

Mogilevskaya, Regina "Abandon your phone and dive into nature in Bushwick." *Brooklyn Based*.
(November 11, 2017).



BROOKLYN BASED

Abandon your phone and dive into nature in Bushwick

BY REGINA MOGILEVSKAYA



A scene from NDD Immersion Room.

Can you step away from your cellphone for five minutes? What about 10? In Rachel Lee Hovnanian's (*The Ray Lee Project Vol 1.) NDD Immersion Room*, the artist asks viewers to do just that, and rewards them with an installation that smells, looks, and feels like an autumn night in the middle of the woods. The question is whether or not viewers can enjoy this brief connection with nature knowing their cellphones are in a lockbox just a few feet away. (*The Ray Lee Project Vol 1.) NDD Immersion Room* is on view at Victori + Mo through Dec. 22, and we sat down with Hovnanian to get a little more insight into her inspiration for the piece, and her own relationship with technology.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

BB: What kind of relationship do you have with your phone?

RH: Some days my cell phone functions as a studio tool responding to daily business emails or calls, other times it connects me with family and friends, and other times my phone is a “personal minder” offering me mental companionship as I catch up on reading or viewing images saved on my phone. And sometimes, if I forget a name, or phone number, it is a memory resource much like a personal library.

BB: It's no surprise that our relationships with technology and social media are already pretty messed up. Do you think they're going to get worse? What are some of your fears when it comes to peoples dependency on technology?

RH: There's a positive side to all of this—camping has gone up 30% this year. Slowly, I think many people are looking to recapture private alone time as what some may see as a natural rebellion to technological demands. It is not hard to imagine that at some point in the near future, whatever technology rests beside you on your nightstand may be implanted under your flesh—you can pretty much take that concept as far as you like. Just recently I read in BBC News, on my cell phone, that a teen living in the Central Hunan Province of China, underwent surgery to remove a kidney in order to raise money to buy an iPhone and iPad. Think about that.

BB: Can you talk a little about your inspirations for the NDD Immersion Room?

RH: When I travel I don't see children playing outside like we did when we were younger. Driving through the countryside in most areas you no longer see children riding bikes outside 'til dark, I find this indicative of what we are dealing with and quite disturbing. I read noted psychiatrist, Dr. Samantha Boardman's blog [Positive Prescription](#), where she wrote about Nature Deficit Disorder. Dr. Boardman, discusses the psychological and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. I reached out to her and she recommended I read the book, *The Machine Stops*, written in 1909 by E. M. Forster, which portrays a world where human beings live in isolation beneath the earth surface, depending on an all powerful machine for survival. The story concludes with the collapse of the machine and the collective realization of the doomed underground society that man's connection to the natural world is all that matters.

BB: How do you think a multidisciplinary approach helps get the themes of your art across in a stronger way? How often do you get frustrated with all of the mediums you're incorporating?

RH: All of my work implies that there is tension between the fragility of life, and technology. I am invigorated by this.

The viewer is crucial and constitutive to the work—without their response to it there is no reflection. Upon entering the space, one is drawn to the tactile nature of my NDD Immersion Room as it is surrounded by the cooling shade of the forest and plant life. There is a constant power relationship between the visitors, and the surrender of technology. In silence, the seated viewer, becomes part of the artificial wild surrounding the campfire. Some visitors feel helpless without technology, some are excited by it, and some find it meditative.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Initially, the viewer enters the wild space through a cold white room. There is a bunker in the space (a protection from the enemy) much in the same way our phone is our protection. The bunker has fake frozen plant life coming out of it. The visitor must surrender their phone in a lock box before they enter the dark forest. Then they are given a flashlight to follow a path before entering the forest where the viewer experiences small details in the wilderness. One experiences a lit campfire where you can meditate. Though the forest is not real, there are elements in the forest that are.

The experience is actually mesmerizing similar to the way in which technology is mesmerizing. The entire aesthetic experience connects with the social and cultural contexts of my white *Natural Fractile Series*.

BB: What do you hope people come away with after experiencing your piece?

RH: I hope people will further develop an awareness about our relationship to technology after experiencing my NDD Immersion Room. We give our friends and family grief because they are always on the phone abandoning conversation and each other for the immediate gratification our personal devices provide us with—but we need to be accountable—aware of our own behaviors. Essentially there is no substitute for connecting our senses to nature and to what is real and present.

*Rachel Lee Hovnanian's (The Ray Lee Project Vol. 1) NDD Immersion Room will be on view at at **VICTORI + MO** Thursdays through Sundays, 1-6pm, through Dec. 22, 2017, and by appointment.*