

Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

THE MOUNTAINS MUST HAVE IMAGINED THE CITY
IN THEIR ECHO AND THEY DREW IT IN THE SKY FOR
US/AND THE SEA BIRDS CARRIED MESSAGES
FROM THE WATER TO THE MOUNTAIN BIRDS
AS THE SEA ROCKS WALKED HERE SLOWLY

YOUR WORDS, OR MINE?

Ebtisam Abdulaziz · Adel Abidin · Etel Adnan · Ghada Amer · Heba Y. Amin · Charbel-joseph H. Boutros
Yaminay Chaudhri · Tim Etchells · Lulwah Al Homoud · Rachel Lee Hovnanian · Jenny Holzer
Glenn Ligon · Basim Magdy · Robert Montgomery · Raqs Media Collective
Thomas Ruff · Ed Ruscha · Mathieu Tremblin · Tsang Kin-Wah · Lawrence Weiner

Tech Fix



New York-based, Houston-born artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian recently had an epic exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery in Manhattan. *The Women's Trilogy Project*, which ran for almost half a year (24 February–20 July), unfolded in three installments, touching on themes of collective narcissism, contemporary obsessions and technological oppression. **Nadine Khalil** checks in with the artist after the finale.

Rachel Lee Hovnanian at *The Women's Trilogy Project, Part III: PURE*. Photography by Douglas Friedman

In a way, it is fitting that the artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian and I communicate via email – the internet being that disembodied machine which enables people to connect across geographies and time zones. I say this because Hovnanian plays with the binary of connectivity and distance in her work, and much of her output reflects a certain emptiness, a lost intimacy – a sense of what has become of us in the move from analogue to digital. In *Foreplay* (2014), different homosexual and heterosexual couples are pictured in bed engrossed with their electronic devices, seductively shrouded

in the midnight blue emanating from glowing LCD screens. *Dinner for Two: Wedding Cake* (2013) is an installation that depicts the extent to which technology has become normalized in our lives. Two screens at the ends of the table, each representing a (presumably newly married) man and woman, loop against the incessant sounds of phone notifications. The couple, eyes downcast, do not speak; they seem oblivious to anything other than their gadgets. Meanwhile a holographic projection of a laboratory rat burrows into their wedding cake.



Left: Rachel Lee Hovnanian. *Zoe and Susie*. 2014. Photograph from the *Foreplay* series. Right: *Perfect Baby Showroom*. 2014. Baby doll, acrylic, metal, wallpaper, wood, neon, foam, fabric, LED lights, extension cords, cereal. Images courtesy of the artist



Even our most important life decisions will soon be made using technology.

There's also a level of artifice in Hovnanian's mediated works. She arranges fake white flowers, frames an icy-looking *White Narcissus Panel with Mice* (2014) and commissions doll artisans to sculpt genetically customizable hyperreal babies (weighted to mimic newborns) in the *Perfect Baby Showroom* (2014). As she laments our addictions to both technology and sugar (emblematic of her Warholesque grids of branded cereal, that, incidentally, also form the stuffed transparent pillows for her plugged-in babies), her futuristic vision of domesticity is somewhat bleak but not without humour. In fact, her latest illustrative neons declaring: *FUCK MY LIFE NO WIFI* (FMLNWF, 2018) or *Delete Negative Thoughts* (DNT, 2018) – accompanied by a desktop trash icon – have a decidedly millennial feel to them.

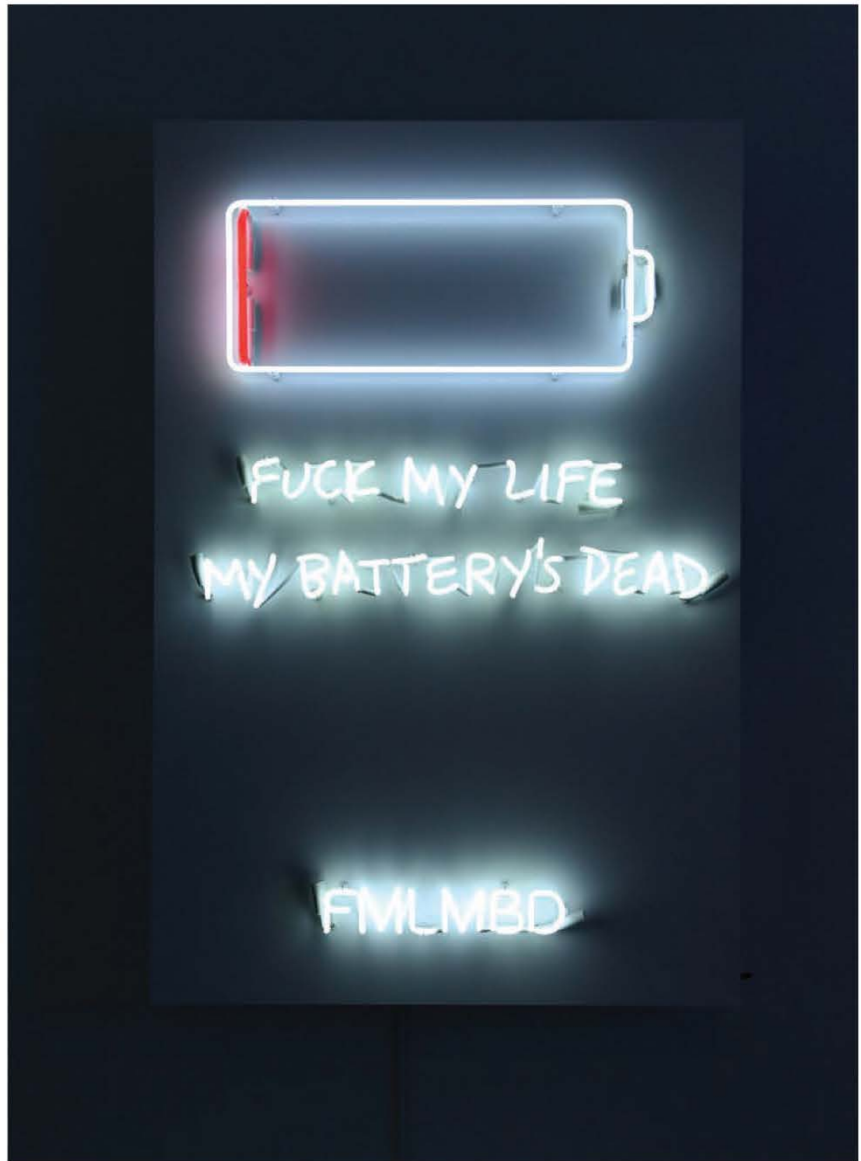
Yet as if in defiance to our fast-paced, device-dependent lives, Hovnanian's *The Women's Trilogy Project* ran for five months at Leila Heller's Manhattan gallery (until 20 July). An ambitious show(s) that unfolded in three parts, the first of which, (*Ray Lee Project Vol. 1*) *NDD Immersion Room*, comprising a large-scale immersive installation, is where I encountered the artist's work for the first time. NDD stands for Nature Deficit Disorder, and visitors were required to

