

American Woman

Rachel Lee Hovnanian - a multidisciplinary New York based artist, takes us on tour from Chelsea to Brooklyn visiting the outposts currently housing her Womens Trilogy showcase.

Words and photography PAIGE SILVERIA



RACHEL Lee Hovnanian has just presented the first part of a three-exhibition series entitled The Women's Trilogy Project. Launching separately in Chelsea's Leila Heller Gallery over the course of six months, the series is an effort by Hovnanian to delve into the deeply embedded — and often troubling — societal mores, such as the use of technology, gender roles, alcoholism and other various structures that maintain so potent a fervour for the 'American Dream'.

INPRINT caught up with the artist and followed her on a tour — from Manhattan's Chelsea neighbourhood to Bushwick in Brooklyn — to visit various outposts housing the multifaceted Trilogy showcase.

PS — Tell me about your upbringing.

RLH — I grew up on a farm in Texas and my best friends were my brothers. I didn't feel that I was any different than them in any way. I would roll down hills, fish, build forts under the cattle ramp or play in the mud. We had a guest house that was always filled with visitors. My parents also had a place in New York and they rented a beach house in East Hampton where they would be able to see their artist and writer friends. I was always drawing, carving or painting — making things. I would find washed-up, coloured, frayed rope on the beach. I called it mermaid hair and I would make things with it; and I'd collect shells. I made forts with my brothers or mudpies in the garden.

PS — What ideals did your parents raise you with?

RLH — Food was important in our house. Foods that we enjoyed on our travels would try to be duplicated in our home kitchen. Everything was made from scratch. Knowledge, creativity and curiosity were celebrated and we travelled with books that had to be read. The other side to things is that my parents entertained a lot and alcohol played an important part in the academic and artistic culture. My father was a writer and taught comparative literature. Most of his friends were musicians, artists and writers, and their gatherings would often last into the early mornings. In New York, he would disappear to go down to Greenwich Village to be with them in various hangouts. Over drinks they would explore their inner intellect. But even without the guests, there was a cocktail hour every day. He said a drink helped him get in touch with his creative side and helped him develop ideas.

PS — When did you move to New York and what was it like

for you initially?

RLH — I moved here in 1982. This city has always had an energy unique only to it. I got a job working as a Junior Art Director at McCann Erickson. It was a very exciting time. I recall working on Johnson and Johnson's baby soap creative. I lived with three women. We slept on bunk beds; I shared mine with an actress. We both worked at other careers so that we could pursue our passion — mine art and hers acting. In my spare time I painted, went to art shows, saw films, visited museums, concerts — met new people wherever I went. I loved running through the city. You see so much.

PS — As a woman, how did the art community receive you at this time?

