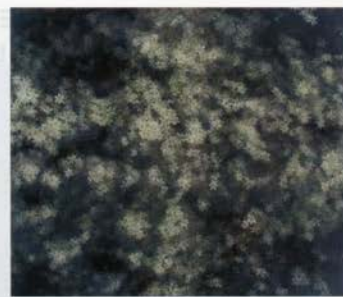


RACHEL HOVNANIAN



Although beauty's fragile existence indicates its imminent end, our culture seems determined to keep youth's flawless face and undeniable power on extended loan. Rachel Hovnanian aims her arsenal of disparate techniques at this ideal, whose ubiquity fuels both our insecurities and the resulting multimillion-dollar industries that assuage them. She twists events and materials that represent surface concerns, like beauty pageants or costly cosmetics, into countermessages, and makes it clear that any consolation brought by winning nature's lottery is transitory. Hovnanian's *Beauty Queen Totem*, with its smooth, white marble skin, stands 11 feet tall, towering over the viewer with a mythic stature that recalls both ancient goddesses and science-fiction scenarios. The sculpture addresses perfection by blowing it up, and reveals how we create both myths and monsters in the name of a regimented sublime. In *The Beauty Queen Trophy Case*, 10 seemingly identical figures perch atop 10 trophies garlanded by narcissus, but on close examination each body is slightly different, with wider or smaller hips or varied chest sizes. These differences are subtle; the artist has manipulated the ideal's uniform measurements in tiny increments. The variations in form activate the viewer's eye/mind and relieves its prejudice.

Most humans like their surfaces flawless and their boundaries intact, but Hovnanian illustrates the



chilliness that sets in when these goals are achieved. The legions of small white figures that populate her photographs—beauty queens, business women, sugar daddies—exist in pale dollhouse dramas. The gender roles are suffocating for both sexes, as are the interior spaces full of featureless luxury. Money, not beauty, controls these scenes, and Hovnanian reveals the sweet addiction to drugs and liquor that reward and numb beauty's capture. She also highlights singular objects that exist as symbols of tradition and presents them like talismans. *Simone's Gloves*, a photograph of white opera-length gloves of the type worn by debutantes, is printed larger than life. Pulled on, these gloves (here scaled up to suit an Amazon) are like gauntlets, allowing protection from society's mannered battles, their size indicative of the significance such accessories carry.

Hovnanian's examinations of the narcissus flower, and its myth, involve materials as hard as marble and as soft as wax. She has also created a scent from the decayed petals of narcissus, which smell much different from fresh petals due to the chemical change that occurs as they die. But it is in her painting series *Memory of the Narcissus* where Hovnanian holds up beauty's decay for extended consideration. She paints the narcissus flower, rubs it with pigment and then wipes the pigment away. This is a meditative process, repeated again and again with the flower disappearing and resurfacing, slightly changed. The layers of rubbed pigment suggest the soft-edged memories that accumulate atop one another in our brains, partial remembrances that emerge from dark and drifting spheres. The vivid present disappears as the spirit of ritualistic touch emerges, revealing the beauty available in loss and decay—the richest, deepest kind. If beauty is, as Rilke observed, "nothing but the beginning of terror," perhaps beauty's loss frees us from its taxing demands, allowing us to find promise in a more textured, less predictable, ideal.

—Mimi Thompson is a painter and writer living in New York.

ARTISTS ON ARTISTS – RACHEL HOVNANIAN





THE BRIGHT SIDE
 "I feel like I have a suburban house in the city with a cottage garden," says Claude (LEFT), on a terrace lined with boxes of pink foxglove, snapdragons, lavender, and mint. OPPOSITE PAGE: Splashes of sunny yellow are a theme of the house. In a hallway, a sculptural console by Alexandre Logé and a painting by Rachel Hovnanian. Portraits by Sebastian Kim.



ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INTERIOR DESIGN

SEPTEMBER 2005



Architectural Digest



Valley Of the Dolls

FOR her show "Too Good to Be True" at the Collette Blanchard Gallery on the Lower East Side, Rachel Hovnanian deals with the power and burden of beauty. The Texas-born artist uses dollhouse pieces to mock what she calls the "fantasy of a perfect domestic life." She poses her miniature beauty queens (literally, the tops of trophies set in plaster) in all-white scenarios: holding a bouquet in front of a cabinet of doughnuts; perched on a bed surrounded by shopping bags; standing in front of a mirror that makes the figurine look fat. Indeed, in one of the last scenes, the perfect beauty queen is passed out on a bed with empty bottles of vodka and Valium. "We feel this pressure in the media to be these perfect people, to look and act a certain way," Mrs. Hovnanian said. "But at the same time, we want to know it's too good to be true." Through June 30.

