

# THE NEW REGIME 2008

Ushering in *BlackBook's* annual special-edition celebration and prognostication of the people, places, and things we see leaving their mark in the culture well beyond the New Year. While a new President of the United States isn't included, we sure are excited about *that* 'new regime' too (particularly since, at the very least, it ends that old one).

## The New Literary Enfant Terrible

**BOOKS** MERCEDES HELNWEIN CAME OF AGE IN A VIENNESE CASTLE, HER FACE BANDAGED, MOUTH FILLED WITH MEDICAL INSTRUMENTS (ALL IN THE NAME OF ART). WITH HER FORTHCOMING NOVEL, AND NEW SOLO ART SHOWS ON THE HORIZON, THE NEXT GENERATION HELNWEIN IS OUT TO PROVE JUST HOW STRANGE—AND GENIUS—SHE CAN GET.  
By Nick Haramis

As a slight child, novelist and fine artist Mercedes Helnwein started fooling around with comic books. She'd bury herself in work, trying to ignore her father, Austrian-Irish shock artist Gottfried Helnwein, as he positioned nearby zombies and Nazi henchmen for his various art projects.

Helnwein grew up feeling alienated by the modern world, happy to hide away in a secluded Viennese castle overrun with three siblings, where, she explains, "I was stuck in the Victorian era and Mark Twain's America, and blues music." The Helnwein children spent their days posing for their father, their faces painted and bandaged, steel clamps in their mouths. When taken to restaurants to mingle with dad's famous friends—Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Muhammad Ali—she ignored them in favor of literary escapism.

And then—maybe her greatest escape of all—Helnwein moved to Los Angeles. Now 27, she has her own entourage that includes Marilyn Manson, Giovanni Ribisi, and Jason Lee (who will host her 2008 gallery opening in Los Angeles). She continues to garner critical acclaim for her drawings, and received raves for "Strange Days," a high-profile solo exhibition at New York's Bespoke Gallery this past summer.

Her visual works feature women juggling defiance and restraint, a combination that will serve her well on *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*, her debut novel set for an early 2008 release by Simon & Schuster. Described as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* for the literary set, *Potential Hazards* is a cautionary tale fueled by its protagonist's bizarre perception of adolescence. On setting pen to paper, Helnwein grins and says, "It's like being God. You can do whatever the hell you want."



HELNWEIN *Self-Portrait with Ribbon*, pencil on paper, 2006.

## Mercedes Helnwein in Conversation with Gottfried Helnwein

Two generations of art provocateurs discuss tortured saints, world wars, and the unbearable lightness of being normal.

**GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN:** You've been drawing and writing your own little stories since you were seven.

**MERCEDES HELNWEIN:** Since before that. But I think I was around seven when I started trying to combine the writing and drawing. I did a whole series of little comic books.

**GH:** You were reading all the time too. You never went anywhere without a book. In restaurants, when we were hanging out with other people, you were reading.

**MH:** That's pretty much the bulk of what I did in my teens. The modern world just kind of annoyed me—everything that was hip at the time didn't at all fit in with my ideals. I was stuck in the Victorian era and Mark Twain's great America and the blues. I know you always felt similarly about that. You were obsessed with needing a castle when we still lived in Vienna.

**GH:** Well, I was born into this middle-class family right after the war in Vienna, where everything was seriously fucked by the two world wars, thanks to the stupid generations preceding us. I found myself in limbo with a bunch of ugly and frightened people.

As a little kid, I felt like I had been marooned on a small, hostile, and forgotten island. I didn't want to be there. I looked around and asked myself, "Where is my castle?" Everything was so small and narrow-minded then. Everyone seemed to be competing at being the most boring and mediocre.

**MH:** You told me once that you didn't want to be a painter because you thought it would be boring.

**GH:** The only art that I experienced as a kid were the paintings of tortured saints in the cold churches where I spent most of my early years. I saw people nailed on crosses or pierced by arrows, Jesus ripping his shirt open and revealing his sacred heart surrounded by a crown of thorns, bleeding and burning. These were the images that haunted my dreams.

Some years later, I opened a gum wrapper that contained a tiny, badly printed picture of Elvis. I was in a state of shock, because I didn't know that a human being could be so beautiful. I didn't know who he was, and I didn't know his name, but he was an epiphany for me. Later it was the Rolling Stones, Hendrix, Captain Beefheart, Muddy Waters, and others who kept me alive. When I was sixteen or seventeen, I was convinced that the ultimate state of existence was to be a member of the Rolling Stones. Everything else that the world had to offer disgusted me.

The last thing I wanted to be was some weird painter with a beard, a smock, and beret standing in front of an easel, painting squares and triangles or shit like that.

