

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Rachel Lee Hovnanian's Shallow Satisfactions

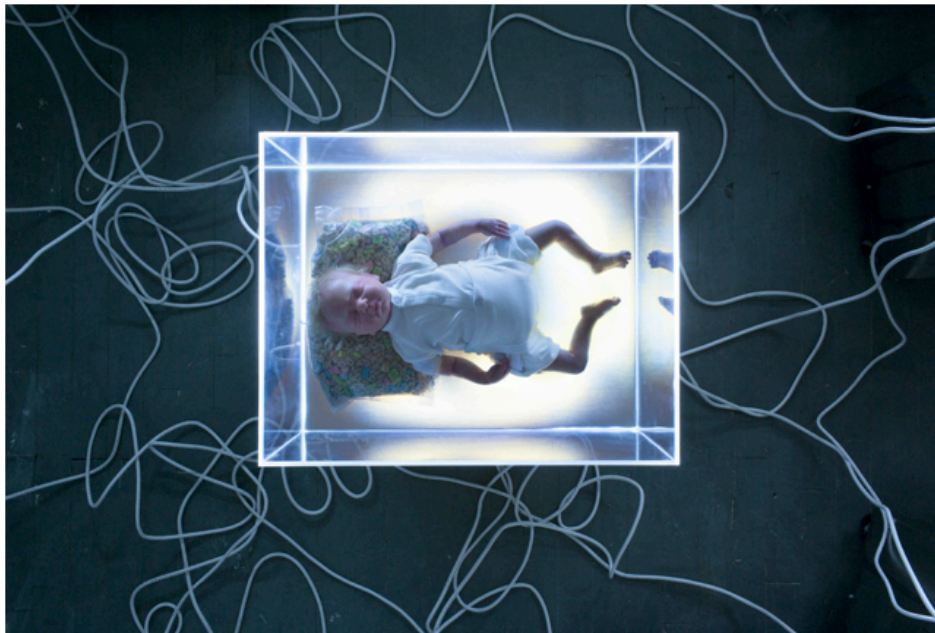
by Alissa Guzman on October 9, 2014



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "Perfect Baby Showroom" (2014), wallpaper, extension cords, baby dolls, metal, acrylic, wood, neon light, foam, cotton fabric, LED lights, cereal (all images courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery)

A few weeks ago a photographer friend and I were making the usual rounds of fall gallery openings in Chelsea when, well after dark and deep into a conversation about the existential dilemma of having children — if we want them, why we don't, what regrets either decision will bring — we stopped serendipitously in front of a gallery with a large, neon sign in the window that read, "Perfect Baby Showroom." Gazing in as enraptured window shoppers, we saw a hospital-like infant ward where individual racks showcased near-immaculate babies. Grabbing my arm, my friend exclaimed: "Look, babies! This is perfect."

Inside what was the Leila Heller Gallery we found an exhibition titled *Plastic Perfect*, a solo show by the sculptor, installation and performance artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian. New York-based, Hovnanian creates installations that deal with societal obsessions and excesses, mainly technology and our narcissistic attachment to it. As instructed, inside the “Perfect Baby Showroom” we put on lab coats, white gloves and gleefully took selfies with our perfect baby of choice. Handmade by doll artisans, the babies had an uncanny weight and malleability, with perfect little faces and sleepy eyes. In a room of floor-to-ceiling wall outlets, the babies were plugged in and warm to the touch, incubators in a *Gattaca* future. Hidden amidst the interactive playfulness of the showroom, however, lurked Hovnanian’s unmistakable critique of a homogenized, beauty-obsessed and overly consumptive culture. Hovnanian asks the question: should we feel perfectly at home shopping for babies?



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "Perfect Baby Showroom (The Evan)" (2014)

The exhibition itself became more tenuous and less conceptually rigorous the more we explored. A series of “paintings” in the form of branded cereal boxes mounted in grid-like rows, splattered with white acrylic paint and with titles like “Magically Delicious” and “They’re Gr-r-reat,” tries to draw a connection between the sugary cereals fed to America in the 1960s and the Millennial attachment to gadgets. The paintings feel forced, like bad neo-Pop art, and Hovnanian seems to mistakenly believe that simply presenting something indicative of popular culture is enough to create a relevant critique of it. Instead I found myself wondering what the cereals my mother never let us eat have to do with genetically modified babies. Though it’s hard to feel too connected to the propaganda of cereal, the

reality of how our devices have changed our interactions and behaviors is something we confront daily, and contemplating how our overly connected lives have slowly lead to disconnection feels exceedingly prescient.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "They're Gr-r-reat" (2014), cereal boxes, acrylic, crushed glass, wood, 46 x 44.625 x 4 in.

A similar problem exists with Hovnanian's "Poor Teddy" relief paintings, wall installations that consist of teddy bears, knives and swarming silicon mice. Teddy bears, symbolic icons of childhood, don't *actually* convey very much about childhood, even when they have a knife stuck through their heart. The message is so obvious it's confusing: is she saying technology is killing childhood or that we are so distracted from reality by our digital worlds that mice overtake us in a *Nutcracker*-inspired nightmare? In the case of her "Poor Teddy" series and the cereal paintings, Hovnanian's less than heavy-handed aesthetic saves her. Even her most clichéd pieces have a playfulness and humor about them that thankfully leave you still marginally interested in the remainder of the exhibition.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "Poor Teddy" (2014), nylon, oil, teddy bear, knife, silicone

A series of photographs titled "Foreplay," installed toward the back of the gallery, are the most compelling works in the exhibition. Though the 3D showroom is interactive and fun, "Foreplay" is serious, ambiguous, and provocative. Modern couples, shot from above, are depicted in their bedrooms comfortably wrapped in sheets and pillows, staring at the glossy, high-res screens of their phones or tablets. Lit by the cool blue reflection of LCD screens, these images are formally beautiful, yet ask more questions than they answer. Are the photographs only depictions of our nighttime rituals? Are they a celebration or a condemnation of our digital dissociation? Would they carry the same weight of judgment if books were substituted for phones and tablets? The haunting light of the screens, the separation of each couple, and the suggestion that this is the state of contemporary foreplay, creates a potent image of modern life. Much like her warm babies, Hovnanian's couples seem warmed by their devices, and the artist herself seems to question the shallowness of our satisfaction.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, "Helen and Travis" (2014)

The dangers of technology loom large for every modern generation: for my Boomer parents it was television that changed society, for my generation it was dial-up internet and computer games that kept us staring at tiny black-and-white screens, and today it's smartphones, tablets, and social media. Though unplugging has become the naturalist catchphrase of the 21st century, has technology actually altered who we are, how we socialize, our connectedness with each other? Are these instead just the questions older generations pose to those coming after? Hovnanian's artwork is as torn as our love-hate dependence on technology: we engage in social media while complaining about it, we buy the new and upgrade the old. The idea of unplugging seems so unlikely today that *Plastic Perfect*, playfully dystopian and warning us of the dangers we might yet provoke, is perfectly of the moment.

[Plastic Perfect](#) continues at Leila Heller Gallery (568 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)