MAURA EGAN

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2010

T The Moment

TUMMY TROUBLE
Nina Boone, 49

What Nina sees in the mirror: "My stomach is the first thing I think about when I shop," says Nina, a sales executive. "Every time I put on a bathing suit, I turn sideways to see how far my tummy pooches out." Nina holds on to suits forever ("It's like I'm afraid to try to find another") and only buys them online. ("Dressing room

lights are horrible, jeans leave marks around your waist—there's no way it's going to be a good experience"). She wishes she could find a suit she likes as much as one she wore in the '80s: a black one-piece with white straps.

Adam's solution: Nina was on to something with that suit, says Adam.

Colorblocking works, if it's in the right places. Here (Spanx, \$198), Nina gets the benefits of shapewear plus a little visual trickery: The dark part is strategically placed over her stomach, bringing the eye to the lighter areas and carving a new shape. "I feel contained," she says. "I don't just look good for my age, I look good."

"I would have to leave the country to wear a two-piece."

68 JUNE 2014

STYLEO



Hovnanian with one of her "supersized" suits, 2009's Body Armor.

It's Not You, It's the Lighting

Rachel Hovnanian, the artist who re-created her Fun House Dressing Room for this photo shoot, is fascinated by how women feel about their bodies. "I grew up in the South, where beauty is really important," Rachel says. In 2009 she designed an interactive exhibit that includes a simulated dressing room replete with bright lighting, a distorting mirror, white swimsuits (from teeny to gigantic) hanging on a rack, and piped-in audio messages like "I shouldn't have eaten those chips." "When women enter the space, they start to think about what's wrong with their bodies instead of what's beautiful, and my goal is to get them to go easier on themselves," says Rachel, who also brings together therapists, feminists, and fashion industry members for panel discussions. "We're so image-driven now," she says. "I want women to have a sense of humor about how they look." (For more information, visit rachelhovnanian.com.)



[IN THE AIR HOME](#)

JUNE 9, 2010, 4:41 PM

Simone de Beauvoir and the Beauty Queens

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has just been republished in an new edition — but for an update on the famous philosopher-and-muse's classic study, there's also "Too Good to Be True," Rachel Hovnanian's current show at Collette Blanchard Gallery that deals unambiguously with women's issues.

The artist's photographs, based on arrangements of dollhouse figurines, feature women outfitted as beauty queens engaging in various highly fraught scenarios: one stares at a computer screen on which *Good Housekeeping* magazine advertises "How to Get Out Blood Stains," while a man, presumably her husband, lies face-down on a bear rug nearby with a bullet in his back and a bottle of Windex next by his side; another beauty contestant is passed out in bed, accompanied only by a bottle of tequila, a vial of Valium, and a phone off the hook (the piece is titled *Get Him to Forgive You*).

And yet, praise of the show has so far been firmly co-ed. We hear that at the opening — which featured a young female performer reading women's magazines while chained to a chair — a woman identified with Hovnanian's work so intensely that she exclaimed, "I would like to buy all these photos and bring them to my therapist, because this is my life!" But it was a dude who purchased the large \$5,500 photograph *Beauty and the Donuts*, in which one of the beauty queens gazes longingly at a case full of pastries. Perhaps it is art that will solve women's problems and end the battle of the sexes once and for all! The show'll be up until June 30, so let's see....



MAY 26, 2010, 9:30 AM

Welcome to the Dollhouse

By MAURA EGAN

Kevin Noble Rachel Hovnanian, “Get Him to Forgive You,” 2010.

For her show “Too Good to Be True” at the Collette Blanchard Gallery on the Lower East Side, artist Rachel Hovnanian deals with the power and burden of beauty. Her photographs of various beauty queens (literally female trophies tops set in plaster) pose in pristine all-white scenarios— holding a bouquet in front a cabinet of donuts, perched on a bed surrounded by shopping bags from Chanel, Gucci and YSL, and standing in front of a mirror that adds pounds to the waistline.

Hovnanian uses dollhouse pieces to create her maquettes of what the Texas-born artist refers to as as “fantasy of perfect domestic life.” Indeed, in one of the last scenes, our perfect beauty queen is passed out on a bed with empty bottles of vodka and valium. “We feel this pressure in the media to be these perfect people, to look and act a certain way. But at the same time, we want to see the imperfections, the harsh realities. Look at at all the gossip magazines where we get to to see people off camera. We want to know it’s too good to be true.” The show runs from today through June 30th.