**MH:** Why did you end up studying painting then?

**GH:** I scanned through all the possible occupations that society had to offer, and one day I realized that there was no way that I would ever fit into this system. I thought maybe with aesthetics, I could express what I felt deep inside, and that maybe it could even have a certain impact on society. That's when I decided to become an artist.

I knew immediately what to paint: wounded and bandaged children. It was intuition. I was amazed how many emotions and how much excitement my little watercolors could trigger in people.

**MH:** Recently, I've been thinking that there are probably two types of artists: the ones who are in love with the medium, and those who are trying to communicate something. Both are valid I, think.

**GH:** Kandinsky said, "In art, everything is allowed." You are on your own. You don't have to justify what you do.

**MH:** Yeah, a work of art can't solely depend on great technique if there is no backbone or nothing to give it life. I think the only thing that should be illegal is insincerity in art. You can really sniff out something phony.

In the same way, I was starting to be so disappointed with music. I really thought it was over, dwindling down to some kind of embarrassing halt. Then, somehow the White Stripes emerged. I remember lying on my bed in the middle of the afternoon listening to their album, almost paralyzed.

**GH:** We live in the golden age of materialism, where religion is replaced by psychiatry, art by "entertainment." The White Stripes are like a good rain in Death Valley.

If you're unhappy with the state of things, you have to create your own micro-society where art still rules. I always wanted a big family, lots of kids, friends, and dogs—and a nice castle.

**MH:** That was a good place to spend a bulk of childhood.

**GH:** I always thought, “One day I will have a bunch of kids and I’ll give them all the freedom that I was craving. We will travel together and explore the world. They will be my closest friends—not subordinates—and we will be a gang.” I always wanted to live in a creative society with high culture, aesthetics and peaceful anarchy. I hated this over-regulated bureaucracy, where all these half-wit, self-appointed authorities tell you what to do and what to think—and especially what not to do and not to think.

**MH:** Peaceful anarchy is a great way of describing it. I remember that you never wanted to travel anywhere without at least one kid, and so we ended up going pretty much everywhere—like when you took Ali to meet Muhammad Ali.

**GH:** Yeah, that was in Los Angeles when he lived there. The Austrian and German Television was producing a documentary on me and I insisted that Muhammad Ali be in the film. I loved how he challenged the white puritan establishment, how he danced in the ring and shouted to the world, “I am the greatest.” I named Ali after him. Muhammad was so sweet when we met him. He approached little Ali, who was three at that time, hugged and kissed him, and then he started to spar with him.

**MH:** I also remember drawing Ali from life an awful lot. I don’t even know how he managed to sit still for so long while I tried to get him down on paper. Then I’d draw weird repetitive patterns on his sweater—like lots of little elephants.

**GH:** Even with all your projects, you guys were kind enough to model for my paintings and photographs. I painted your faces, bandaged them, and put medical instruments in your mouth.

**MH:** My inspiration has always been Mark Twain. I’ve always wanted to meet him, and see this world that he was describing. I guess Twain, Steinbeck, and the blues are all different angles of this same thing that I feel so attached to.

**GH:** And a lot of those influences ended up in your novel.

**MH:** Well, my first novel really couldn’t be about anything other than America. I think I owe it that much. Writing it, I was definitely fueled by all the impressions the American culture and history has

left in me, but at the same time, I wanted this to flavor the story, not suffocate it. It's called *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*, which gives you a pretty good idea of what it is about.

**GH:** Between writing and visual art, which is more important to you?

**MH:** They're so different. They require different moods, different skills—with drawing, you can blank out, listen to audio books or music, and let your mind wander all over the place. But with writing you have to be right there, writing that sentence. It's always felt a little like surgery to me, but on the other hand, you get the opportunity to be literal. Words are so powerful, and it's extremely gratifying to put something down on paper exactly how you want it and then serve it up. Plus, writing a novel is like being God. You can do whatever the hell you want—make your characters go through whatever whims you happen to have that day.

It's funny that we all ended up in the middle of some field of art quite early on, only too glad to skip college or university. You and mom never even mentioned college to us.

**GH:** I don't believe in that education system very much. I actually encouraged you to stay away from school. The most important thing is to stay curious and look around and keep learning as long as you breathe. In our family there was never a distinction between work, study, and private life. It is all one.

**MH:** We never even took any family vacations. All the trips we took were related to art. Your work was pretty much going on all the time. Life in an average family was very alien to me. I just kind of knew it from movies, you know, where the mom stays at home and cooks. The dad comes home at six every evening and says, "Honey, I'm home!"

**GH:** I think we are the normal ones.