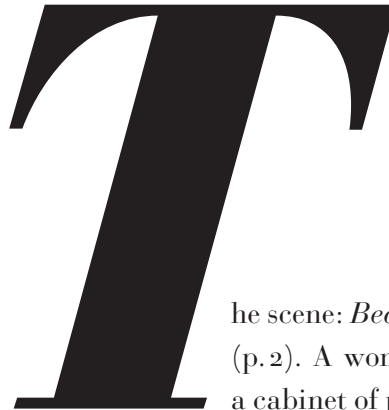


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# ***TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE***

MICHAEL CLIVE



he scene: *Beauty and The Doughnuts* (p.2). A woman stands alone before a cabinet of pastries. And though the pastries are behind closed doors and the woman is in open space, it is she who is the prisoner, locked within her longing for forbidden foods, surrounded by public judgment and expectation. From her tiara and bouquet, we recognize her as a beauty queen despite seeing her only from behind.

It is a view from which this particular beauty queen is especially vulnerable. We can imagine the sizzling gossip that must surely dog her, because that kind of gossip has surrounded us all since childhood: in the schoolyard, in magazines, on television and the radio. We grow up learning all about standards of beauty that are too good to be true and rewards of beauty that are too good to be real.

By turning the focus of her art to the ceaseless pressure to look impossibly good, Rachel Hovnanian has laid bare the consequences of our national obsession with personal beauty—its trappings, its excesses, its corrosive power and cultural pervasiveness. With a visual vocabulary that includes monumentally scaled beauty-queen totems, interactive installations, paintings, drawings and documentary film, her art has spurred a rare kind of public conversation... even giving rise to panel discussions about the social impact of beauty drawing participation from prominent women in journalism, science and the media. Now she turns her gaze and scale toward the smaller scenes and unguarded feelings behind the facade of beauty on public display.



## 2 Do No Evil

*Too Good to Be True* is all about off-camera realities, and Rachel has chosen media and points of view to fit her subject. In the past she has combined techniques and materials ranging from traditional paint, charcoal and marble to digital audio and video. To fit the more intimate concerns of *Too Good to Be True*, her materials are spare and severely controlled, and her formats almost confining. Although an installation and performances are included, the show is dominated by a series of photographed scenes that seem frozen and mute.

In execution, these scenes are pointedly cinematic. Format, medium and point of view are also crucial: *Too*

*Good to Be True* is comprised of 31 archival photographic images. Centered within two-inch borders, each scene is framed as if within an inward-facing window. The picture plane is like a Hitchcock movie screen, opening onto an alternate reality that is at once alien, ordinary, and fully identifiable with the viewer's. As with film characters, we see difference first, then sameness: their surroundings and circumstances are far from our own, but what's happening to them could just as well happen to us. Then there are the images themselves: homey, often perplexing views of daily life rendered in creamy, denatured black-and-white. Like genre paintings, these photographs capture glimpsed moments when small details collide with big ideas about personal beauty.

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Compositionally, however, Rachel creates worlds that are closer to Bergmanesque dream sequences. In these suffocating yet ordinary universes, every surface seems stripped and blunted, and what's left is reduced to surreality: details simplified or rubbed out altogether, faces blankly glazed, bodies seemingly caught in slow motion if not immobilized, color drained away. The effect is foreboding in its simplicity, and it pushes the iconography of each scene straight into our face. Everything is symbolic and exaggerated, yet it's all as real as video from the evening news, or the morning mess in our kitchen after a party the night before. For the figures we see trapped in Rachel's diagrammatic domestic dramas, this reality is what's left of personal identity after years of attempted conformity to the requirements of beauty mythology.

In scenes such as *Do No Evil* (p.4), with its beauty contestant standing in judgment before three farcical monkey-judges, Rachel places us above her subjects, looking down to make our own evaluation. Yes, the criteria of beauty are arbitrary and its arbiters are mindless, and our lofty point of view makes the scene funnier. But the humor comes with strings attached: who is standing behind us, judging us from above as we judge the contest proceedings? No one escapes the competition.

Our point of view is drastically inverted in *Press Conference Apology* (p.5). Its formal, triangular composition would be right for an altarpiece, but it draws us right into the news vortex in one of those all-too-familiar press conferences. We know the participants by heart: the disgraced presidential candidate, or governor, or golfer; the wife whose numbed face conceals rage, or bewilderment, or loyalty by default; the beauty queen-mistress with a knife in her hand, set off by a velvet rope; and an entourage that amounts to a crowd scene. We stand at the vertex of it all, participating in the drama, as we do every time it is rehashed in the media.

In developing these visual narratives, Rachel creates a world of fable: all characters are recognizable types, everything is freighted with symbolic meaning, and the story line delivers a discomfiting moral lesson. As with Aesop's tortoise and hare or his grasshopper and ant, we come to recognize aspects of ourselves in these highly reduced types and the objects in their world. But like another great, more recent fabulist—Mr. Peabody, with his Wayback Machine—Rachel provides ironic, pitch-perfect titles. Sometimes gossipy, often wickedly funny, they become part of the visual story and help us locate ourselves with respect to the narrative.