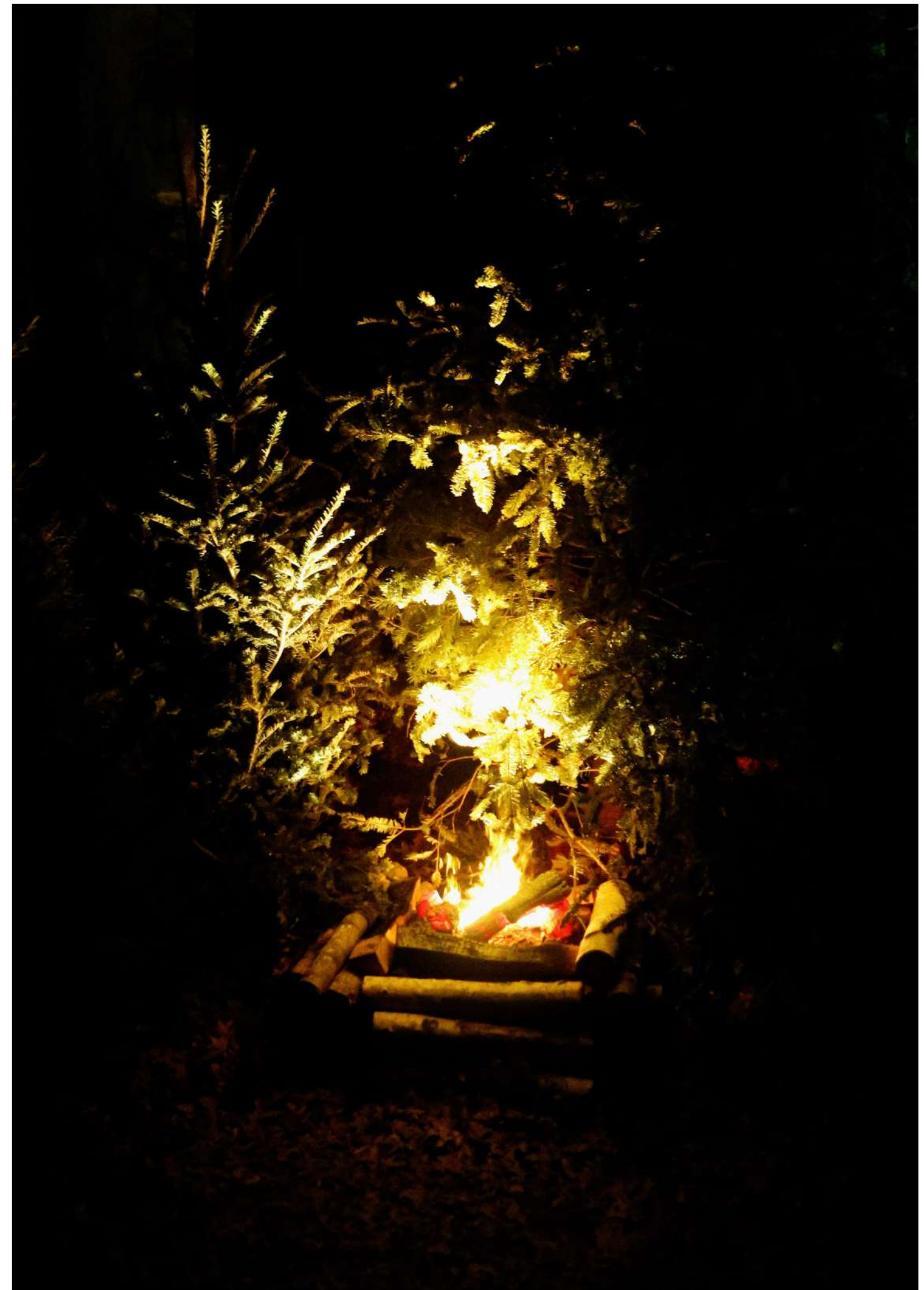
RLH — In the art world and as an art director everything was still being run by men. Creative business was still built around Martini lunches. It is changing, but slowly.

PS — Do you think it's just as difficult today to be a female artist as 30–40 years ago? Or is it possibly easier to stand out because now minorities in this industry, including women, are more sought after?

RLH — The art community has a long way to go. Women still face subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination. If we want to change the way we see the world, promoting the work of women is an excellent start. The female voice expressed through art demonstrates the different ways people perceive and experience the world. The art industry shares the same prejudice we face in the real world: sexism, racism and ageism. These labels still define artists. However, more and more young, evolved journalists recognize this. I'm hopeful that they will make the necessary changes, in this and all artistic creative industries, to support talent. Artists are vulnerable because they reveal so much of themselves.

PS — What is the idea behind the Trilogy?

RLH — As a female artist I wanted to really challenge myself to dig deeper and look into societal dependencies faced by women and its impact on our lives. I had been thinking about these issues for a very long time. 'Preservation of the Narcissus', 'Power and Burden', 'Mudpie and Plastic Perfect' all explore the human condition of narcissism. Now our digital world enables us to live in as many dimensions of narcissism as we can design and manage. This is exciting, but what is the quality of our reality? It's simply time to pause and look at technology's impact on intimacy, and continue to examine the resulting loss of intimacy that we





Previous spread right: *Part I, Nature Deficit Disorder*, woods detail.
Opposite: *Part I, Fuck My Life My Batterys Dead*, neon.
This page: *Part I, Waiting Room*.

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— RACHEL LEE HOVNANIAN

have with each other. 'Nature Deficit Disorder' (NDD), the first part of the Trilogy, deals with challenging the audience to lock up their treasured smartphone and allow oneself to be immersed in nature — allowing the individual to perhaps feel more than anxiety and boredom — making NDD the perfect first subject for this exhibition. As a tomboy in Texas I was always outdoors and I vividly remember the pleasure of going camping and fishing. NDD means that human beings, especially children, are spending less time outdoors and more time on digital devices, resulting in a wide range of behavioural problems and the psychological and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. NDD, 'Happy Hour' and 'Pure' are all parts of The Women's Trilogy because I am sharing stories that resonate with other women.

PS — Tell me about Part I's Waiting Room and the NDD Immersion Room.

