

QUEST

ARTS
&
CULTURE
ISSUE

Rachel Lee Hovnanian
Plugged-In or Unplugged?

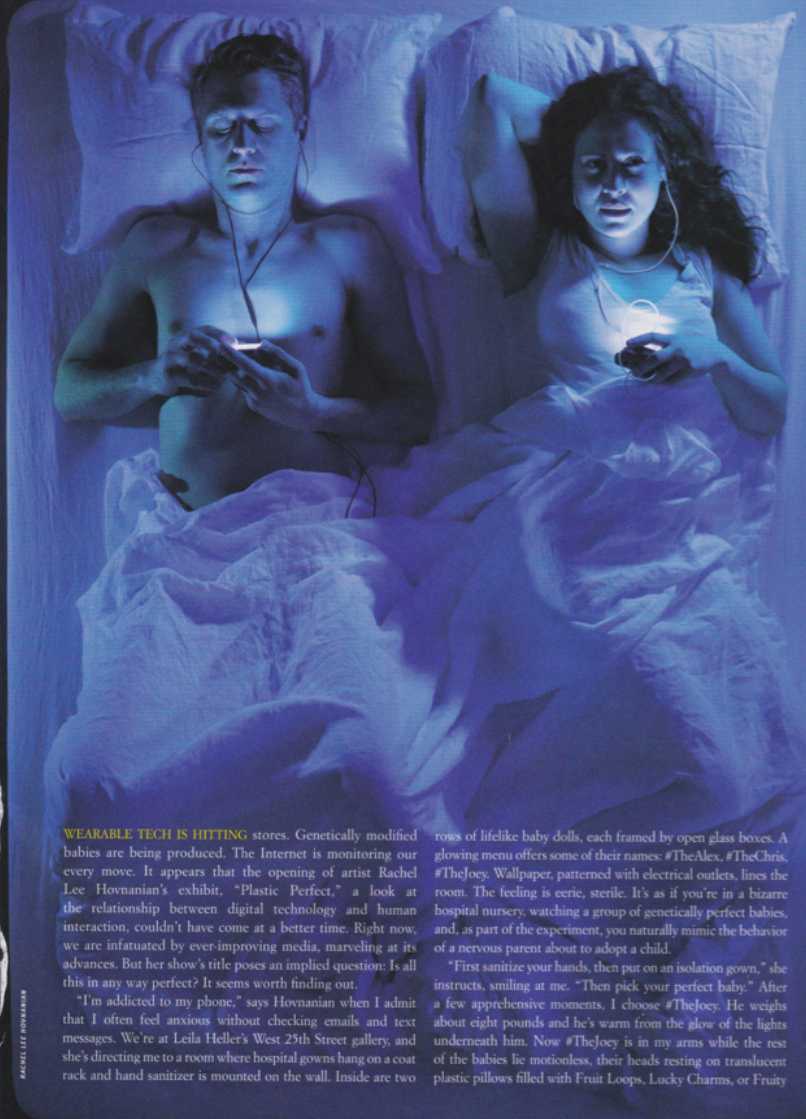


Instant Gratification

BY ALEX R. TRAVERS



This page: Rachel Lee Hovnanian fueling up on instant gratification; "Foreplay: Zoe and Susie" (2014) (top); "Foreplay: Helen and Travis" (2014) (middle); "Foreplay: James and Emil" (2014) (bottom). Opposite page: "Foreplay: Hamilton and Rebecca" (2014). The "Foreplay" series underscores the irony of society's infatuation with hyper-connectivity.



WEARABLE TECH IS HITTING stores. Genetically modified babies are being produced. The Internet is monitoring our every move. It appears that the opening of artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian's exhibit, "Plastic Perfect," a look at the relationship between digital technology and human interaction, couldn't have come at a better time. Right now, we are infatuated by ever-improving media, marveling at its advances. But her show's title poses an implied question: Is all this in any way perfect? It seems worth finding out.

"I'm addicted to my phone," says Hovnanian when I admit that I often feel anxious without checking emails and text messages. We're at Leila Heller's West 25th Street gallery, and she's directing me to a room where hospital gowns hang on a coat rack and hand sanitizer is mounted on the wall. Inside are two

rows of lifelike baby dolls, each framed by open glass boxes. A glowing menu offers some of their names: #TheAlex, #TheChris, #TheJoey. Wallpaper, patterned with electrical outlets, lines the room. The feeling is eerie, sterile. It's as if you're in a bizarre hospital nursery, watching a group of genetically perfect babies, and, as part of the experiment, you naturally mimic the behavior of a nervous parent about to adopt a child.