Take, for example, *No Prenup* (p.8), a scene in which we see the title character in the foreground. Viewed from behind, he is visible only from mid-back upward—a bald gentleman, seemingly thin, seemingly with a very fat wallet. His new wife is sitting up in their four-poster bed, her beauty-queen tiara and smile in place, surrounded by the apparent spoils of matrimonial victory: shopping bags full of luxury-brand fashions. As he faces her in what seems to be an attitude of confrontation, we imagine his face might be registering surprise or even indignation. But what about his beauty-queen bride? Is this the moment when she realizes that Chanel, Gucci and Versace must take the place of a human bedmate? Are they her fees for services rendered? By surrounding her in luxury, do the trappings of beauty have her in a trap?

Though the hubby in this scene is a new character, admirers of Rachel's work will recognize the people and symbols of *Too Good to Be True* as recurrent elements that take on new meaning in each setting. Most ubiquitous among these is the iconic Beauty Queen Totem, whom we see in the prenup bedscape only from the waist up. As both a pop-culture embodiment of ideal beauty and a prize for achieving it, she has appeared in many sizes and guises in Rachel's recent work, but always with at least a hint of emotion

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### 8 No Prenup

that has not been concealed by make-up or botoxed away. In *Too Good to Be True* she alternates between cartoon-y shock and, more movingly, a grinning facial blankness that clearly projects her attempt to conceal her bewilderment or alienation at that critical moment when she first recognizes her predicament.

The austere simplicity of the Beauty Queen in all these surroundings and guises lends her a mythic quality, as if she had been turned to stone by ancient magic. But where a Greek warrior might have suffered this fate by virtue of his own deeds—by gazing at the Medusa—the hapless Beauty Queen is immobilized by the gaze of others. Rachel's

imagery provides a suitable narrative for her: *Too Good to Be True* can be experienced as a kind of "Pilgrim's Progress" in which the Beauty Queen Totem makes her way in the world, moving from one stage of beauty-based thralldom to another. We see her disciplining herself to endure the privations of beauty like an athlete in training; on the career track, facing a different kind of competition than on the runway; and at home, ambushed by the realities of marriage and domesticity.

We also see her in the workplace. In *Back Stabbers II* (p. 6) she is depicted on the executive track in a parade of beautiful young achievers—attorneys, perhaps?—all

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with the same brisk walk, smartly bobbed hairstyle and fashionable suit, and all with the same knife in the back on their way to the career ladder. But the pressure is no less intense outside the executive ranks; in *Rumors* (p.6), three beauty queens congregate around the water cooler as another hews to her work station. They, too, are calculating how best to muster their assets on the job, using what they've got to get what they need.

Back home in the bedroom, as in *No Prenup*, one might expect disguise and concealment to fall away in a moment of recognition. But Rachel's domestic scenes show how the constant pressure of public beauty leads to private confusion and doubt in the privacy of sexual role-playing. Here her images are populated with figures that have the simplicity of puppets and about as much freedom of choice; they are ensnared by a domestic contract that has beauty hidden in the fine print, with results that unfold as inevitably as marriage. To view them, Rachel positions us like voyeurs hiding behind a bush to get a look at what's going on inside.

From this gruesome vantage point we can better understand how no one is spared from the beauty obsession and the gender stereotyping that results: both men and women grow up with unrealistic ideals of feminine and masculine appearance. Small wonder all of us are confused and unready for our own roles when the time comes for mature intimacy. This bewilderment is enacted in many scenes; *The Collector* (p. 11), for example, has acquired an authentic Beauty Queen quite literally as a trophy wife, but not as a life companion. Perched on her pedestal, molded from an actual trophy figure, she takes her place beside the collector-husband's fireplace with her best winning posture: sash and bouquet in place, shoulders back, chin out, smile numb. Like the stag's head on the wall and the candelabrum on the mantel, she is in her allotted space, proudly displayed and helpless to move. Enthroned in the foreground with his back to

the viewer, the collector-husband sits in a regal wing chair with a bottle of tequila on the coffee table beside him as he savors the moment and his possessions. But we can see that the Beauty Queen, with her perfectly upright posture, is staring away from him, dead ahead, and that behind her death-mask smile her focus is inward, on her predicament. It is the predicament of any woman who has been classed as beautiful, collectible chattel, from Henrik Ibsen's Nora to Gloria Steinem's Playboy bunny.

For both partners, beauty and its pursuit have led not to authentic love, but away from it: to the opulence of luxurious display and the security of material substitutions for sex. By the time we see them at their barren *Dining Table* (p.12)—long as a jetport runway—they share nothing but the trappings of an elegant lifestyle. Such substitutions cannot put an end to physical longing and the yearning for real intimacy. With these needs unsatisfied in the absence of a healthy self-image, it's not far from The Collector to the confusion of unfulfilled desire and gender ambiguity in images such as *Natural Athlete* (p.15) and *Bear Skin Rug* (p. 20), with their male and female bodybuilders. The steroid-induced exaggerations of their bodies represent yet another sexual mirage, an impossible standard of physical appearance rooted in fantasy that tempts desire and then thwarts it.

For all the wit and perceptiveness of *Too Good to Be True*, viewing it is not for the faint of heart. Too many scenes strike too close to home—at least for those of us who have ever looked into a mirror and felt our insecurities get the better of us. If the result is a viewing experience dominated by silent contemplation, rather than dynamic interaction, as at Rachel's previous exhibits, then the discourse between viewer and subject remains equally intense. It's after leaving the show, when viewers confront their own domestic realities, that the volume level is likely to rise.

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