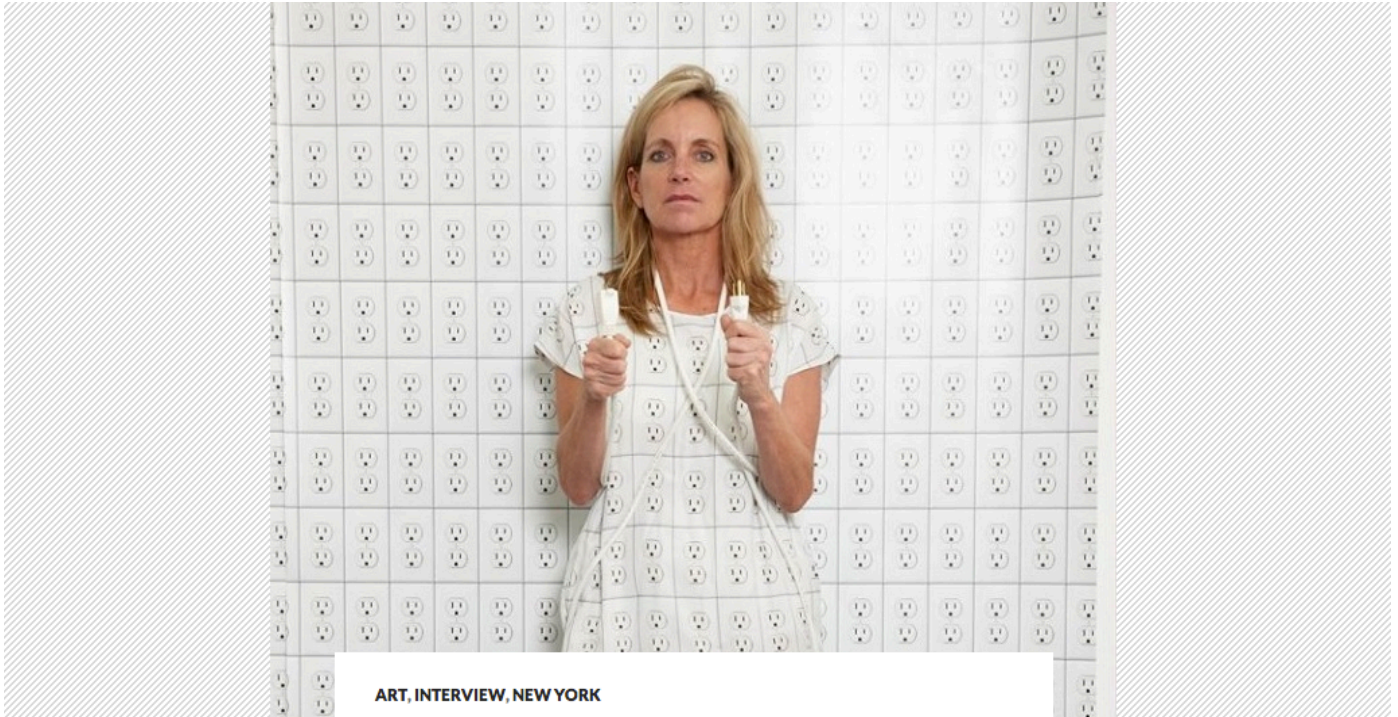


LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Casual Muse



ART, INTERVIEW, NEW YORK

RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN TALKS DIGITAL AND NARCISSIST CULTURE

🕒 OCTOBER 16, 2014 👤 ADMIN 💬 LEAVE A COMMENT

NEW YORK, NY – Last month, I attended the opening night of **Rachel Lee Hovnanian's Plastic Perfect** at the Leila Heller Gallery. As I moseyed through the exhibit, I witnessed art imitating life. Plastic Perfect explores our loss of human intimacy due to the preferred company of a smart device. Spectators viewed each piece of art through the eye of a camera phone. I, guiltily, focused on getting the perfect Instagram shot instead of capturing the real life moment of just experiencing. So what makes us so obsessed with ourselves? Though the exhibit does a great job sparking self-reevaluation among viewers, I just had to know Hovnanian's personal views of today's tech-obsessed world. [We chatted briefly at her 3-day pop-up cereal bar, Instant Gratification.](#) The New York based artist explained that our addiction to technology is no different than grabbing a bowl of cereal — endless bowls of easy, yummy, satisfying but never fills your tummy sugary cereal. In a nutshell, we're hungry for "instant gratification." Hovnanian, who is currently showing Plastic Perfect in Moscow, and I continued our chat in the interview below:

Your current exhibit, *Plastic Perfect*, focuses on today's narcissistic attitude and the impact technology has had on our social behavior. Why do you think we are so obsessed with ourselves?

We are indeed a narcissistic culture. We are sucked into our screens which reflect everything that we love. We experience immediate gratification as often as it suits us. Most of us can't find time to separate from technology. Only when the power is down, or if we are visiting a remote place with no wireless, can we take a break. The Internet is a library at our fingertips. And we are the curator of our own desires. What's not to love?



Rachel Lee Hovnanian displaying ULTIMATE instant gratification!

The "Foreplay" installation is so spot on! We can be in bed with another person yet be more intimate with our smartphone. What do you think causes the digital preference?

Thank you. The effects of digital technology on our culture are yet to be understood. My video, "Foreplay", reflects a loss of intimacy. New digital technologies make us more secure, they save us time, they en-

tain us, they connect electronically to people far away — which is great. But they also seem to replace the intimate reality of authentic experience with a digital simulation. I think the bedroom once symbolized intimacy and romance, but now we take our digital devices there. In my "Foreplay" Installation we are together in bed yet digital miles apart- By the way, in this installation, one can imagine parents enacting the same loss of intimacy in procreating, replacing old-fashioned sex with planned processes guided by the fertility industry. Soon parents may order up a genetically modified baby with the preferred hair color, eye color, height, IQ and talent in order to give their baby the best possible chance to compete in the world. Who can compete with that entertainment?

