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Nature With Chirps, but No Tweets

By: Bob Morris



Kevi Lipe in the conceptual artist Rachel Lee Hovnanian's "NDD Immersion Room," which visitors cannot enter without surrendering their phones. The artist meticulously recreated a forest at night, indoors. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Sometimes when Rachel Lee Hovnanian, a conceptual artist who lives in Manhattan, sees a hill, she will stop what she's doing to roll down it. She also likes lying under trees.

"As a tomboy in Ohio and then Texas, I was always outdoors," she recalled recently, while giving a tour of her current show at the Leila Heller gallery in Chelsea. "I would make mud pies, climb trees and go fishing and camping all the time."

Not doing much of anything in nature, she believes, especially in a time of pervasive smartphone and tech entertainment addiction, can be good for the imagination.

And that explains why her new exhibition has an "NDD Immersion Room," and why visitors are asked to give up their phones and have them locked up by staff members in glass boxes on the wall before entering.



*Real pine trees have been placed throughout the room at the Leila Heller gallery in Chelsea.
Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times*

NDD stands for nature deficit disorder, a phrase coined by the writer [Richard Louv](#) in a 2005 book, “Last Child in the Woods.” Ms. Hovnanian first saw the term used on a psychology website called [Positive Prescription](#), and it resonated with her own ideas about humans needing some contact with nature to be healthy, whether that means seeing mountains on the horizon or touching mud.

The artist’s Immersion Room is an elaborate indoor installation that meticulously recreates a forest at night. You enter with lanterns, one or two at a time through mirrored swinging doors, to walk on leaves and a wood stump path under towering, fragrant fir trees. The sound of crickets and rushing water fills the darkness. A fake campfire flickers under an artificial sky full of stars where there’s a log to sit on or a camping cot for anyone who cares to lie down. All of this is next to the West Side Highway.

“When I’m anxious I always go to the park,” said Leila Heller, the gallerist behind Ms. Hovnanian’s multigenre and satirical installations. “But kids don’t know how to do that these days because they’re on their phones.” That said, the show is drawing crowds.

Visitors are free to sit and linger and many do. They can’t, however, take pictures or text their friends.



*The sound of crickets and rushing water fills the darkness.
Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times*

“It’s about detaching from technology and using your other senses,” Ms. Hovnanian said.

She has been, like many people, appalled at her own tech addiction for years.

“A normal user touches her phone 2,500 times a day and an excessive one touches it twice that,” Ms. Hovnanian added, referring to various studies from business websites. “I met a mother who told me that her 2-year-old’s first words were ‘Mama, ‘Dada’ and ‘iPad.’”

She was not always so anti-tech. Her previous installations included “Plastic Perfect,” featuring hyper-realistic robotic babies that gallery visitors held while posing for social media.

“Easier than real babies, and you can order them online like pizza,” Ms. Hovnanian said.

She also created a video installation, “Foreplay,” with young, nearly naked couples lounging in bed while staring into glowing phones, as if they were lovers in a four-way or perhaps about to conceive an artificial baby by way of ordering one from Amazon.

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Ms. Hovnanian's installation, with a tent and trees, aims to help visitors unplug from social media and phones while exploring her work. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Another installation included a dinner table populated with two iPads that show video images of a man and a woman. They are positioned to seem like they're staring at each other.

“I've seen couples on dates with one of them texting on a phone, which causes the other one to start texting too,” Ms. Hovnanian said, “It's all very alienating and distracting.”

The artist, who is married to Ara K. Hovnanian, president and chief executive of Hovnanian Enterprises, a Fortune 500 home-construction company, asks her family to put away phones at dinner and has a rule for herself of not turning on her phone while having coffee with her husband in the morning.

Galleries and museums, of course, have been dealing with phone intrusions for years. Unlike theaters, however, they don't require audiences to turn off their devices. Most have given up on prohibiting or policing photography. Some have paid the price for their leniency.



*A woman charged her phone in an igloo constructed by Ms. Hovnanian.
Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times*

A few years ago, a student visiting the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera in Italy tried to take a selfie while sitting on the lap of a statue and broke off its leg. Last year a selfie-taker at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington Still, social media can help galleries promote shows and make them more fun.

“I don’t like to control how people behave and besides, most of our visitors are very respectful,” said Anne Pasternak, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, who is overseeing a David Bowie exhibition that forbids photography, in a rare move for the museum. “But I do think that lit-up screens can be distracting in a dark installation.”

Some visitors to Ms. Hovnanian’s installation balk when told that they have to give up their phones to go into her forest. “I’ll come back another time,” one young man said, then turned and fled.

But most of them, according to staff members, don’t mind at all.

“Many people leave without remembering to get their phones back,” said Brandon Reis, an intern at the gallery who heard one visitor suggest to another about coming back to spend spring break in the Immersion Room.

Ms. Hovnanian, who is 58, and who once created a cafe installation that served mud pie (recipe instructions in the catalog include taking shoes off to feel the cool earth beneath your feet) enjoys interacting with visitors who ask questions about the various rooms of her current exhibition. (The Immersion Room is on display through April 11, and there is also a Waiting Room in which visitors enter a plaster igloo to charge their phones.)

Last Wednesday she listened to a young man from Paris who emerged exuberant from the Immersion Room, as if he just came in from a long hike through a redwood forest. “So many artists are good at mocking social media and selfie culture,” he told her in excellent English. “But you actually give us a reason to give up our phones.”