

A WOMAN'S WORTH

Fed up with society's unattainable standards for beauty? So is multimedia artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian, as evidenced by her clever and thought-provoking work.

BY SUE HOSTETLER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEMMA HART INGALLS

Modern culture celebrates beauty and youth more than ever before, making even the most self-confident among us insecure. But leave it to the art world to turn that equation on its head. New York-based multimedia artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian has made a name for herself in the contemporary art world by creating clever and sometimes brutally honest pieces that examine the all-too-familiar anxiety-ridden relationship women have with their appearance. Her work deftly explores the illusions and stereotypes that surround the female species, brilliantly utilizing cultural imagery and iconography of cosmetics, beauty pageants, plastic surgery and more.

Raised in Texas, Mexico and New York by artist parents (both were painters), Hovnanian studied fine art at the University of Texas and Parsons School of Design. In the past year alone, her work has been snapped up by prestigious collectors during exhibitions in Palm Springs, Dubai and Iowa and at shows including Art Platform Los Angeles and The Armory Show in NYC. (It can currently be viewed at Imago Galleries in Palm Desert, California, and New York City's Leila Heller Gallery.)

Her early work, a series titled *Preservation of the Narcissus*, involved photographic prints and paintings of snow white narcissus flowers on an inky black canvas background, a contemplation of the fragility of youth and the temporary nature of beauty. "I was always fascinated by the myth of Narcissus (a character in Greek mythology renowned for his obsession with his own beauty) in terms of memory, identity and loss," says Hovnanian. "In the paintings I coated the narcissus flowers in wax, crushed the blooms in ink and even worked with a chemist to recreate the sickly sweet aroma of the flower from the moment the bloom begins to decay. My narcissus blooms are innocent, yet objects of intense desire. Women are often portrayed



Artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian and her trusty binoculars, which she often uses to keep an eye on the street below her New York City studio.

in the same way." The artist has also created sculptures that mine our preoccupation with modern techniques of preservation—mirrored boxes that, when approached, light up to reveal a sea of narcissus flowers growing out of empty Botox bottles.

But it was Hovnanian's subsequent projects, *Power & Burden of Beauty* and *Fun House Dressing Room*, that truly took the art-world cognoscenti by storm. The former furthered her dialogue about the unattainable pursuit of perfection. In it, photographs are populated with an army of small, flawless, white female figures that appear in dollhouse-like tableaux addressing messages and counter-messages about gender roles, money, competition and consumption. "Beauty and the Doughnuts" portrays a beauty queen staring longingly at a case of desserts. In another, titled "No Prenup," a beauty queen sits on a four-poster bed after a shopping spree, surrounded by luxury label bags, as her obviously older husband looks on.

Fun House was an equally provocative and interactive piece that involved an actual dressing room visitors could enter. Outfitted with a collection of white bathing suits in wildly different sizes and a fun-house mirror, it featured an audio loop of women whispering disparaging comments: "My thighs are so fat." "You shouldn't have eaten those Cheetos." "You need more Botox." The response was overwhelming. "Those comments are

A piece from the artist's *Preservation of the Narcissus* series.



immediately understood by all women," says Hovnanian. "Most everyone I have spoken to identifies with that installation."

The thematic choices Hovnanian makes in her work are interesting, given that the artist herself is athletic, blonde, known for her keen fashion sense and universally well liked. One finds it hard to believe she has experienced any of the angst represented in her art. Married to a real estate developer, Hovnanian has two children and is described by friends as an unwaveringly supportive girl's girl, self-assured but low-key. All of this begs the question: Does she ever feel fat? Or old? Or just not good enough? Hovnanian laughs. "Do I feel vulnerable? Yes—and no. I do the best I can. Like most women, when I enter a dressing room I see the flaws and hear the voices loud and clear. But I also laugh out loud about it all. No matter how many positive or negative voices I hear filtered through the media, my art is my passion and daily practice. I just dive in." *F*