

DIE ZEIT STEHT STILL

In ihren Bildern und Fotografien friert Mercedes Helnwein schöne, vermeintlich dahingeworfene und absurde Momente ein. Wir sprachen mit ihr über das Aufwachsen mit ihrem berühmten Vater, Künstler Gottfried Helnwein, über inszenierte Zufälligkeit und die verlorene Schönheit vergangener Moden.

all artworks by MERCEDES HELNWEIN



Queen of the underground



Mercedes Helnwein

Es gibt schlechtere Karrierehighlights, als eine von Damian Hirst aufgekaufte Ausstellung. Und dennoch könnte Mercedes Helwein, 36, nichts ferner liegen, als strategische Karriereplanung oder ehrgeizige Künstlerposen. An ihre Ölkreidezeichnungen, Fotografien und Filme geht sie noch immer so neugierig und spielerisch heran, wie sie es von frühest Kindheit von ihrem Vater Gottfried Helwein gelernt hat, dessen überdimensionale hyperrealistische Kinderportraits oder Fotografien von Marilyn Manson als schaurige Mickey Mouse zu seinen wohl bekanntesten Werken zählen.

In Wien geboren, später in Deutschland und Irland aufgewachsen zählt die auch für Modemarken wie Orla Kiely tätige Künstlerin mittlerweile Los Angeles zu ihrem Zuhause. Wenn sie sich mit der dortigen oberflächlichen Kunstszene auch nur schwer arrangieren kann und oft im elterlichen Schloss in Irland Zuflucht sucht.

Genau dort, im idyllischen "Castle Gurteen de la Poen", in dem einst Dita von Teese Marilyn Manson heiratete, haben wir sie für unser Gespräch erreicht.

Some people following into similar career paths as their parents at some point wonder if there was any other option out there they missed. Were there ever any moments you wondered how free we really are in our life path, how much is in us and how much who we become depends on how we grow up?

I've never wondered that. I think who I am as an artist has always been completely personal to me, and I would have had the same creative urges regardless of who my parents were. That being said, I couldn't have asked for a better environment to grow up in. I couldn't have been more lucky. There have been lots of influences and inspirations along

the way thanks to my parents. Lots of freedom to explore what interested us as kids — and maybe most importantly freedom to be who we were.

Had I grown up with a stockbroker dad, who considers art frivolous or incomprehensible voodoo, or at best strictly an investment, the journey would have been very different. I probably would have had to dye my hair green as a teenager and do a lot of things to rebel and distance myself from that world. It would have been more of a struggle.

Would you share some childhood memories of growing up surrounded by your father's work? Do you remember what art meant to you as a child?

Art was a completely normal part of life for me. I didn't consider it as something special — it was what my dad did every single day. I could wander into the studio whenever I wanted and hang out with him, and he would explain what he was working on or let me paint something next to him. It became a totally natural part of life early on — even for me to be drawing all the time.

I also remember my dad taking my brother Ali and I along to printing houses when he oversaw the printing of his catalogues or books. Ali and I were fascinated by the automatic drink machines these printing houses always seemed to have — where you could push a button and a little paper cup would fall out of somewhere and fill with coffee or hot chocolate. We would drink hot chocolate all day long and play and run around between the large printing presses, watching the big sheets of paper slide out.

I remember also playing backstage in theatres and watching rehearsals when my dad did stage and costume designs



Kids and Guitars



Halloween



Tiffany



for theatre productions like MacBeth. There were some incredible dancers in that production and it was fascinating to watch them warm up backstage.

There was always something going on, and we travelled a lot with my parents. My mother works very closely with my dad, doing all the business side of things, and they took us pretty much everywhere.

Family continues to play an important role in your life, was there ever a time where you needed some distance? Also professionally?

I live in L.A. most of the time, as does my brother Ali with his family. However, I love coming to Ireland and being able to stay here with my parents. I have a studio in one of the towers of the castle here, and there's always a lot going on – people coming to stay – other artists, friends, kids running around. I really enjoy the times I have together with my family. As a grown up, it's obviously different dynamic spending time with my parents – they are both really fascinating people and I get to take advantage of that

in a different way. We get to have a really close friendship in our relationship was grown ups.

The caption for one of your arranged group photos on instagram says “Things I made people do in my teens”, can you tell us more about these images?

In my teenage years I often would taken everyone who was around and dress them up and make them be in photoshoots. I was particularly obsessed with recreating very specific periods in time or social situations. This could be Catholic school kids, farmers in the 1930s, immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, modern day fake family Christmas cards, nerds from the 1960s, late Victorian photographs, a 1920s wedding, or a deodorant advertisement. The idea was: how close could I get this photograph to look like an authentic photograph from that time period with the resources I have? Or how closely could I emulate a certain situation? So to set these shoots up there was this great challenge that included everything: creating the clothes from what was available in the house, and trying to imitate

hairdos and set up the right backgrounds and find the right props. I would use my friends for this, my brothers and their friends and girlfriends, neighbours, whoever was available. And surprisingly enough I've discovered that most people will go along quite willingly and dress them up as country musician or nuns or whatever.

Actually nothing much has changed in that regard. I still do these shoots. I have my shoots for work purposes of course, but I always continue this same side project that started in my teens. The most recent additions to this project: country music album covers, a Christmas advertisement for bail bondsmen, fake rock 'n' roll bands, fake party pictures, etc.

Generally within some of your portraits your work process starts with giving your models new identities – how much of their real personalities flows into it?

Very little of the true personality of a model ends up in the work. The whole point is to create a character and a

story out of what initially inspired me by someone's general look. There is definitely something there with the person to begin with, but it's usually something physical — facial features, etc. — and that might inspire a type of person with a type of history, and though the photoshoot that character is created.

There have been people that I use over and over again in my work, and those people have something very inspiring to me — but their own personality is usually starkly different than the character that ends up in the drawing or painting. I love changing a person into a fictional character. I would say everything in my work — whether photo, painting, writing or film, leads back to a story. The story isn't always very evident, but it's there.

Bobs friends





Wizards



Living room fire



Guys

dustbowl



Do you have an „historian’s“ approach to fashion in your work in terms of knowing which style of dress went with which social background, specific time, overall look? Do you collect fashion?

I've always had a pretty good sense of what people looked like in different time periods because of my interest in history. Not so much an interest in the political aspects of history but more of the general every-day life aspects – what were the ideals at the time, what did people look like, what was the architecture like, the general attitude of the time period. Not just in the 20th century, but all the way back to the Dark Ages. It's always been interesting to me, and by the time I was sixteen I could tell by the shape of a sleeve if a dress was from the 1830s or 1840s. So through that natural interest, I've had a good concept of what people looked like and how they dressed.

As far as fashion in my work goes: it of course serves the purpose to communicate a layer of the story. Nothing would be accidental in the image. Every detail would add to the history of the person wearing that article of clothing. Again, it's all about the story.

And yes, I collect clothes. I have racks and racks of vintage clothes, wigs, uniforms and weird props like alien antennas, dinosaurs, ray guns, and so on.

You're especially inspired by the Sixties – the amount of work that went into dressing oneself, the hair and make-up is extraordinary. Is that something you miss in today's world?

I think I do. There is a total lack of romance in everything these days. Most people don't seem to notice how ugly the world has grown around them – I mean in terms of architecture and every day objects. And yes fashion and mainstream styling is largely horrific or boring to me.

What role does it play for you artistically and personally?

In my personal life, fashion plays an important part too. My wardrobe is filled with lots of vintage clothing from all kinds of time periods, and I've always toyed with the idea of designing my own clothes some day!



Queen of spade