What Price Beauty? One Artist's Take

By Kimberly Brooks

November 9, 2009

Every woman makes a decision, even by not making one, on what lengths she'll go to uphold her youth and beauty, whether for herself or someone else. In Rachel Hovnanian's current "Power and Burden of Beauty" at the Jason McCoy Gallery, her installation includes drawings, sculptures and film stills that challenge viewers to consider and reconsider the price of beauty.

Her work covers topics we have heard much about since the feminist and post-feminist art of the 80s and 90s. She explores the subject from the point of view of the way in which females are raised in the US by interrogating the world surrounding beauty queens and pageantry. Using solid white marble as her medium, she constructs quiet, subdued worlds, which invite the viewer to stare in silent reverie. Invoking Greco-Roman-like silhouettes of grand, larger-than-life-sized women, Hovnanian dares visitors to experience her bleached-out world, which feels at once ancient and futuristic -- as if all our great classical past has been super sanitized in some dark future.



Rachel Hovnanian, travel photo of Himba female from trip to Namibia in 2008

Kimberly Brooks: Aside from being a woman who is confronted with these issues daily, what inspired you to make it your theme?

Rachel Hovnanian: On a sketching trip to Africa, February 2008, I encountered Himba tribal women in their home setting in Namibia. Visiting with them and observing these strong, beautiful women, I was able to see some elements of our own society stripped of pretense and standing starkly in high relief. It became a sacrament for me, celebrating their strength and toughness, as I observed them living in the desert. Their roles in their society, their dignity and their bearing started me on the journey to strip away my preconceptions; and more personally, how powerful was their beauty and their clarity. I was moved profoundly seeing them and being welcomed by them. I created a short film so that I could capture, remember and show to others. As

women, possessions, gender roles, stereotypes drive us to actions and limitations that are artificial rather than real.



Rachel Hovnanian, *The Power and Burden of Beauty*, Installation

KB: *What does the child's bassinet and wallpaper of beauty icons signify in this context?*

RH: I thought it necessary to relate how early in a woman's life the strictures and celebration of beauty were inculcated. In an artful way, I simply wanted to present the reality. From our earliest days we are plunged into the roles and perceptions: from the traditional pink accoutrements, to the ways in which we are exposed to the outside world. As children, we learn 'the rules' very quickly and how punishing are deviations. Women are forced to rebel and question in order to become their own person. The ornate bassinet sits as a small votive before the wall of images, a sacrificial position.

KB: *Describe your process of working, any routines you may have that might be unique, curious.*

RH: Most of my work is in my studio downtown, off the West Side Highway. I work from early morning to early afternoon. It's my pattern. When working on the 11 foot sculpture of the Beauty Queen, I worked in a large studio beside local craftsmen and other artists in a family-owned sculpture studio in Massa Carrara. It has been in the hands of the Corsannini family for many years. There, I must follow the schedule of the family. The lights are turned off in the cavernous work area at midday. We wash our hands in preparation for the meal. Our faces are white with the marble dust. Massimo, Alessandro, Leo and I break crusty bread fresh from the local bakery. We eat the rich local cured meats flavored with fennel; and peppery olive oil made from Leo's father in law's orchard. The smell of fresh cheese fills the room and we slake our thirst with the rough local wine. There are no labels on the wine because it comes directly from the vineyard's cask.



Rachel Hovnanian, *Who's to Judge?*, Video Still, 2009

KB: Is there a work of art that inspires you?

RH: The celebration of photo-shopped images, cruel distortions of reality has affected me deeply. Photos of Miss America and Miss Universe are a fascination for me; and gave much impetus to the work. My Beauty Queen totem, perfectly postured, is meant to invoke ice and snow. She is judged every year and is open to harsh criticism and idolatry. She is mute, standing 11 feet tall on an altar with an almost unconscious quality. She wears an evening gown and holds a bouquet, staring unseeingly off in the distance. She lives for the ages as do the celebrity figures at Madame Tussaud's--permanent and ephemeral; solid and fleeting.



Artist Rachel Hovnanian

Rachel is a classically trained artist who received her BFA at the University of Texas in Austin. Hovnanian grew up in Texas where beauty pageants were celebrated, meanwhile, her parents rejected this way of thinking as they were anti Vietnam war activists--her latest body of work reflects these conflicting values, "The Power & Burden of Beauty." You can visit her website at www.rachelhovnanian.com.

First Person Artist is a weekly column by artist Kimberly Brooks in which she provides commentary on the creative process, technology and showcases artists' work from around the world.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

MICHAEL CLIVE

T

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.

1 **Beauty and The Doughnuts** (detail)





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.

4



Too Good To Be True

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 relished 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





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



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.



