

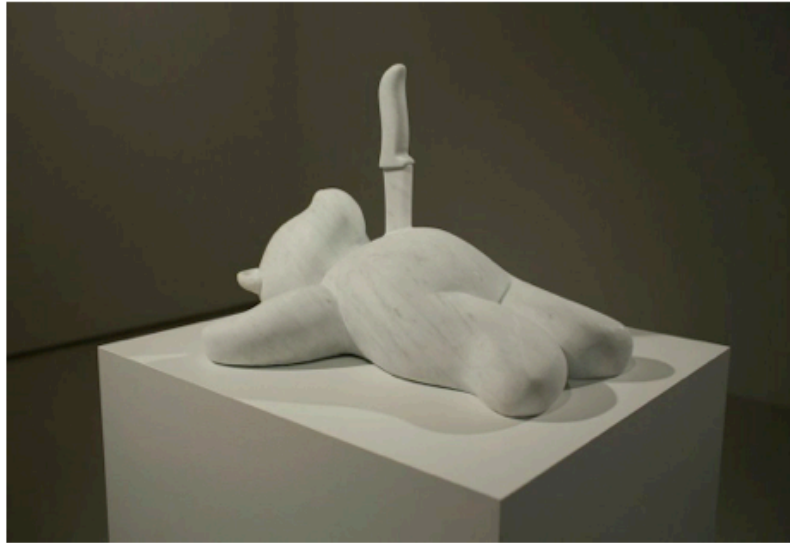
LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Spears, Dorothy, "Artist in Conversation." *BOMB*. (November 6, 2014).

BOMB – Artists in Conversation

Rachel Lee Hovnanian by Dorothy Spears

Plastic babies, Fruit Loops, and albino mice.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, *Poor Teddy Marble*. Bianco Carrara marble, 18x16x14 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

Dorothy Spears Rachel, your work addresses issues related to food, beauty, and self-perception. It also examines social conventions and how humans interact, say, around the dinner table. What has drawn you to these subjects?

Rachel Lee Hovnanian Well, I was raised in a household of writers and artists. My parents both painted; they were friends with lots of artists, and so as a little girl I spent a lot of time in studios. And my mother, who was a great cook, decided she wanted to teach cooking, because growing up in Texas, food was not a big part of people's lives. As a result, food was important in our home. It's natural for me to combine the two.

DS You mentioned going to studios.

RLH My parents were friends with a lot of the second-wave abstract expressionists. We would visit them if we were in Paris—Janice Biala or Balcomb Greene.

DS Your father told you something at a young age ...

RLH When he moved me to Texas in second grade he said, “Pay no attention to this culture: It’s not important what you look like; it’s more important what you put in your head, because it’s going to last longer.” So when I moved to New York right out of college, I started looking around thinking and saying, “Listen this beauty culture is not celebrated like it is celebrated in Texas, but there is certainly a lot of pressure on women: how they look and how they are judged by it.” And now men too.

DS Were you an artist when you first moved to New York?

RLH Yes. My maiden name was Lee. It was before the big wave of Asian artists and I started selling right out of art school, in a little, tiny gallery...

DS What year are we talking?

RLH Late ‘80s. My friends would go in and say, “Tell me about this artist,” and they would say, “Oh, that’s a Chinese artist—Rachel Lee.” (*laughter*)

DS So your exhibit, *Plastic Perfect*, at the Leila Heller Gallery this past fall here in New York was followed by a show in Moscow, from which you’ve just returned, at the Perchersky Gallery. Tell me about the differences and similarities between the two shows.

RLH Well, I’m looking at where I am in my life and how technology affects our relationships with each other. For instance, the “Foreplay” installation is five different couples: homosexual, bi-racial, or a man with a computer. They are all in bed, but instead of relating to each other, each person is busy on their devices, iPads or their phones. So in Moscow and New York I hung a bed on the wall with two side tables on either side, so when you walk in, the inhabited bed appears to be floating above the viewer. There is an old piece of technology in the room, a rotary phone; and when you pick it up and listen, Maurice Chevalier sings “Isn’t it Romantic.” With any phone, there’s that moment when I see a smile or smirk, and the person next to them wants to know... (*laughter*)

DS Who is that? What just happened?

RLH The song’s lyrics go: “I know your profile,” which means something totally different now.

DS Wow, embedded message to the future (*laughter*), that’s funny. You mentioned the wedding banquet also...

RLH I’ve shown that here in New York, but I showed a different variation. I used a long table and a wedding cake, this time a real wedding cake. I always use the technological, white mouse—a rear projection video—eating away at the wedding cake while partners ignore each other, busy on their digital devices. But this time I used live couples and they were taking selfies.

DS Were they Russian?

RLH They were Russian.

DS Did they speak?

RLH No, they don't speak. They only speak through their technology. They could take a selfie with any of the viewers walking by. The significant other on the other side, maybe they were only texting each other, or emailing each other, or maybe they were playing a game, but they were not looking at each other, and they were not talking to each other.

