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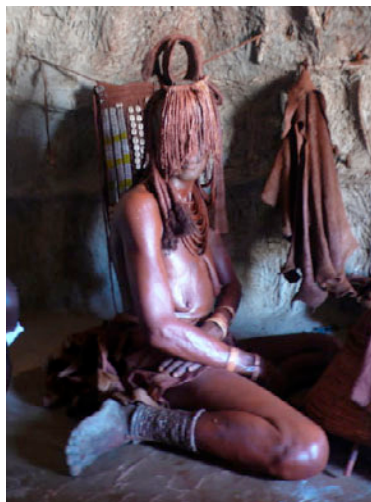
What Price Beauty? One Artist's Take

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 Carra. 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.