It's funny how disconnected we have become yet we digitally connect with the world via the million of apps offered to us. What does that say about our social skills?

One aspect of digital connectivity is this unique loss of intimacy which results in isolation. When we are isolated from each other, it really doesn't matter where we are or how close we are physically; we are apart and might as well be thousands of miles away. And I have witnessed this recently during my vis-



Shot taken from Hovnanian's "Foreplay" installation.

its to Moscow, Shanghai and Hong Kong while there for my openings. This is not just prevalent in the US. It was an eye opener watching art students at the shows immediately instagramming the work or texting it to friends. So instead of phoning friends or speaking with each other- they reach for their digital device to communicate as a reflexive behavior.

WHO NEEDS A TEDDY WHEN YOU'VE GOT A SMART PHONE?



This site, *Casual Muse*, is a response to today's confessional media. There are so many platforms for us to create personal profiles, invent perfect identities and update the world on our every move. It's like we are becoming our own celebrities. Do you think this form of narcissism is self-empowering or detrimental?

I'd rather let you decide that for yourself if you don't mind. But Sherry Turkle, research professor at the MIT New Media Lab, has said that our digital devices have the power to change us fundamentally...to redefine what it means to be human. When pushed for more on this Turkle tells us it is too soon to tell.

I've noticed that with the increase of social networking comes a more intense desire to become perfect. Everyone is watching. People are starting to compare themselves to the "perfect" profiles illustrated on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. What is "perfect" anyway?

Our strength as women is our ability to rethink all gender roles and stereotypes that drive us to actions and limitations that are artificial rather than real. Real is actually perfect.



Dinner for Two, a live performance at the opening of Plastic Perfect at Pecherskiy Gallery in Moscow

The white mouse motif used throughout the exhibit — was that a nod to our computer mouse? What was the idea behind that?

Well, you know what they say — when the cat's away...those white lab mice are running wild in the pantry while our attention is elsewhere, focused on the digital screen. They also have something in common with the Perfect Baby: they are the result of genetic manipulation. Albino mice are extremely rare in the wild, almost nonexistent. In their millions, they were created in the laboratory for laboratory purposes. They are the result of research and they were created for research. The idea of a huge white mouse and other rampant white mice seems bizarre, but we have already created a world of rampant rodents that are "not on our screen" — in research settings testing new products for us everyday. I believe we are the new white lab mice, providing data for the marketing experts who understand how data mining works. We swipe our cards at the grocery store, they see what we've been buying, and they figure out what we'll want next. At least the white mice in my paintings can escape off the canvas. Unlike them, we are pretty well hemmed in by technology; once we adopt it, it's hard to live without it.



The Perfect Babies Showroom is adorably insane! What inspired that?

The babies in the Perfect Baby Showroom are called Reborn Babies. Like genetically modified organisms, they start out as something else and are transformed, in this case by doll artisans who make them so realistic that they can easily be confused with real infants; in fact Reborn Babies have been known to be 'rescued' by police from locked cars. Reborn Babies are often crafted with weighted heads that must be supported like an actual baby's head. They may even have an audible heartbeat, and a chest that rises and falls in apparent respiration. They are arranged in a row in my Genetically Modified Newborn Showroom. Dolls are an international craft with a long history of artisanship, but with Reborn Babies this hand-crafted tradition seems to cross a line that we also see crossed mainly with technology. I found this to be very fascinating. In starting with something familiar and transforming it into something new, (GM Newborn Baby Showroom) something that exceeds what we would have considered possible, it is like genetically engineering agricultural products — or real GM human babies. And the result of this craftsmanship is something so hyper-realistic that it confuses us. Many owners of Reborn Babies can't help but form attachments to them as if they were real babies, even though they know they are not. In this way they are like the digital technologies that we rely on in more and more of our lives: What we see on the digital screens all around us is so vivid that it replaces reality.



The Perfect Baby Showroom

I love that you included babies and toddlers into the installation. The little ones are really the “lab rats” of this new communication age. They may never know a smartphone-free dinner or how it feels to go to sleep without texting first. Based on this developing new-age communication, where do you see art and creativity in the future?

Sherry Turkle's book "Alone Together" is very interesting. Turkle observes, "We're more anxious; we're more alone; we prefer to go to our computer than to each other because it's so much easier." Turkle talks about the computer, that everything we have on the computer is all geared to ourselves. So whatever apps we want, Instagram, Twitter—all of that, is geared to us—so it's a natural thing; it's our narcissistic reflection in the computer. Someone shared this excellent insight with me- that kids born into computer usage early go through life probably not knowing what boredom feels like. Imagine that? These children are never going to have to try to invent something to get out of that state of boredom because there's always going to be something there on the Internet to explore. So who knows what's lost. In a sense there doesn't seem to be a loss, but if there's an absence of stuff to do, who knows what could have come out of that? Boredom forces you to have an imagination and I think that is an important insight.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian...unplugged.

What's your favorite app? IG

Filter or no filter? Depends on the image

Hashtags: #Cool or #Lame? Both

Online dating: Yay or nay? I'm married- no thanks- but what a great way to meet new interesting people.

Longest time you can go without looking at your smart device? An hour.

Any tips on balancing life on and off line? Still working on it.- maybe you have some tips for me! *(Ed note: Still trying to figure that one out too!)*