RACHEL HOVNANIAN'S BEAUTIFUL, BEAUTIFUL WORLD

MICHAEL CLIVE

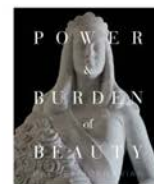
Beauty declares itself everywhere as the subject of Rachel Hovnanian's work. But isn't beauty the subject of all art? Arguably, yes. But as Hovnanian's works demonstrate with cumulative force, conceptions of beauty in our mediagenic age have come a long way from their origins in esthetic philosophy.

Classical esthetics analyzed beauty as a gateway to transcendent truth, or as the worldly analogue of an incorporeal ideal. Later, religious interpreters saw beauty—especially feminine beauty—a dangerous delusion, a temptation that led humanity away from truth and into loss of innocence. When modern art emancipated itself from literal representation, meaning seemed to emancipate itself from beauty. But Rachel Hovnanian re-establishes this connection by working in a wide range of demanding media to confront how personal beauty is codified and embedded in our lives: as a touchstone of social prestige and power; as a seemingly unreachable

prerequisite for sexual confidence; as a commodity that can be bought but not owned; and ultimately as an obsession that treats growth, maturation, aging and death as problems that can be solved with money, discipline, a positive attitude and the right cosmetics.

Significantly, Hovnanian's works combine these very modern concerns with more traditional aspects of beauty, as well as beauty's special relationship to the feminine. Her paintings, drawings and sculpture have always been executed with a rigor and refinement informed by past masters. Continuing her exploration of beauty's social meanings and costs, Hovnanian's 2009 exhibition *Power & Burden of Beauty* increases her scope and the acuity of her gaze, defining beauty in consumerist terms that are universally recognizable but recreating it in forms that can be as bracing as a snowdrift. Her visual vocabulary includes pageant winners, their trophies and flowers, their tiaras and formal wear. Torturous

Left: BEAUTY QUEEN TROPHY CASE, (detail), 2009, mixed media, 21 ¼ x 90 x 7 inches (54 x 229 x 18 cm), edition of 3 plus 1 artist proof
Previous overleaf: BEAUTY QUEEN TOTEM, 2009, carrara bianco marble height: 11 feet (335 cm)



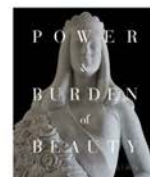
swimsuits are here, along with cosmetics and the retail setting that surrounds them like a modern-day version of Dr. Caligari's cabinet. They are explored in paintings, drawings, sculpture and photographs along with multimedia constructions, site-specific installations and film. Individually, these works confront viewers with accepted notions of beauty as our shared cultural legacy of outward appearances. When they are gathered into a gallery setting where we mingle with them and other viewers, they mediate us as the imperative to look good mediates us in our social milieu—requiring us to judge, to be judged, to compete, to conform.

The power of personal beauty is elaborated and acculturated into us from an early age whether we like it or not: ritualized in the schoolyard, codified in the media, enacted at home and at work. But another kind of beauty is on display here too, and it prevents *Power & Burden of Beauty* from being sociological fieldwork. By executing her work in media that range from stringently classical to modern and eclectic, Hovnanian broadly engages the historical debate about what constitutes the beautiful in art—a conversation that connects Socratic inquiry with Keats' Grecian urn and with modern critics such as Arthur Danto. In this context, esthetics is a branch of philosophy, and a giant marble effigy of a beauty queen trophy embodies many subjects at once. Do her impossible proportions amount to a platonic ideal of beauty, or a gruesome distortion? Is a formally modeled drawing of a paunch-sheathing swimsuit a classical study, or a death-mask of the torso? What happens when, instead of Duchamp's fountain, the gallery displays the contents of our

own cosmetics drawer? Or puts our own perceived dysmorphia inside a frame?

Look around; you'll find the results are in plain sight, but viewing them requires a mixture of courage and canniness. For example, *Fun House Dressing Room* is a devilishly detailed installation where distorting mirrors magnify the experience of trying on a bathing suit in public—a nightmare-simulacrum that's more real than the real thing. Here, as elsewhere, we see reflections as if in a knife-blade; although many of Hovnanian's works are formal paintings, drawings and sculpture, mirrors are never far away in her installations and constructions. Even when they are positioned to reflect a beauty statuette, they are liable to change direction and purpose as the viewers step back in the viewing space and glimpse themselves. As one visitor to her 2007 exhibition *Preservation of the Narcissus* remarked, "nobody passes the mirror without checking themselves out. It's like a car accident. You don't want to look, but you can't help it." One conclusion is clear: in the tyranny of beauty culture, everyone stands in judgment and everyone is judged.