"First sanitize your hands, then put on an isolation gown," she instructs, smiling at me. "Then pick your perfect baby." After a few apprehensive moments, I choose #TheJoey. He weighs about eight pounds and he's warm from the glow of the lights underneath him. Now #TheJoey is in my arms while the rest of the babies lie motionless, their heads resting on translucent plastic pillows filled with Fruit Loops, Lucky Charms, or Fruity



RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN

This spread: Featured in "Plastic Perfect" is "White Narcissus Panel with Mice I" (2014), a mixed media work by Rachel Hovnanian. (above), Hovnanian working in her New York studio (below).

Pebbles. As if she can read my thoughts, Hovnanian explains that we might be able to pre-select genetically perfect babies one day. I put #TheJoey back against his confectionary headrest and she hands me a fact sheet which maps out his future. The first line reads: "The Joey is a Tony Award-winning masterpiece." I also learn he'll take first place at the 2020 Iron Man competition in New York City. Not bad, kid.

A lot of contemporary art can be tediously didactic. Hovnanian's work is playfully interactive, imprinted with theories about pop culture, technology, and narcissism. But it never feels like it comes as a lesson, warning, or an I-told-you-so. It's about sharing an experience. Even our initial conversation is more of a dialogue than a one-way interview. "I want people to pause and think about how technology has impacted our lives," she tells me. She's not trying to say our devices are bad, however. In fact, a smartphone adds to the exhibit's experience. "Four men walked into the show, sanitized their hands, and then put on isolation gowns and chose perfect babies," she says. "They were strangers, but holding the babies brought them together. They posed together for a selfie like proud fathers."

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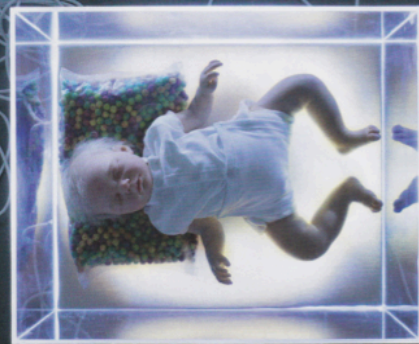
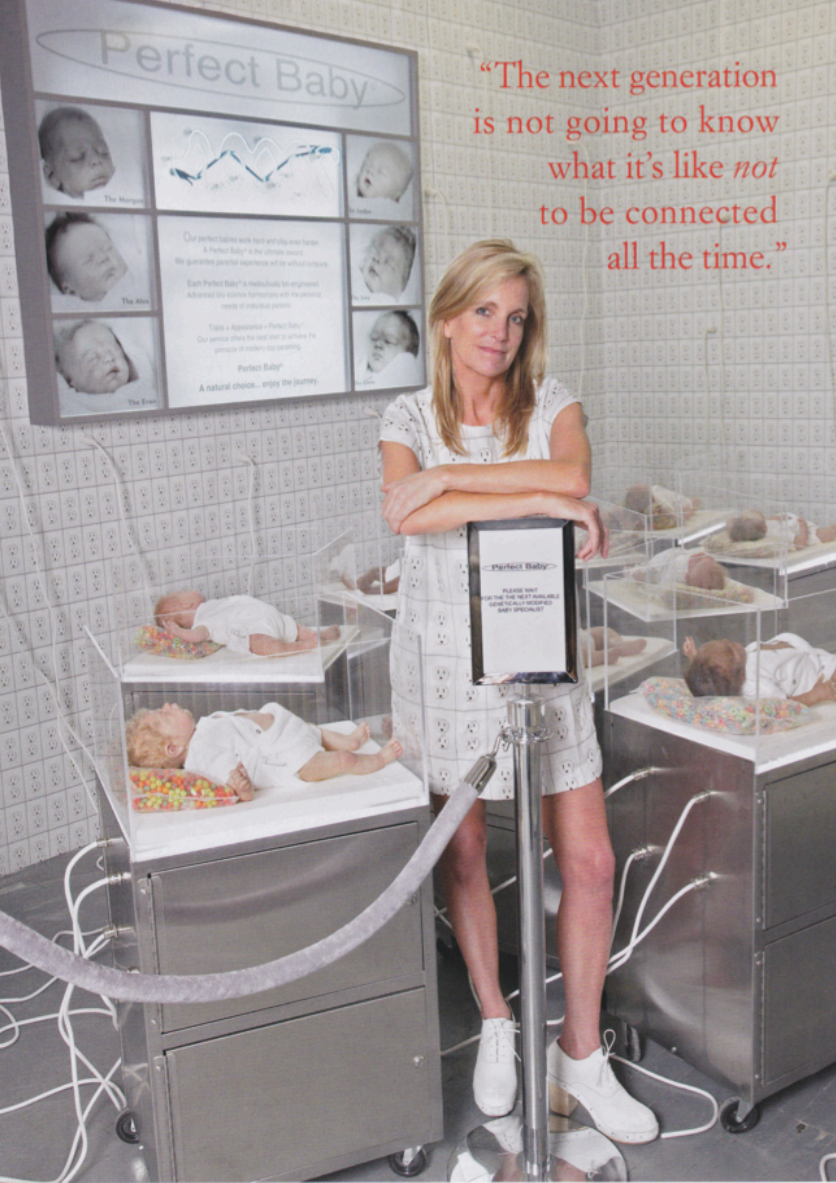
On my first visit to "Plastic Perfect," a few days before I meet Hovnanian, the space is full of activity for the opening, guests hovering outside the small entranceway to the "Perfect Baby Showroom," the standees clamoring for a chance to take their picture with one of the dolls. Waiters pass out Wheaties and other sugary treats rather than offering water or wine. And guests, myself included, are all glued to their mobiles, snapping photos of the art and the people who are engaged with it.