RLH — Initially, the viewer enters the wild space through a cold white waiting room. There is a bunker in this space (a protection from the enemy) much in the same way our phone is our protection. The bunker has fake, frozen plant life coming out of it. After the waiting room, the visitor must surrender their phone in a lock box before they enter the dark forest of the NDD Immersion Room. They are given a lantern with which to illuminate a path within the otherwise pitch-dark space. One is drawn to the tactile nature of being surrounded by the cooling shade of the forest and plant life. There is a constant power relationship between the visitors and the surrender of technology. In silence, the seated viewer becomes part of the artificial wild surrounding the campfire. Some visitors feel helpless without technology, some are excited by it and some find it meditative. Though the forest is not real, there are elements in the forest that are. The experience is actually meant to be mesmerizing similar to the way in which technology is mesmerizing.

PS — It's apparent that we have a problem unplugging and the negative aspects of this are innumerable. Do you think digital technology has affected intimacy and individual isolation in a positive way as well?

RLH — Technology has allowed people to connect with one another by sharing experiences spanning across cities, countries and it has facilitated opening global borders. Some communities that remained isolated have been penetrated by technology. However, it has also provided a false sense of intimacy and produced isolation and loneliness. We cannot recognize one without

understanding the other. Technology seems to provide a gratifying false mindfulness. I choose not to judge, however, I have been looking at our dependence on technology, and I simply question its effects on our human relationships. When I travel I don't see children playing outside like we did when we were younger. Driving through the countryside in most areas you no longer see children riding bikes outside 'til dark, I find this indicative of what we are dealing with and it's quite disturbing.

PS — With Part II and III, how did you seek to explore domestic gender roles and the way in which they supported a culture of alcoholism?
RLH — Women were traditionally the keepers of the domestic order, just as the father's role was to secure and defend that order. This exhibition shows us not only the nature of these rules but how they are learned through a process of acculturation in every aspect of the child's life and the terrifying result when this order is breached through alcohol, which disrupts a rigid, but artificial order with unpredictable disorder and interrupts the surface calmness with violence and abandonment.

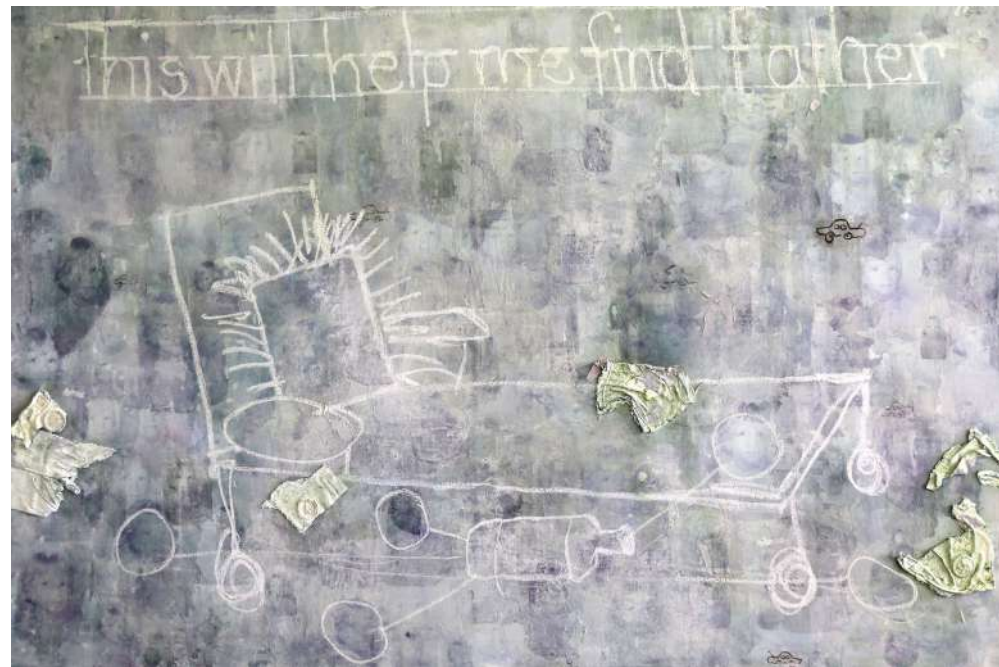
PS — Do you think that women moving out of the household and into the workforce has changed alcoholism in our society?

RLH — With women in the workforce it seems to have increased, but I do not know the percentages on this. I do believe we are living in a very judgemental culture. It is well documented how digital technology has affected young girls' self esteem. Rather than improve the way women feel about themselves, it seems that the pressures on women young and old have increased measurably. So perhaps there is some connection here. I can only say that working through The Women's Trilogy Project has affected me deeply and at times has taken an emotional toll, since it has allowed me to deal with the broader issues of feminism and also with personal experiences from my childhood. The response thus far has been overwhelming.

PS — Tell me about the paintings in Part II, Happy Hour.