The work that thematically anchors *Power & Burden of Beauty* is the monumental *Beauty Queen Totem*, which stands some eleven feet tall on a victory platform that is archly suggestive of a wedding cake. Crowned, gowned and sashed on her trophy, this beauty contest winner is immediately recognizable, looking at once perfect and perfectly wrong. With her ramrod posture and a stony blankness in her anonymous gaze, she has the impossibly leggy, high-busted slimness of a fashion drawing—wasn't it designer



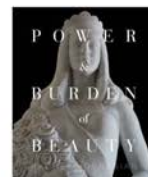
Claire McCardell who dubbed this tall, long-limbed style the “American Look”?)—and she appears to be stranded in victory, her arms full of roses. She looks not merely fragile but already annihilated, with hybridized features that are devoid of personal identity. And because one false move would destroy the grotesquely artificial perfection in the folds of her gown, she is effectively paralyzed. Even her crown is not quite right: rather than a bejeweled tiara, it is a blank headpiece formed around a single narcissus bloom, Hovnanian’s touchstone for the impermanence of beauty and the inevitability of decay.

As if to test the proposition that beauty really is “skin deep,” Hovnanian has executed three seemingly identical *Beauty Queen Totems*. One is sculpted in creamy Carrara Bianco marble, a stone especially suitable to renaissance sculpture, religious iconography, and the beauty queen’s own characterless face; the other two are cast resin. As for the difference and its significance—well, to quote the documentary film loop that provides a contextual background for all three sculptures, *Who’s to Judge?* There are sly nods to Koons and Oldenburg here: *Beauty Queen Totem* gains meaning through its manipulation of scale and through idealization pushed into the realm of the grotesque. But the more provocative comparison is to Gaston Lachaise’s equally monumental bronzes of women, fearsome and proud in their fatness. While Lachaise ladies violate every criterion of modern feminine beauty in their outsized bodily proportions, they still project a gorgeous, turbocharged eroticism and physical robustness at anyone who dares to look at them. They’re bronze, lobed, shiny, earthy. By contrast, the white-bread-

hued *Beauty Queen Totem*, bred and trained to embody ideal femininity, seems in the process to have been drained of the qualities that feminine beauty originally signified: sexual allure and fertility. It’s as if she chose to be embalmed while still in her twenties, to save time later on.

In America, where we glorify both competition and sex, it’s surprising that beauty contests should give rise to juiceless paradigms of beauty that replace Eros with Hygeia. While the Venus de Milo is often cited as the Western standard for feminine beauty, the *Beauty Queen Totem* finds an earlier analogue in artifacts such as an ancient stone carving known as the *Venus of Willendorf*, which predates classical Greek civilization by a good 20,000 years or so, and which seems to conform to an ideal more in line with Lachaise. If the beauty queen possesses this kind of strength, it is reflected in Hovnanian’s fearsome *Body Armor*, a hollow, rigid bathing suit stuck on top of a pole. Immaculate yet impossibly sexy, it seems to beckon alluringly while warning the viewer to keep away. In another example, *Trophy Cases*, Hovnanian reconciles the traditional fertility symbol’s social/esthetic utility with modern-day individual kinkiness by presenting us with a department store shelf’s worth of beauty queen statuettes. Each trophy exemplifies a variation on the beauty theme of bodily proportion while retaining her requisite anonymity.

Of course, behind the American beauty queen’s anonymity lie all the distinctiveness and fragility of any individual. The discipline and regimentation of beauty contest culture belie all that, but Hovnanian chooses a medium that is



the polar opposite of sculpture—film—to fill us in on the lively particulars of the contest circuit. A native of Texas, Hovnanian grew up in a household where beauty culture was familiar, if taboo. Research and shooting for *Who's to Judge* brought her back to her home state and into the company of contest competitors and their admirers. Talking to them reveals humor and humanity, but also cause for concern: when does the grownup beauty imperative begin to take hold in little girls, and at what cost? The satirical film *Little Miss Sunshine* and the much-discussed pole-dancing episode of Disney's *Hannah Montana*—performed by Miley Ray Cyrus when she was a young teenager, but viewed by 'tweens and younger girls—exposed deep public concern over these questions. But they were hardly the first. Tom Thumb wedding pageants, first enacted during the Civil War era, remained extremely popular through the 1920s and continued to be staged (and to provoke controversy) through the 1970s. Clearly, our shared mythology of beauty is already ingrained in children at an early age. How early? In *Beauty Queen Nursery*, Hovnanian positions a baby girl's frilly bassinet before a wall decorated in a rep pattern of beauty icons, capturing that Lacanian moment when the infant becomes aware of glamour vortex. Here it happens before she is even aware of herself as a separate, conscious being.