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hand over their phones (and connections with the outside world) before entering. Inside was a dim simulation of real fir trees, illuminated by an artificial campfire and a starry night, and complete with the sounds of crickets emerging from the ground covered with leaves, which crackled as you walked in.

Outside this comforting chamber filled with the sounds of nature, were more leaves in the artist's *Natural Fractile Series* (2018), this time painted chalk white and glued around and inside mirror-like but opaque frames. Again, despite references to our quickly changing modes of life, there's a cold stillness to Hovnanian's work, a sterile beauty. "The solitude evoked by the white palette also speaks to how removed we are from our environment – it exists as a concept now, frozen and disconnected from reality. I realised this when I spent time sketching in the Versilia forest near Pietrasanta, where I studied the movement and wildness of the forest," she wrote in our email exchange.

Although Hovnanian's adoption of the male pseudonym, Ray Lee – her nickname as a boyish teen interested in "stereotypically male pursuits", and revived to comment on the impact of gender in the art world – is less than convincing, her work has come of age in her latest introspective series. Gone are the white mice, genetically bred symbols of scientific testing (which Hovnanian admits she grew up with as pets before they became part of her studio) as symptoms of social media and surveillance. "We are the new lab rats, and the research is happening on us," she quips. Replacing a mediated understanding of the world – best represented by the website she set up for mock online adoptions with *Perfect Baby Showroom* (2014), which "throws into high relief the fact that even our most important life decisions will soon be made using technology" – is a more sensual, material understanding of our surroundings. Hence there are remnants of the ever-short-lived narcissus blooms, though no longer so obviously nestled in Botox bottles, but embalmed and set on mirrored glass (*The Gaze* series, 2007) to comment on beauty frozen in time, or affixed to industrial steel sheets in magnified versions of a computer *Motherboard* (2012) as symbols of virtual memory. More is left to the viewer to discern, especially with the child-like paintings in *Happy Hour* (part II of the trilogy), which explore the impact of alcoholism on the artist's childhood as well as the social constructs of perfectionism and femininity.



Rachel Lee Hovnanian. *FMLMBD (AP 2)*. 2017. Neon mounted on metal. 152 x 102 x 8 cm.
Image courtesy of Rachel Lee Hovnanian Studio



Left: Rachel Lee Hovnanian. *Natural Fractile Series (Oval III)*. 2018. Wood, gesso, plaster, oil paint, resin, cotton and paper. 104 x 89 cm. Image courtesy of Rachel Lee Hovnanian Studio; Right: Rachel Lee Hovnanian at *The Women's Trilogy Project, Part III: PURE*. Photography by Douglas Friedman



***The Women's Trilogy Project* advocates for a stronger connection to our true stories in the midst of countless forces that pressure us into presenting only idealized, curated versions of ourselves.**

"My thinking about *The Women's Trilogy Project* began when I found an image of myself in my mother's home in Houston four years ago. I was unsmiling and stoic in my elementary school portrait, which inspired a deep soul-searching about my childhood, my family and the addicted culture we find ourselves living in today. What was going on with me at that point, I thought? I began working on paintings and installations centered around addiction-related issues, tackling everything from social media to substance abuse," she confesses. "Leila [Heller], who has always been a courageous, groundbreaking woman in the field, so believed in the work that she offered me three consecutive gallery shows."

Moving from notions of the ideal family and made-to-order infants to her less-than-perfect family and painful childhood, it must have taken courage to bring these inner struggles to the forefront of her practice. "*The Women's Trilogy Project* as a whole advocates for a stronger connection to our true stories in the midst of countless forces that pressure us into presenting only idealized, curated versions of ourselves," she adds. For the denouement, *Pure*, Hovnanian asked viewers to write a negative thought resulting from social pressures on a plaster Ivory soap cast and smash the soap for cathartic release.

Although Hovnanian's work suffers from being stark and reductive at times, rather heavy-handed at driving the point home, this is intentional. She is saying that you need to scratch beneath the surface to uncover a subtext of perfection and distortion, beauty and deterioration, connection and alienation. Like the symbol of the narcissi, "a fragile bloom harking to the awareness that every celebration of beauty, and by extension, of life, is foreshadowed by recognition of its inevitable end," her vision is one of the essence of myth, ephemerality and inevitable decay.