but no one seems to have noticed.

The artist began creating this critical work in June 2012. She chose to hold her exhibition during

Chinese New Year to point out the self-deception involved in the “togetherness” of a family meal and clearly demonstrate that technology has the ability to add distance to even the closest relationships. **BLOUIN ARTINFO China** spoke to the artist about her work.

Where did you get the inspiration for this work?”

Every day I see that I am constantly pulled into the Internet, and I see this happening to others around me everywhere I go. Just to name a few observations I have made: I overheard a mother say to her children at a family dinner in a New York restaurant, ‘Let me finish this one email before we order.’

Another time, in Hong Kong, I observed a young couple at lunch in a restaurant, staring into their iPhones, barely speaking with each other but smiling at their devices and only occasionally looking up. I think the idea that we should put each other on pause in order to speak to others who are texting us and not prioritize those present at the table is the new norm.

In Russia, I noticed people losing touch with reality around them, heads down staring into their iPhones while walking outside, crossing busy streets. This happens not only in the United States; people around the world walk along streets or beaches, and instead of looking around, they gaze downward to check their messages, paying close attention to distant others and missing the moment.

What are you trying to express with this work?

“New Year’s Feast: Beijing” is an installation depicting a family gathered around an elaborate New Year’s feast table set for eight. The family members are focused solely on their digital devices, ignoring each other, just as they fail to notice the delicacies set before them. Select dishes have been invaded by white lab mice - no one seated at the table appears to be aware of how isolated they have become, nor do they seem aware of the feast or the mice invading their lavish banquet. This behavior appears to be a universal issue.

Was this a work created specifically for Joyce Gallery?

Yes. I met Bartley Ingram, head of Art and Creative at Joyce, at a dinner that gallerist Mandy d’Abo gave a few years ago, before my show of photographs, “Too Good To Be True,” at her Catstreet Gallery in Hong Kong. At the time, I was preparing for my “Dinner for Two: Wedding Cake” installation for the Armory Show. The work was subsequently bought by C21 Museum and Bartley asked me if I would create an installation for the Beijing Joyce Gallery.

For me, as a woman artist, the process of creating “New Year’s Feast: Beijing,” drove home the notion that technology can engineer *us*, affecting our behavior towards each other.

We have sacred spaces carved out in life, and technology has invaded our social borders. In my opinion we are like lab mice, and I worry that we will forget the important things that we know about life. Joyce Gallery was extremely supportive of a work that is a controversial look at the traditional family.

“New Year’s Feast: Beijing 2014” will be exhibited at [Joyce Gallery](#) through March

Translation by Bridget Noetzel