RLH — There are repeated photographs embedded in them. Some I pulled from the Internet; others I found in a box of my mother's photos, such as a crumpled photo of myself from when I was a little kid. It made me think of growing up with an alcoholic father. I started to really pull out feelings of that time and of being a young girl — the rules we had to abide by, the order of the household. We think we all want to live with a white-picket





Previous spread right: Part II, House of Empty Bottles.
 This page: Part II, Lawn Chair painting detail (bottom), Part II Questionable Reputation painting detail (bottom).
 Opposite: Part II, Girl Scout Manual Pages.

fence, but it's a syndrome and it doesn't really exist.

PS — The American Dream.

RLH — Unfortunately, my father had this addiction and when he'd drink, he'd start yelling and disrupting the household. So my mother would pack us all up, sometimes in the middle of the night, and take us away in the car. There was this instability in my childhood, of not knowing what was going to happen. As a child of an alcoholic, you don't want to get out of the lines. Because if you do, you could disrupt the alcoholic and cause them to drink again. You want to be good and calm and not make a scene. That's where all of the lines for the cursive writing in the paintings come from. I was a Girl Scout, our motto was "Be Prepared," but they don't prepare you for real life. They teach you how to be this proper woman in our society. So I took this old Girl Scout manual and started thinking about these rules that get passed down to women. "You need to make sure that everyone is happy. This is how you set the table."

PS — It's like the Good Wife's Guide, but for children?

RLH — Exactly. And it turns into a competition between girls: "How many badges did you get?" It was this striving to be perfect. So in the paintings, there are pieces of ripped-up Girl Scout uniforms and badges. In one of the Questionable Reputation paintings there is the classic image of a girl in a pearl necklace. Typically girls in the South are given a pearl necklace when they reach puberty. It represents virginity and cleanliness, but then on the other side, it also means semen around the neck. When I was 16, I went out on a date with a boy and afterwards he went around the school telling everyone that I'd slept with him, which I hadn't. It finally got to the mothers, and I had always been this perfect Girl Scout who didn't want to disrupt things, and all of a sudden I had this questionable reputation. So I felt that I had to explore this and have this conversation within my work.

PS — What is the significance of the chaise lounge found in several of these paintings, with the bottle beside it?

RLH — I lived in New Mexico and for my father it was the perfect place to drink. He would pick up hitchhikers — usually college students — and have these crazy parties. We'd wake up in the morning and there'd be alcohol everywhere and everyone would be smashed. It's a big thing for writers; drinking is glamorous. It was just this whole drinking phenomenon.

PS — Of course, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson were all big drinkers. Debutante culture is also featured in this series of paintings, can you tell me about it from your experience? It's like the next step after Girl Scouts.

RLH — It's a Southern ritual that I wasn't permitted to participate in because my parents didn't approve of it; they were artists. But I had lots of discussions about what it was like for girls whom I knew that were debutantes. It was a lot of drinking, again, and they had to wear flasks on their legs because there was a lot of pressure to drink and loosen up. When a man asks the father for his daughter's hand in marriage, the father would say, "She'll be a good breeder." When you start to dissect it, you have the perfect virginal bride being offered almost like you'd offer a cow.

PS — Where does the Ivory soap of Part III fit into this?

RLH — It's such an American product and it represents that good girl: white, virginal, clean. There's so much represented in this bar of soap. I'm producing 2,000 casts of it and having people come into the show and literally use a sledgehammer to break the mould. The washing machine is the altar where they'll break it and there will be a big pile of the broken soap pieces. It's so therapeutic. And the casts all have a little bit of real Ivory soap in them, so when you break them, you can smell the real thing.

PS — Tell me about this ominous structure you've built and what it represents.

RLH — The facade is made up of chalkboards, which further references staying in the lines. I have barbed wire around the top to protect the space; I don't want to let anyone into my secret of what was going on at home. So all of the bottles inside are my thoughts and what is going on in my head. And I don't let anyone in here, but I can't get out either. The pages on the bottles are ripped from the old Girl Scout manual that I mentioned earlier. They're filled with all of these rules that have been handed down, that we don't even question. And when I found a page that triggered me, I ripped it out and drew on it. For instance, in one, it describes that with ballroom dancing, the man always leads. Another says to read and write poetry, but then it says to meet a poet and see what he thinks. Another: have good posture, look and be perfect.

It wasn't that long ago, but it seems incredibly antiquated. Things are changing, but in the South the rules are still there. Well, they're really still everywhere.





Previous spread right:
Part III, Ivory Altar.
This spread: *Part III, Ivory Soap.*