Baltimore Museum of Art exhibition takes on ‘Nature Deficit Disorder’ in unusual ways

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Rachel Lee Hovnanian in her Nature Deficit Disorder Immersion Room. Photo credit: Connor Cassidy.

An upcoming installation at the Baltimore Museum of Art invites visitors to disconnect from technology and reconnect with nature — but first they must surrender their phones and are offered a drink of Mountain Dew from a urine specimen cup.

Rachel Lee Hovnanian in her Nature Deficit Disorder Immersion Room. Photo credit: Connor Cassidy.

Rachel Lee Hovnanian's immersive installation, "Nature Deficit Disorder," opens in the museum's historic Spring House on April 1 and runs through May 31. This is Hovnanian's first solo museum installation and reflects decades of interaction with and study of the impact of technology on our lives. Visitors step into a simulated nighttime forest, encouraged to reconnect with the natural world.

Journalist Richard Louv coined the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" in his 2005 book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." The phrase describes what Louv and many others considered an alarming, growing disconnection from nature, accelerated by not only advances in technology but exponential increase in the number of hands of that held it.

In the two decades since, the dangers of digital overstimulation have been proven real and serious. Harvard Health warned against "doomscrolling" in 2024, the National Institutes of Health in 2025 unpacked the "dilemma of brain rot" caused by excessive screen

time, and in 2023, Yale School of Medicine warned of mental health problems in youth resulting from too much media activity, citing findings published in the "Journal of Behavioral Addictions".

In Hovnanian's installation, visitors might think they are part of a study themselves since they are greeted by Spring House staff dressed in lab coats who collect and lock away their phones and offer them a sample of Mountain Dew presented in a urine specimen cup. This is Hovnanian's comment on a culture seeking quick, synthetic fixes over a more natural approach.

Rachel Lee Hovnanian in her Nature Deficit Disorder Immersion Room. Photo credit: Connor Cassidy.

Once inside the immersion room, there are fir trees, live insects, crunching leaves, and a faux campfire, illuminated only by lantern light. It is an intentional break from technology and meant to invite people to be present and connect with the environment around them. As they exit the space, visitors are given soil and seeds they can take home to extend the experience if they like.

"My work has long explored how technology shapes attention, mental health, and human connection," Hovnanian said. "This installation emerged from my observations of society's growing digital dependence, alongside my own experience of it. What do we lose

when our lives are constantly mediated by screens? I hope to offer a pause—an invitation to rediscover how it feels to be fully present."

"Nature Deficit Disorder" is the final exhibition of the BMA's Turn Again to the Earth initiative, a multi-year effort to show commitment to sustainability and foster dialogue on climate change. Hovnanian's immersive installation supports that initiative by prompting audiences to consider the consequences of divorcing oneself from nature, and the importance of remaining connected to it.

"For more than a year, the BMA has served as a site of active dialogue about the environment, sustainability, and the important role that art can play in spurring engagement and action," said Asma Naeem, Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director of the BMA, in a statement. "Hovnanian's installation beautifully embodies the vision that has guided our work for Turn Again to the Earth as it offers a powerful and intimate experience for visitors. It reminds us that sustainability is not only about systems and structures—it begins with our own relationship to the natural environment."