DS And the mouse represents technology for you?

RLH The mouse is an albino animal, a rare form of nature, but through technology we've been able to breed billions of them. I mean they've become normalized...

DS The mouse also appears in the Leila Heller show in a variety of forms.

RLH Yes, exactly, it appears in *Poor Teddy*. And in both shows actually, I made a mouse using a computer, and I printed it through a 3D printer in all different shapes and movements.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Installation view of *In Loco Parentis*, 2014. Digital video, acrylic, Cheerios, refrigerator, high chair, metal, diamond dust, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

DS There is a capitalist subtext to your work, a critique of unabashed consumerism. How does such a critique fly in Moscow?

RLH In Moscow people thought that I was making fun of their behavior. I said, "No, no, no, you don't understand: this is everywhere; it's not just in Moscow."

DS In New York, it was very American; I can testify to that.

RLH Yeah, here in New York I've had people from Iran, Australia, Japan, and Korea say, "Oh, that's me—" and all different ages as well—"That's my life. How did I get there?"

DS What are some of your favorite viewer responses?

RLH Well, I had a Korean woman who picked up the Morgan baby and she started crying.

DS You are referring to an installation called “Perfect Baby Showroom,” in which you present a series of incredibly realistic looking baby dolls in what looks like hospital incubators. A sign on the wall tells us, “Each Perfect Baby© is meticulously bio-engineered. Advanced bio-science harmonizes with the personal needs of individual parents.” The baby you just mentioned, The Morgan, is black.

RLH The Morgan is one of the types of babies you can order. It felt so real to the Korean woman, she was crying. Her husband was taking a video of her. It was amazing that it gave her that experience even though she knew it wasn't real.

DS How did you hear about this?

RLH I was in the gallery and I heard this crying. When I went over, she was nervous to pick the baby up. And she was screaming with ecstasy. I've had other people kiss the babies, and teenagers who say, “No, I don't want to pick up the baby.” This was crazy because they reacted as if they were real when they know otherwise. Grandparents brought back their grandchildren, and created a conversation about how they feel about their children's use of technology—it opens up a great dialogue. Even though you know it's not a real baby, you still get that feeling when you pick it up—that interactivity. When one of the grandsons picked up the baby he said, “Oh, now I understand what you are talking about.” Because he lives a virtual life and sometimes a virtual life is better than the real life ...

DS Especially when you're very shy ...

RLH Extremely shy and very awkward. This gave him an outlet. For instance, he said, “I'm going to Paris tomorrow.” He was talking about a video game. And his grandfather said, “But that's not the real Paris.” And he said, “But I get to see everything.” So you can understand why it is addictive.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Installation view of *Perfect Baby Showroom*, 2014.
Wallpaper, extension cords, baby dolls, metal, acrylic, wood, neon light,
foam, cotton fabric, LED lights, cereal, dimensions variable. Image
courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

DS You've exhibited your work a lot internationally, in Beijing, Barcelona, Madrid, Hong Kong – do you attribute all of this foreign interest to the iPhone?

RLH We are all the same; we're human beings. We all have narcissistic behavior and we are all fed information about consumerism that leads us to thinking that we need to have this new product, In Moscow everyone had the iPhone 6. We want the latest and the greatest. If we could have the technology to have a perfect baby; would people really go for that? I wonder.

DS There are genetic tests, allowing people to create babies according to their specifications.

RLH Genetic engineering can eradicate a lot of diseases, which is fantastic; but always on the other side...

DS The dark side.

RLH Yes, now you can pick which sex and eye color you want your child to have. I have asked many scientists about this, and most likely in the future we are going to be able to pick out the height, the weight, the athletic abilities. In Beijing they're already studying where the quantitative gene lies.

DS I had the happiness of picking up the Morgan baby, a little black baby, from its tank. My boyfriend took a picture of me holding the baby and I posted it on Instagram with the message: "What empty nest?" My youngest son just graduated from high school. There was literally a deluge of messages from my friends saying, "Did you adopt?!" We're talking about how the babies trigger a response; a sense of joy can be captured on the camera, and it's a real emotion, but it's a fake baby. (*laughter*) How do you feel about that confusion?

RLH It's exactly what I'm looking for. And when you Instagram the picture, that's confusing too, because people can create avatar lives. I'm looking for that, I'm looking for a conversation.

DS There's humor and irony at work for sure. Technology is why culture has become so much more homogeneous. With all your travels to different countries for your shows, have you noticed that's true?

RLH The same stores exist everywhere ... In Moscow everyone was walking down the street stuck on their phones. I mean with the technology, it's great right? You can get anything you want anywhere in the world. We're always on the grid and there is no unusual place that you can go.

DS So something is lost too, because if you travel, you're really not going anywhere.

RLH Yeah, airports are all the same; you could be anywhere. When I was in China, my hotel room, the artwork on the walls—it looked very similar to the hotel I was staying in in De Moines last year.

