

DRAWINGS, ART, FILMS AND MUSIC

Artist and novelist, Mercedes Helnwein first appeared in *BLAG* Vol. 3 No 1 when Danny Masterson introduced us to her work. This Austrian native and resident of Ireland and Los Angeles has since progressed to make films and create art in brand new ways.

Where were you 20 years ago and what did you want to be when you grew up?

"Twenty years ago I was a little kid, but it's funny because I was doing pretty much the same things I'm doing now. Drawing, writing, filming weird stuff with my parents' video camera, and dressing up my friends for photo-shoots. I don't think I thought too much about what I wanted to do as a grown up and somehow I was lucky enough to never have to figure it out."

How has your work progressed since you started and where would you like to see it once you reach your 20th year?

"Initially I thought I was just going to be a writer, except I was always drawing obsessively and so I almost accidentally ended up in random art shows in LA and with a group of dedicated collectors. Once I realized I was actually getting a response from people to my little drawings, it was hard to ignore doing art on a more serious level. It was too irresistible. It became clear that a crucial part of being an artist is to have ones work end up in front of other people. Just to be drawing in my own room for myself became completely uninteresting. And in order to do that I had to get far more involved and have an audience in mind, which is where things really changed.

"I guess since then my work has grown a lot in size and spilled over into many more media, which I really hope it will continue to do. I don't like things to get too predictable and monotonous. I like when each piece is a battle to be won."

What main events over the last 20 years do you think have inspired or helped shape your work?

"When I was a teenager I found out about Blues music – old stuff like Blind Willie McTell, Charlie Patton, Son House, Leadbelly, etc. For me that was the most important cultural encounter I made. I had never been aware of anything else that was so powerful. It set a new standard for everything."

You live between Ireland and Los Angeles. What's the best of both worlds?

"Well, they are like opposite sides of a battery. LA has a lot of worlds living on top of each other, lots of energy, lots of everything going on simultaneously. I think you can get your hands on whatever you want there any time you want.

"Where we live in Ireland, out in the countryside, it is incredibly peaceful, green and beautiful, and you definitely can't get your hands on anything you want at any time you want. It gives you back your sanity a bit. And there are some amazing pubs in the middle of nowhere where people bring their instruments to play."

Is there one particular place of the two that encourages you with a certain aspect? For example your films maybe in LA and your drawings in Ireland? If so which and how?

"Most of my inspirations comes from the U.S. to be honest. It has been like that ever since I read "Huck Finn" when I was 14.

"I developed a deep fascination for the American south via literature and music. I became obsessed with that part of the country long before I had ever been there. But there are many layers of American life that fascinate me – the language, slang, idealism, the dark sides, religion, living rooms, strip malls, highways, restaurants, the loneliness, and its vast space."

You've been getting recognised for the films you make. To me they feel like a cross between Hitchcock and *Bande Apart*, not sure if you agree! How did the

style and concept come about and how would you describe it?

"I initially started making these films to accompany my drawings. For each exhibition I'd have a screening room with a corresponding film projected against a wall. The theme of the drawings would continue in the film – the same characters, the same scenes but with movement, color and sound. So it gave people, including myself, the chance to get a secret insight into what was happening in the drawings.

"It's weird, but I never was particularly inspired by other films where my own films are concerned. It's always been more from music that I'd get ideas. In fact, I always have to have the music done first, so I can edit to it."

Do you work with a crew and editor, or are you hands on?

"On some of them I did everything from dressing the people, lighting them, filming the scenes, directing and editing. It gets a little intense. Only the music is not done by me – that is my brother Ali. I give him a general idea of what I'm looking for and he takes it from there and always comes back with some amazing material for me to edit to. To have complete control like that feels obsessively necessary sometimes, although it can be an overwhelming amount of work too.

"When I do films for fashion, like the ones I did for Orla Kiely, there is definitely a crew involved. Although even with those, I still do the editing myself, because for me that is where you basically create the film."

Taking all your works into account: writing, art and filmmaking, is there anything you would apply them to as a new project, for example an animated film perhaps? Or would you add another string to your bow?

"I'm very closely connected to music in everything I do, so I'd love to intertwine my work more deeply with music. But I realized today that I'd love to add a much wider variety of projects to what I do. I like the idea of using any medium available in any field of art."