I mention my experience to her, confessing I was using my phone as a crutch, a tool to subliminally avoid conversation. "The next generation is not going to know what it's like *not* to be connected all the time," she responds, leading me to a room that proves her theory. In the back of the gallery is "In Loco Parentis," an installation where an iPad, projecting an eight-minute loop of a baby playing with an iPad, sits in a booster seat. Behind her is chaos: The fridge is wide open. The floor is littered with Cheerios. A digital mouse gnaws away at some cheese. And the parents are in the other room, occupied with their own digital dilemmas. The kid's alone, consumed. But she doesn't seem to mind. "During the entire time I filmed that girl"—90 minutes—"she never once looked up," Hovnanian adds, then makes an interesting remark: "I have been told that parents have seen children take a book's pages and swipe them like and iPad." As we walk out of "In Loco Parentis," toward another section of the gallery, I don't doubt her statement's validity for a second.

Up next is "Poor Teddy," a mixed media work where a knife sticks through the heart of a teddy bear, his camaraderie replaced

Perfect Baby

“The next generation is not going to know what it’s like *not* to be connected all the time.”



This page: In “Perfect Baby Showroom,” the ideal human is available in a laboratory-meets-shopping-mall setting, where parents determine the lives and physical characteristics of their babies (above); “Poor Teddy” (below). Opposite page: Rachel Hovnanian stands in her “Perfect Baby Showroom.” Hovnanian’s “Plastic Perfect” exhibition will be on view at Lella Heller Gallery (568 W 25th St, New York, New York) through October 18.

by technology’s allure. A group of mice herd the incapacitated toy as if they’re ready to consume it. According to Hovnanian, the mice represent technology. And, she says, humans are being tested like lab rats, which is true: “There is much research on our behavior using technology.”

In another nook of the gallery is “Foreplay,” a video featuring a few distracted couples in bed. It’s projected on a mattress. “I shot them on this bed,” she exclaims. That zany notion is countered by a meditative mood: “Isn’t It Romantic,” a song from the 1930s, plays softly on the line of a rotary phone when you pick it up. At first, it’s voyeuristic—and then you realize that these couples aren’t really doing anything worth spying on. They’re lying in bed, illuminated by the glow of their mobile phones. Then their restlessness kicks in. They fidget, scan, scroll...too engrossed in their devices to talk, sleep, or have sex.

As we walk back into the main gallery space, Hovnanian tells me that technology is now marketed like sugary cereal once was—it saves you time and it’s healthy and fun. A few moments later, she pulls up her Instagram app, showing me a celebrity’s photograph of “Plastic Perfect,” which instantly got over 4,000 likes. Clearly, she’s thrilled. This is Instagram’s nutritious side, proof that the train runs on two tracks: Technology can help us, but it can also rob us from living in the moment.

There’s more of Hovnanian’s art on the outside of the gallery, which I missed when I first saw the exhibit. As we walk outside, she points out three neon signs with kitsch-y phrases and their

respective acronyms. Two girls walk by and notice one. “I want to take a picture of that,” beams one girl to her friend, pointing at the sign on the gallery’s Eleventh Avenue sidewalk that reads, “I don’t give a fxxx. IDGAF.” In the adjacent windows: “By the way I think I am in love with you. BTWTTHAILWY” and “Fxxxed up, insecure, neurotic, emotional. FINE.”

The soup-to-nuts experience of “Plastic Perfect” brings out Hovnanian’s questing character and, most importantly, encourages conversation, *interaction*. Like the sugary cereals she features, “Plastic Perfect” offers a quick high, one that may have you feeling fucked up, insecure, neurotic, or emotional after your visit. Or fine. ♦



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