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The Bio-Engineered Future of *Perfect Baby Showroom* Comes to the Dallas Art Fair

By: Bethany Radcliff



As you traverse the Dallas North Tollway near Oak Lawn Avenue, you may spot a billboard advertising so-called “perfect babies.” Well, they are perfect babies, but they aren’t human. Yet.

The billboard shows the image of a baby and directs passersby to the site Perfect-babies.com. It features text that reads, “Genetically perfect children...inconceivable? Coming to Dallas April 15.”

The perfect babies being promoted in the advertisement, which went up Monday, are actually part of an art installation by New York City artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian, who was raised in Houston. The installation is called the *Perfect Baby Showroom*, and will be on display during this year’s Dallas Art Fair as the solo exhibition of Leila Heller Gallery (booth F2) from April 15-17.

This mixed-media installation will include walls covered in electrical outlet-printed wallpaper. Cords that are connected to these outlets lead directly to rows of clear plastic boxes on pedestals that, taken together, resemble futuristic incubators. Inside these

open-topped boxes are hyper-realistic dolls, clothed in white and resting gently on pillows full of colorful breakfast cereals. In past shows in New York and California, a sign on the wall above the babies resembles a fast food menu, with close-up images of the babies' faces labeled with names such as *The Morgan*, *The Jordan*, and *The Joey*. Hovnanian says that this year's exhibition in Dallas will feature babies that have been "upgraded to 2016 models."

This exhibit seems like a more youthful revival of *The Stepford Wives*, featuring baby-sized models. With her *Stepford*-esque babies, Hovnanian is calling on viewers to use her art as a conduit for interaction, response, and critical thinking. She makes this interaction pretty easy, creating an alternate reality of sorts. In fact, upon entering the exhibit, viewers are instructed to use hand sanitizer, put on a lab coat, and take pictures to post on Instagram.

Hovnanian says that she likes to pull people into her work, and in the *Perfect Baby Showroom*, "there is a constant power relationship" between the visitors, the billboard, and the babies. Guests are even encouraged to pick up and handle the babies before making a selection, an experience that can be both disturbing and emotional.

Hovnanian's past work has focused on technology and human interaction. An earlier piece, a video projection called *Foreplay*, featured couples entwined in their beds, staring into smart phone screens, forcing viewers to confront face-to-face the lack of intimacy that our devices, which are meant to connect us, can create.

The *Perfect Baby Showroom* is no different in its critique of modern technology, and brings into question ideas of genetic modification and consumerism, and the fact that modern technological advances could lead to a future of bio-engineered "designer babies." To illustrate this concept, the perfect babies in the installation are resting on pillows made of colorful, sugary, processed breakfast cereals, which Hovnanian relates to genetic modification.

"We are such creatures of perfection that we'll manufacture human beings like cereal from a factory in hopes it will give us the same rush, just as a sugar-filled consumer product would," she says.

Hovnanian forces the viewer to see the consumerism and the humanity that these perfect babies represent. The perfect babies even have resumes, which spell out what they will each achieve in life. One will end poverty when he becomes president of the United States. *The Morgan* will create robotic bees and save the world's ecosystem. *The Alex* will become chief curator at the Dallas Contemporary by the age of 20 and a wing of the Dallas Museum of Art will be named after him.

When asked specifically about the billboard on the Dallas North Tollway, Hovnanian says she believes that, in the future, companies will develop real perfect baby technology. Her goal is to draw people's attention to the "fragile possibilities" of our technology-driven future. The technology is approaching, albeit slowly, with celebrities like Chrissy Teigen and John Legend receiving backlash for choosing to implant a female embryo over a male embryo through in vitro fertilization. The billboard serves as an extension of the installation that will be at the **Dallas Art Fair** next month, and seems to be meant to attract controversial attention, creating what Hovnanian calls an "infinite feedback loop of reflection."

Hovnanian's *Perfect Baby Showroom* will be at the Dallas Art Fair on April 15, 16, and 17. Hovnanian will also be part of the Art Fair panel on April 16 from 4 to 6 pm at the Fashion Industry Gallery.

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