

RACHEL HOVNANIAN

PRESERVATION OF THE NARCISSUS

The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.

– Henry Miller

For the past several years, Rachel Hovnanian has been methodically engaged in a process of exploring and capturing the essence of the narcissus flower. The fragile bloom, whose symbolic associations are central to the history of art, offers an opportunity to pursue her ongoing interest in beauty—its ephemerality, preservation and inevitable decay.

According to the well-known Greek myth, the Narcissus flower was named after a beautiful young man who became so enamored by his reflection in a forest stream, that he fell in the water and drowned. The delicate white flower subsequently grew along the banks of the river where his body once was. The story has been reinterpreted over the years, most notably by Ovid, who interchanged the myth of Narcissus with that of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had made. Giorgio Vasari included the story of Narcissus in his canonical 1568 tome *The Lives of the Painters*, seeing the experience of mistaking a reflection for the real thing as a metaphor for the process of transformation art evokes. The myth of Narcissus has continued significance in the modern world. Sigmund Freud identified narcissism as one of the infant's primary stages of psychological development while Oscar Wilde, along with several 19th century aesthetes, saw the story as an affirmation of homosexual desire.

Hovnanian explores the myth of narcissus in terms of memory, identity and loss. In this series of works, the artist has examined virtually every aspect of the narcissus flower; coating them in wax, crushing the blooms to produce ink and working with a chemist to recreate the sickly sweet aroma of the flower at the moment when the bloom begins to decay. The scent is then instilled in candles, which act as *momento mori* to a flower that withers immediately after it comes fully into bloom.

In the *Fractile* paintings, the flowers are virtually mummified. Created through a time intensive and ritualistic application of hot wax, the encaustics recall Egyptian funereal portraits. Just as the ancient portraits commemorated the deceased as they were in the prime of life, Hovnanian's paintings memorialize the flower at the height of its beauty. In her haunting *Memory of the Narcissus* paintings, Hovnanian again works with layers, painting the flowers in great detail, wiping away at the image and then starting again. The result is an exquisite palimpsest, where ghostly traces of each layer can still be seen.

Whereas the *Fractile* and *Memory of the Narcissus* paintings explore general themes of beauty and loss, *The Gaze* installations relate most clearly to our current cultural preoccupation with beauty and our aversion to the aging process. While the notion of a fountain of youth is nothing new, in Hovnanian's mirrors, wax coated blooms float in mini vases made from Botox bottles. The mirrors are motion-sensitive, programmed to illuminate in response to the viewer. *The Gaze* acts as a multilayered portrait. Appearing at first to be a mirror (and referencing the universal compulsion to look at one's reflection), the installation suggests the amount of "work" that often lies behind a pretty face.

Working primarily in black and white, Hovnanian's paintings are unabashedly beautiful, yet they point to something darker underneath—awareness that every celebration of beauty, and by extension of life, is foreshadowed by recognition of its inevitable end.

Merrill Falkenberg, Ph. D.

5 *The Gaze I* (detail), 2007, steel, glass, encaustic, narcissus flowers, glass vials, fluorescent bulbs, plexiglass, 73 x 30 5/8 x 6 inches (185.4 x 77.8 x 15.2 cm)