



“HIGH NOON,” 2009, **Mercedes Helnwein**
 BLACK PENCIL ON PAPER, 30” X 22”
 PHOTO: COURTESY MERRY KARNOWSKY GALLERY

LOS ANGELES

Mercedes Helnwein:
“East of Eden”
 at Merry Karnowsky Gallery

A writer as well as visual artist, Mercedes Helnwein does not so much tell stories or even capture moments in her drawings as she triggers possibilities—the possibilities being vaguely unlikely, vaguely unsavory, and not-so-vaguely menacing, rather like inverse Magrittes. Helnwein’s basic ingredient is the fully, fashionably, clothed human figure, more often than not regarding the viewer or about to; occupying a peculiarly lit, but familiar space, they are shown engaged in a solipsistic soliloquy—self-absorbed and drenched in an almost urgent ennui—with someone and/or something else. The something else is never a weapon, and the someone else never seems to be a love interest or BFF, so the narrative tension keeps to a simmer. But that tension is the more pervasive for its very indirection and indefinability. Caught in their extravagant but empty gestures between choreography and improv, Helnwein’s (usually) young things seem more to be falling into or out of a *mise-en-scène* than making scenes of their own. (Robert Longo’s *Men in the Cities* comes to mind.) Still, they seem to belong, if only to their own passive or frustrated alienation.

Helnwein’s technical style underscores this sense of displacement. Daughter of one of the most powerful contemporary narrative painters working today, she knows that, in the post-modern context, at least, mere pictorial perfection deadens the impact of the image. The slight awkwardness she leaves in her figural renditions, the planes of face and body emphasized and flattened both by the raking light of the set-up and the stiff inexactitude of the hand, serves to amplify the immediacy of her imagery, imbuing what would otherwise be so much more photographic reportage with a brittle, memory-jarring tactility, the kind a sketchbook rather than a snapshot album provides. As such, Helnwein’s drawings suggest storyboard or graphic novel frames, although their contents refuse to cohere one picture to another. Her accompanying film brims with quick cuts, jerky human motion, and groups of twenty-somethings not quite relating, as if being led in a game by a modern dancer-turned-psychologist. Even still, this year’s film has a sly, ineffable logic that the one Helnwein included in her show last year did not. That fact—coupled with the fact that last year’s drawings were themselves *more* technically “correct”—indicates that she is becoming more visually conscious of her own discursive voice.

—PETER FRANK