DS On other hand, there was a sculpture in this show that was carved from Carrara marble.

RH Right, This summer I was working right in the middle of the marble quarries just down below Carrara, in Massa Carrara.

DS During the process of making the Carrara marble works, do you find people to work the stone?

RLH I do the model. And then we look at and pick the stone we want depending on the size of the sculpture. They do the master cut with a saw, and then I do the carving with electric tools. I think there's nothing better than getting your hands dirty.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, Installation view of *Perfect Baby Showroom*, 2014. Wallpaper, extension cords, baby dolls, metal, acrylic, wood, neon light, foam, cotton fabric, LED lights, cereal, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

DS How do you distinguish between social commentary such as, say, journalism, or even a public service announcement, and the making of art—what makes it art?

RLH The medium. Luckily I have access to a lot of different mediums.

DS Tell me about some of the different mediums that are in your show.

RLH Now I have access to 3D printing and in the show I had a 3D printer. They're saying that in the future you're not going to need to go to the store because if you want something, you're just going to print it up. They're already printing organs, and I was thinking what is the craziest thing you could print?

DS What do you mean, organs?

RLH Human organs. So what's the craziest thing that one could print? And I thought: babies. So I had a baby being printed and then the printer messed up three-quarters of the way through the show and I just left it. Because it's fantastic to have these 3D printers, but there is the other side of it. What if it makes a mistake? You've heard of this woman who went to a sperm bank to have a baby, and they gave her the wrong sperm.

DS You mean she chose a sperm?

RLH She chose a number.

DS Based on the profile of a person...

RLH Yes. And instead of the number she chose, she got 254. They didn't know it until after she had the baby and the attributes that she was looking for were not present.

DS What did she get? (*laughter*)

RLH Definitely not the racial characteristics that she wanted.

DS Did you program the 3D computer yourself to make the baby?

RLH Well, it's with a Makerbot. That was a glimpse of the future. It's something crazy.

DS It's a kit?

RLH It's a kit. I had to go to a professional to get the scanning done.

DS How were the babies made?

RLH I adopted the babies online. They're called "reborn babies" and that's another part of the installation. These are adopted by people and given birth certificates. They are made by doll artisans, and are hyper realistic dolls that people treat as real babies, real children. It's better in some ways, because they never grow up; you never have to feed them.

DS When you say that people treat them as real babies, what does that mean, exactly?

RLH People adopt them: they have nurseries for them; they put them in high chairs; they put them in car seats; they take them out.

DS And what is the purpose of this? Is it therapeutic?

RLH It's something that they prefer. I mean think about the couple so busy playing in their virtual reality that they forget to feed their real baby.

DS It's like having a wind-up doll or something.

RLH Or a robot, right? I mean they don't grow up. They can put their love on them. And even though it's synthetic, it's similar to *Second Life*; it's better than the real thing.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian, *Foreplay: James and Emil*, 2014. Archival pigment print, 60.5 x 43 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

DS A few weeks ago, you did a pop up show in SoHo where you offered free sugary cereals and Wi-Fi. Why don't you explain a little bit your history with cereal.

RLH When I was in Houston, my mother started to teach cooking, and she taught all of us how to cook. I went to school with all the astronauts' kids, and so I came home from school and said I would like to have Tang. And my mother said, "Why would you want Tang when it's fake, when you can have the real thing?" And I said, "because it's cool and it's fun." I wasn't allowed to have the sugary sweetened cereals either because she didn't believe that they could possibly be good for you. But of course it was what was going on in society: it was fast; it was

convenient; it was fun; it gave you more time to do things. So I'd go to my friend's house, and eat three bowls of Lucky Charms. And now I relate the addiction I have to my phone to the sugary cereals. They're fun; they bring joy and immediate gratification.

DS And was the installation popular? Did people love it?

RLH Oh yeah, they loved it. They said, "What could be better than free Wi-Fi and free cereal?" It brought back memories to some people. Sugar is part of our culture. It was a rare thing, and now because of technology we've created so much of it... a little bit's fine, I mean you wouldn't want to eat gallons of it.

DS It's interesting that your work is about things that you were prohibited from indulging in as a kid. Your mother wouldn't let you play with Barbie dolls either.

RLH Correct.

DS There's a longing there.

RLH And sort of an investigation of why she was saying what she was saying, She's right, but it's still so culturally prevalent.

DS You were telling me how you finally went to see *Her* this summer, and that you didn't want it to influence your making of this new work.

RLH I wanted to wait to develop my thoughts about what I want to talk about. We all know the story— that he had this intimate relationship with a robot on his phone. I just finished Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together*. She's an MIT professor who talks about this acceptance of a robot: will AI have emotions? Will it be something like the "she" in *Her*? My investigation is about pausing to look at technology and the intimacy we have with technology, and the resulting loss of intimacy we have with each other.

Pop Sculpture—Pop Culture *is on view through November 15 at Leila Heller Gallery, Manhattan, New York.*