Eventually, she may seek one of the prizes arrayed in *Small Dream Crowns*: rhinestone tiaras that have their own unique, iconographic power, like a religious idol. In England, where a well-born dowager once needed at least a tiara or two, they lost their fashion standing in the transition

from the Victorian to the Edwardian era in part because of their weight. By contrast, *Small Dream Crowns*—authentic beauty tiaras—seem weightless as a dream yet impressively large, rising in ever-higher layers of scallops and loops. There is a charming naivete to these glittering curlicues, ornately framed in wedding-cake white with Hovnanian's signature narcissus blossoms. They are innocent, yet objects of intense desire. What do they signify to a little girl who wants one, or an adult woman who wins one? How do they view their own femininity and identity on their way to winning the beauty crown they desire?

Probably not as something to be objectified and mutilated. But the haunting photographs of *Simone's Gloves* place the beauty queen in a centuries-old tradition of such objectification. Gloves such as these were described as “opera-length” in the days when opera was the highest and haughtiest of high arts, but today's pageant participant wears them with her evening gown to embrace a triumphantly mass-market standard of beauty. The image of a matched pair of sumptuously crafted gloves, long and luxurious, projects both aftermath and expectation. But on second glance, these photographically manipulated images project something more; they are distorted, extended to a length that goes on beyond “opera” to, perhaps, “arachnid” or “simian.” That long-limbed American look is here carried to an extreme that is horrifying and patently impossible—at least, without the kind of physical mutilation caused in ancient China by the binding of women's feet, or in certain cultures of Africa and Southeast Asia by the progressive application of neck rings starting in early girlhood to create the appearance of greatly elongated



necks. Similarly, the Victorian Era's highly desired hourglass figure came from a lace-up corset that often permanently deformed the wearer's ribcage, impairing her ability to breathe.

From a safe, culturally relative distance, we look upon such mutilation with revulsion. Not so with Hovnanian's *Wall of Confidence*, which presents an equally extreme spectacle that confronts us every day on our home turf: cosmetics retailing. In this ironically (and hilariously) titled work, beauty-cream jars are arrayed like a marching band at halftime, apparently identical except for the advertising slogans on their labels—all quoted from actual products. The promise of "confidence" is the mass-marketer's act of repressive desublimation, taking away what it seems to be offering. Hovnanian pushes this double jeopardy one step further with *Beauty Queen Vending Machine*, which conflates retailing and beauty competition: the object of this familiar arcade game is to grab a beauty trophy with that tricky, remotely operated mechanical claw. But in order to play, you've got to pay. Is this beauty game rigged? Is winning even possible? The viewer, like the cosmetics buyer, can only guess.

Which brings us back to Hovnanian's role in the discourse on beauty in art. If only by dint of the range and focus of the works in *Power & Burden of Beauty*, Hovnanian would take an important place in this discourse. But her identity as a woman artist inevitably deepens her role. The relative absence of women artists continued right through the 20th century, when the expected surge of post-1970s women artists never really fulfilled expectations. To some observers, at least,

it seemed ironic that Judy Chicago's work, which called society to account for the relative absence of women artists, did so through the medium of porcelain painting—a kind of esthetic ghetto where women were traditionally permitted to practice art as long as they weren't too serious about it. It was to this realm that Angelica Kauffmann's work was belatedly relegated and safely minimized.

Hovnanian has not only stepped into this relative vacuum, but she has refused to compromise in subject or technique—attacking a traditionally feminine problem with traditionally masculine tools. Her work inhabits a world in which personal beauty is endlessly commodified, measured and contested; the fact that we all live there too does not diminish its power to appall. She is asking us, as viewers, to consider how our conditioned response to surface beauty substitutes for deeper, more enduring notions of the beautiful in just the same manner that consumption substitutes for deeper values. And with her potent brand of esthetic bait-and-switch—an alluring surface paired with a densely allusive message about the tyranny and the transience of beauty—Hovnanian provides a viewing experience not unlike watching the arc of a boomerang in flight. It's captivating, but it may be right on target for your neck.

Michael Clive, a cultural reporter who lives in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut, has written for the Whitney Museum of American Art and the American Foundation for Art Research. He is the recipient of a 2009 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.



September 29, 2011

Rachel Hovnanian's Savage Beauty

By ALESSANDRA CODINHA

Rachel Hovnanian's Chelsea studio, where she sculpts and photographs and later displays her occasionally interactive art, is large, airy, whitewashed, filled with shiny objects and, on this day, flooded with sunlight. A gigantic beauty-pageant trophy carved from marble stands in a far corner. It's an imposing figure: barely smiling, 10 feet tall, her roses and tiara as much a part of her form as her arms or legs.

