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ARTnews



Rachel Hovnanian, *Beauty Queen Totem*, 2009.
Carrara marble, 11'. Jason McCoy.

Rachel Hovnanian

Jason McCoy

Rachel Hovnanian, who studied at the University of Texas at Austin, Parsons School of Design, the Art Students League of New York, and the National Academy of Design, has learned from the best—and that includes, it turns out, beauty-pageant contestants and the industries that surround them. “Power & Burden of Beauty” addressed the packaging and selling of feminine allure and the price paid for it by the female psyche.

The show featured icily stylized sculptures of beauty queens with their trophies (or as trophies); large-scale photographs of white gloves; and science-fiction-like skin-cream jars bearing advertising slogans from women’s-magazine ads. On hand, too, were the obligatory

swimsuits, in both drawings and sculptures, along with framed shots of pageant crowns. A little video of young girls in a Texas competition played like a continuous training film for JonBenet Ramsey.

Casting an eerie chill over the surroundings were Hovnanian’s eleven-foot-tall *Beauty Queen Totem* (2009), in white Carrara marble, and *Body Armor* (2009), in cold-cast marble, reinforced fiberglass, and lacquer. The installation had its lab-coat whiteness cranked up by a lighting design that lent it all a funereal pall. In this way a vending machine holding miniature beauty totems, an expanse of wallpaper telling an anti-feminist fairy tale, and mirrors reflecting images of artificial youth and pulchritude produced an aura of deadly directness. —*Celia McGee*