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"Rachel Lee Hovnanian's Secrets." *Sculpture Magazine*. (Aug. 9, 2019).

sculpture



Natural Beauty, 2010. Photograph on archival paper, 32 x 26 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Rachel Lee Hovnanian's Secrets

Raised in Texas, New York artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian has long explored narcissism, perfection, beauty, and addiction. Her first solo museum exhibition, "Open Secrets," curated by Annalisa Bugliani, presents work from the last 12 years. The show remains on view in the 16th-century Palazzo Mediceo in Seravezza, Italy, through September 15, 2019.

LEILA HELLER.



Happy Hour Clock, 2018. Neon, clock face, and vinyl mounted to board, 18 x 18 x 3 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Sculpture: Could you explain the title of your new show?

Rachel Lee Hovnanian: "Open Secrets" came to me because I was thinking about addiction and how you know when you're addicted to something but you don't talk about it or perhaps you hide it. And, of course, it's an oxymoron. With "Part II: Happy Hour"—the second part of my "The Women's Trilogy Project" at Leila Heller Gallery in 2018, which was about relationships and alcoholism—it was the fact that I kept it a secret and didn't want anyone to know, but a lot of people probably did know. But you still try to keep it a secret, so "Open Secrets."

Sculpture: "Open Secrets" is a bit of a retrospective, no?

RLH: Yes, it's work from the last 12 years. It's great because the works speak to each other, even though you wouldn't necessarily think they would. For example, C.R.E.E.P.S (2014) was done separately from Foreplay, but they work well together. Foreplay, an installation in which videos depict couples in bed distracted by phones and other devices, is beautiful because it's all blue; I lit it using only devices—an iPad and an iPhone, which give off that blue light. There's also an old rotary phone in the room—a different mode of communication—and you can pick up the phone and listen to an old Maurice Chevalier song, "Isn't It Romantic?" He sings, "I know your profile," which is wonderful because "profile" had such a different meaning then. I vividly remember showing that installation and

LEILA HELLER.

watching people viewing it; they would often put a hand over their mouth and whisper to me, “That’s me.” It wasn’t just once—it happened quite often. And it didn’t matter where they were from. I originally installed the video C.R.E.E.P.S in my old studio window on 25th Street, overlooking the High Line. I think this was in 2012, and I thought it was important to talk about surveillance. Who is data mining us, taking all our personal information, our secrets? We’re so open, willing, and ready to give up our information, just so we can be online. I put C.R.E.E.P.S across from Foreplay, because in Foreplay the couples are in bed but are attracted to their devices, and the C.R.E.E.P.S are on a monitor facing the couples in bed, looking at them and using binoculars and cameras, collecting their data.



Bear Skin Rug, 2010. Photograph on archival paper, 32 x 26 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Sculpture: What is Beauty Queen Totem (2009) about?

RLH: I made Beauty Queen Totem here in Italy, with stone from this area. I’ve worked for many years in this region, at a family-owned sculpture studio. She’s like a huge monolith, suggesting the pressure on women to be perfect. I originally created her for a show called “Power and Burden of Beauty.” She’s three meters high and based on a trophy figurine, with the base of a trophy. I showed her in the Arco Art Fair in Madrid and at Parasol unit in London, but I’m really excited to be showing her in Italy.

Sculpture: How did the show come about? Why the Palazzo Mediceo?

RH: I’m the first American woman to show at the Palazzo Mediceo. I work nearby, in Carrara, and I come at different times of the year. I did a lot of the drawings for the “Happy Hour” bottle labels here. Usually I rent a house and set up a little studio. I have a table and chairs, my art supplies, and a room where I can work in drawing. I just opened a solo show in Pietrasanta of works inspired by walks

LEILA HELLER.

I took in the forest of Versilia. They were for a project about “Nature Deficit Disorder.” I was looking at the idea that what you see in the forest is wild and unruly, while everything on our phones is perfect. Those are sculptural pieces. I went to Zecchi in Florence, bought pigment binder and natural, raw pigments, and went into the forest, where I painted the movement of the leaves with the binder, which is transparent, then dusted the paper with the raw pigment. In my studio in New York, I would work with those drawings to create reliefs—three-dimensional works in plaster and resin.



Beauty Queen Totem, 2009. Carrara marble, 132 in. tall. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Sculpture: Your two big themes in these pieces are addiction and perfection. What is the relationship between them?

RLH: It's human nature to want to be better, and I think sometimes when you can't achieve it, you'll reach for something else. We put so much pressure on ourselves, and the Internet adds huge pressure. Why are we with our phones late at night? Because we're getting emails or texts that we haven't answered. People tell me that the first thing they do in the morning is look at their phones and the last thing they do at night is look at their phones—we want to be perfect, we want to be good.

LEILA HELLER.

Sculpture: Is this idea related to your show "Too Good to Be True?"

RH: "Too Good to Be True" grew out of "Power and Burden of Beauty." I went to trophy stores and looked at beauty queen trophies. I grew up in Texas, where sports and beauty culture were big. Beauty competitions were a way for women to get out of their situation. Women didn't have sports to get money and scholarships for education; back in the day, quite often women had to rely on beauty to get out. If you won a beauty contest, you could get money for school, so if they did win, that beauty became their burden. I spent a lot of time in trophy shops talking to people. Five-year-old kids are getting trophies that are four feet tall; the following year, you have to have a different kind of trophy—there are trophies for everything. So, I started making trophy figures, different shapes of a beauty queen, carving them and making various objects with them. From there, I started to make little maquettes, putting them in dioramas and having them interact with each other. While doing research, I found some interesting videos of people making dollhouse furniture, and I started looking into dollhouses and how people live their lives through them. They make incredibly opulent rooms; they have secret lives within their dollhouses. I found this fascinating and began collecting dollhouse furniture and adding it to the trophy figurines. This idea of "too good to be true" is perfectionism—when you have a trophy figure, like the beauty queen or the businessman, and all the pressure that goes into that.



FMLMBD Traveling Ape Truck, 2019. Traveling truck, 123 x 89 x 58 in. Photo: Nicola Gnesi

Sculpture: It sounds like Beauty Queen Totem comes out of that.

RH: Yes, it comes from visiting all those trophy stores and going to pageants and going back to Texas and looking at the trophy culture, the culture of the Cotton Queen and all the other queens, and talking to them and interviewing their parents. I interviewed the father of the runner-up for Rodeo

LEILA HELLER.

Queen. I congratulated him on his daughter, and he said, "Yes, but she didn't win." That meant that the young lady was not going to go to college.

Sculpture: Were you a beauty queen?

RH: No. You're talking to an English literature professor's daughter. But I was aware of it, and I grew up in the culture of looking good all the time.

Sculpture: What else have you been working on?

RH: I also created an Ape here. They are old vehicles, three-wheeled things that are part of Italian culture—when people see one they get this warm feeling. I thought, "Why not have something that can bring the museum to the people, something that brings together the old with new culture, like having to have Wi-Fi, having to have a battery?" So, I turned the Ape into a mobile charging station. It travels to the little towns, and people can charge their batteries. I created an acronym for it, FMLMBD: "Fuck My Life My Battery's Dead."