"I grew up with what you could call 'intellectual' parents in Texas; my dad was an English teacher," the artist explains in front of an arcade-style claw game that provides gilt pageant-style trophies as prizes. She holds a trophy she recently won from the game in her hands as she speaks.

"[My parents] always told me that it's what's inside your head that counts," Hovnanian continues. "You grow up hearing that all the time, and then, you know, I'm here, growing up in Texas. And I just turned to them one day and asked, 'How could you even say that? Of course it matters what you look like!'"

Hovnanian herself is petite, with blonde hair, large blue eyes and a winsome smile. She is energetic and friendly, clever and charming. She wouldn't seem hugely out of place at a beauty pageant, yet the anxiety-ridden relationship women have with their appearance plays a central role in her work. There's her "Wall of Confidence," an 8-foot-by-2-foot frame containing identical jars of "Texas Beauty Queen Cream," each plastered with a different slogan taken from actual advertising in the beauty industry.

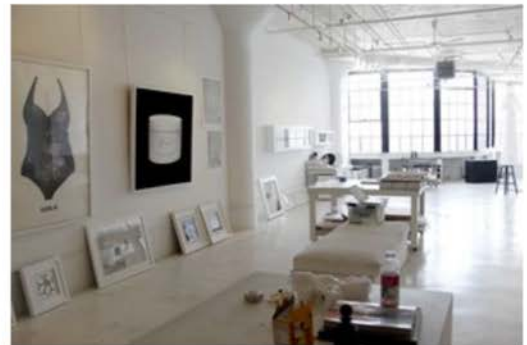
"Imagine...having the confidence to approach new people," one tub offers.

"This product will change your life," another promises.

"Well, there's a reason my latest show is called 'Power & Burden of Beauty,'" Hovnanian says, showing a row of her photographs from her past exhibition, "Too Good to Be True." Beauty queens cast in marble, gilt or wax pervade the illustrations. Some clutch knives, stabbing the competition ("Beauty Queen Backstabbers" and "Backstabbers II"). One has just come off a shopping binge and is perched in a four-poster bed in front of her balding, much older husband. ("That one's called 'No Prenup,'" the artist explains with a grin.) In another, a beauty queen with body dysmorphic disorder sees an engorged version of her actually trim self in the mirror in the changing room.



Rachel Hovnanian
Photo By Thomas Iannaccone



A view of Rachel Hovnanian's Chelsea studio.
Photo By Thomas Iannaccone

“That’s ‘Size 0,’ and actually plays into my latest exhibition, the ‘Fun House Changing Room,’ ” Hovnanian explains as she walks toward a new mirror. “The changing room is where you see all these physical faults and you’re really alone with them under this bad lighting and you’re trying on a swimsuit — it’s the most intimate piece of clothing that we ever wear in public, and you can just feel so awful about yourself. And you usually do.”

First displayed in 2009, “Fun House Changing Room” incorporates a visibly warped mirror (it obviously shows its curves and twists, “unlike those in actual department store dressing rooms,” Hovnanian laughs) and a series of white one-piece swimsuits labeled in their respective sizes. Approaching the mirror, a motion sensor triggers an audio recording, in which a beleaguered voice tells viewers how unattractive they look.

“You need more Botox,” the voice sighs. “You can’t wear this out there. She wore the same thing, you saw the pictures on Facebook. She looked so much better than you. You shouldn’t have eaten those Cheetos.”

Hovnanian is taking the installation to Los Angeles to exhibit at the Art Platform Art Fair through the Leila Heller Gallery from Oct. 1 to 3 along with some of her works from “Too Good to Be True.” While in L.A., she’ll be celebrated by Nadja Swarovski and Sue Hostetler, editor-in-chief of Miami Art Basel magazine, at a dinner at the Chateau Marmont tonight. Swarovski has given Hovnanian a selection of crystals with which to craft a piece for the Women for Women Making a Difference Awards. A percentage of the proceeds from the sale of the piece will go to Swarovski’s foundation.

“I try to confront our obsessions as a culture with beauty and youth and Photoshopping and gossip in my work,” Hovnanian explains, sifting through a plastic crate wherein she keeps the dollhouse miniatures she uses for her tableaux. There are bottles of prescription drugs that would fit inside a pen cap (the pills are actually loose in the bottle and shake around, some “Valium” is loose in the crate), rolls of toilet paper, packs of gum the size of a freckle, laundry products, shoelaces, silverware. It’s difficult to pick these things up with fingertips without obscuring some of them, but Hovnanian brandishes a tiny package of feminine sanitary products, pinched between her thumb and pointer finger, eyebrows raised.

