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Clockwise from left: The artist in her Chelsea studio with *Memories of the Narcissus*, 2007, oil on canvas. *Series II, Fractile #1*, 2006, encaustic on board. *Satori II*, 2007, archival giclée print on canvas. See Resources.



# Rachel Hovnagian

An acclaimed artist puts a flower through its paces to make a point about beauty and truth

By Laura Eden



Rachel Hovnagian's muse could certainly be Dorian Gray, the Oscar Wilde character whose portrait ages while he remains fresh as a daisy. Society's desire for eternal beauty is one of the New York artist's favorite themes, and the springboard of her solo show at Manhattan's Jason McCoy gallery this month is the narcissus, a flower named after the mythical youth who fell in love with his own reflection.

"I was painting traditional still lifes of flowers, and when they wilted, I wanted to toss them," Hovnagian says when asked about the genesis of her *Preservation of the Narcissus* series of photographs, paintings, sculptures, and encaustic-on-wood works. "I started to question why we no longer see them as beautiful at this stage."

*Memories of the Narcissus* is a massive canvas made up of about 60 layers of flower images, the result of Hovnagian painting blossoms, smudging them, and painting more on top. "It took six months to complete," explains the Texas-bred artist, who is a glamorous presence in social and philanthropic circles. For her, the ghostly traces of the delicate

petals symbolize the fragility of life. There's a melancholic elegance to the painting—it is a study of loss.

For works that incorporate actual flowers, Hovnagian was inspired by Madame Tussauds wax museum, where she witnessed tourists posing for pictures alongside an effigy of Princess Diana ("a dead woman," she remarks incredulously). Soon she started to think about the mechanics of preservation and began experimenting with the encaustic technique of mixing colored pigments with wax, a process that was used in ancient Egypt by the artists who created the Fayum funerary portraits. Hovnagian layered a wood panel with narcissus blooms smothered in wax, thus giving the snow-white flowers a kind of after-death permanence. She also has embalmed them with colored pigment and salt, another age-old preserving agent.

Hovnagian addresses more modern attempts to arrest the march of time, too. When a viewer approaches a mirrored box sculpture, a motion sensor causes it to light up and reveal a field of narcissi—wittily planted in empty Botox bottles. ■