

THIS WOMAN'S WORK

Rachel Lee Hovnanian's exhibition *Happy Hour* is a quest to put perfectionism, gender issues and addiction into one spectacular artistic mess, writes Sarah Hassan



Rachel Lee
Hovnanian. *Pure*.
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Friedman

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hat becomes a WiFi hot spot most? Living in the ever-evolving and hyper-connected 21st century means that we are always on the lookout for that elusive Internet connection, a strong cell phone signal, and that perfect selfie angle to share with thousands of our closest “friends” across the worldwide web. In an era dominated by technology, we’ve become practically obsessed with the latest gadgets and the promises they tout, exposed to an endless parade of images from around the globe with a heightened nod towards beauty, luxury, aspirational living, and the barrage that we should be thinner, richer, prettier and more plugged in than ever. It’s no wonder that the current generation feels more disconnected and lonely than previous ones, their thumbs tired from scrolling, swiping and texting in the virtual world rather than walking, talking and exploring in the natural one.

Enter the world and work of Rachel Lee Hovnanian and you’ll find these anxieties—plus a slew of others you might not care to admit to—on full display, held up mirror-like for you to confront and analyse your own way out of. With an academic’s range in multi-media practices, Hovnanian approaches her creative work as part craftsman, part psychologist, tapping into current trends, age-old hypocrisies, and what the future is really up against. Her *oeuvre* includes an offering of white swimsuits to try on in front of a fun house mirror, a brightly coloured display of sugary cereals, an immersion room that instructs you to lock up your cell phone before venturing into a darkened wood complete with buzzing insects and the glow of a campfire, a photograph of a couple cradling their devices instead of each other in bed, and neon signs that bear new acronyms befitting the modern era. Her concerns as an artist are deeply personal and entirely universal, from encountering her own daughter’s struggles with body image—the dreaded bathing suits—to her own addictive romance with her devices. Hovnanian seeks to unpack the troubles we all live with in a familiar and decidedly approachable way. Who can resist the siren’s call of the smart phone’s glow or the fruit-coloured packaging of a cereal box?

As the daughter of two liberal creative parents—her father was a writer and comparative literature professor, her mother ran a cooking school—Hovnanian was born in West Virginia and raised predominantly in Texas, punctuated by trips back and forth to New York, even landing in Mexico for a period when she was 13. While other children might recall the smell of grass or freshly baked cookies from their childhood, Hovnanian remembers her love for the scent of turpentine and paint in her house, the perfume of her parents who both painted in addition to their other creative pursuits. Yet despite appearances—educated parents and a ‘picket fence life’—Hovnanian’s childhood bore the familiar scars of addiction that plague more than one well-to-do family on a manicured American block. Her father, who worked at a time where creatives were expected to drink and hang out in jazz clubs to fuel their creativity, became an alcoholic, a theme that Hovnanian explores in her current exhibition and first solo show at Leila Heller Gallery in New York City, *PART II: HAPPY HOUR*, which is the sec-



ond installment of her current series *The Woman’s Trilogy*.

The exhibition, with its title needing hardly an explanation, draws on themes relevant to Hovnanian’s own experience. In the midst of the #metoo movement, Hovnanian’s work feels even more immediate and timely than ever. Her teenage encounter with how men manipulate the body politics of women with one widespread lie leads us to candy pink work with ‘Questionable Reputation’ written in school-girl script, a nod to the first acronym Hovnanian learned among the whispering debutantes, ‘QR.’ Around the word cherries are drawn, as well as a cartoonish hand holding a martini glass with a phallic symbol sprouting pearl bracelets with the command to “loosen up.” Each of the works in the series bear a similar resemblance—

inviting pastel pink grounds on which childlike drawings are rendered with titles like *Sexy Miss*, *Social Security*, and *Daddy’s Home*, each recalling the stain of addiction on a family Hovnanian recalled never wanting anyone to believe was less than perfect.

Perfection remains a constant theme throughout Hovnanian’s *oeuvre*. It also stems from a preoccupation during her own adolescence marked by the desire to be a “good girl.” Hovnanian admits to being cautious as a child, always wishing to “stay in the lines” and use her goodness as currency lest she disrupt the household, as she would later on with her ‘QR.’ With this false label, Hovnanian began unpacking the hypocrisy of the culture she had always been warned about; women in the south and her home state of Texas in particular, were never expected to question their roles or destiny in society, an idea that Hovnanian’s parents were quick to bristle against. Hovnanian would eventually graduate from the University of Texas at Austin and take her fine arts background to New York where she landed a position as an art director at an advertising agency, a job that no doubt informs her body of work as a constant seer, approaching the psychology of desire and the art of persuasion with an artist’s sensitivity. It is here, the thin line between fine art and the commercial that Hovnanian anxiously exists, teetering on the brink of granting us our deepest desires while forcing us to confront our own vain—and somewhat painful—obsessions. ■ *HAPPY HOUR* runs until May 31 2018 with *PART III: PURE* opening 8 June 2018 at Leila Heller Gallery. leilahellergallery.com

Top right: *The Waiting Room*. 2018 ©Jared Siskin; Above: *Sin*. 2018. Gouache and oil pastel on paper. 19x19cm.