“I’m trying to confront these things,” she says, “before they devour us all alive.”

{beauty in} BLACK & WHITE

WRITTEN BY LAURANN CLARIDGE

Conflicted about the power of beauty as well as its burdens, Houston-raised artist **Rachel Hovnanian** created the narrative photographic vignettes that appear on this month's cover and on these pages. She has become one of the most chattered-about talents working in New York today. Her newest series, "Too Good to Be True," forces the viewer to define beauty and the price we'll pay for it.



TOP LEFT: Rachel Hovnanian's *Close Shave*, 2010.
TOP RIGHT: *White Dress and Matching Appliances*, 2010.
ABOVE: *Dining Table*, 2010. RIGHT: *Suburbia*, 2010.
FAR RIGHT (BOTH PAGES): *Bear Skin Rug*, 2010.





LEFT: Rachel Hovnanian's *I'll Just Do It Myself*, 2010. BELOW: *No Prenup*, 2010. MIDDLE LEFT: *Beauty and the Doughnuts*, 2010. BOTTOM RIGHT: *Chaos to Bliss in One Day*, 2010



Rachel Hovnanian's work ranges from sculpture to drawing, narrative photographic studies to massive oils on canvas that focus on false ideals, coupled with our societal aspirations to attain a flawless façade. Her "Too Good to Be True" series of black-and-white photographs, shown here and on the cover, juxtaposes stiff trophy figurines — beauties with satin sashes and bouquets dipped in ghostly white plaster — with Lilliputian scenes of dollhouse furniture starkly painted flat white. Each vignette, theatrically confined in a suppressive space, is paired with a cheeky title that perfectly punctuates the thought expressed in the frame. For instance, *No Prenup* depicts a pretty young trophy wife poised atop her four-poster bed, surrounded by high-end shopping bags, while her balding, older husband stands at the foot. Casting doubts,

aspirations? You be the judge.

Dining Table illustrates the space that's grown between the trophy wife and her mate, with each seated at opposite ends of a table that must seat 24. In *Beauty and the Doughnuts*, a more voluptuous version of the perfect size-0 beauty queen, her hips and bottom engorged from her weakness for sweets, gazes longingly at a glass case filled with doughnuts, cookies and pastries.

Asked what inspired her newest series of photographs, Hovnanian replies, "It speaks directly to how I feel about a variety of self-worth issues women face. Beauty plus status equals celebrity. Celebrity is coveted and is no longer an American export; it's a global issue. In my work, I prefer to refrain from judgment. Some might be amused, some might be incensed, and hopefully everyone feels something."

Take a look past the public persona, the pretty faces and ask, as Hovnanian has: Is it perfection attained or too good to be true?



Rachel Hovnanian's works are available through Collette Blanchard Gallery, New York City. In December, this exhibition of narrative studies printed on watercolor paper will be on view at Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago. Hovnanian's previous works have been exhibited with Meredith Long & Company, Houston, and were represented by Jason McCoy, Inc., at the Dallas Art Fair. Information rachelhovnanian.com.

January 13, 2012

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POST ARTS

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY



Mat Gleason

Art critic, Coagula Art Jou

ArtPlatform Top Ten Artists

Posted: 10/10/11 06:37 AM ET

The giant Art Platform fair took Los Angeles by storm at the beginning of October. With almost a hundred galleries and exhibition spaces from around the world participating, this was a high water mark in L.A.'s ascendancy on the international art world. There was no shortage of space for exhibitors at the giant LA Mart, the venerable Downtown design emporium known for the forty-foot chair -the world's largest - in its parking lot (and trivia buffs will remind you that the chair is about where first base was when the Los Angeles Angels played their home games at the then Washington Park from 1911 thru 1925).

The fair was primarily on two floors of the LA Mart building but all of the Los Angeles art world was sent into overdrive with the vote of confidence in the sustainability of a thriving art scene here that this fair represents.

Whether it was the champagne VIP preview or Saturday afternoon at \$25 admission, it was crowded at all times. With accolades pouring down, the Pacific Standard Time theme of the show inspired many dealers to dust off the old Ruscha prints in the attic and hawk their wares, but enough gallerists were committed to the long-haul to showcase their artists in a serious setting despite the slew of commerce on all sides. Here are ten that still resonate...



RACHEL HOVNANIAN at Leila Heller Gallery

Feminist critique of perception using fashion saw a minimal woman's one-piece swimsuit available only in size four (the swimsuit model's cut) or size 12 (the average American woman's cut). The outsized sculpture of the bathing suit itself towered over the social intervention imposed on fairgoers.



An interactive dressing room gave you the choice of a Size 4 or a Size 12 swimsuit.