



MERCEDES
HELNWEIN



INTERVIEW: DANNY MASTERSON
ART: MERCEDES HELNWEIN

I began collecting Mercedes Helnwein's work before she had ever publicly exhibited it. One day, through a mutual friend, I ended up in her apartment in front of a dining room table, which was carelessly covered in a pile of ink drawings – and I have been an avid fan of her work ever since.

Talent may be hereditary, but genius is a much more slippery substance. It is strictly individual – and Mercedes is definitely not a type. Her images are weirdly virginal, yet obscure and startling at the same time. She has a knack for manipulating common things into effortless arrangements of ironic activity in a way that I haven't seen anywhere else. Her work is addictive, and I'm really excited to see that it has entered the art world as it has.

Why am I your favorite person in the history of the world?

You have something that one can't quite put one's finger on. Something deep and bottomless that defies time, space and logic. Also, you support real art at a time when a lot of great artists will probably never even become artists because the art scene is flooded with substitute "art".

Why on earth would you have me be your interviewer when I am terrible at writing? (You're not allowed to say "because there was no one else available").

Because:

- a) I have seen no proof that you are terrible at writing, and I won't just take your word for it.
- b) I knew you'd give me some questions that I have never had the opportunity to grapple with before.

How old were you when you started drawing? Did you begin drawing in that cross-hatch style you became known for, or did that come later on?

I don't remember ever not drawing. It started off with a lot of princesses. Actually, ONLY princesses. Then, when I was about eight, I progressed to ten million life studies of my brother, Ali, who would have to hold intricate positions for as long as it took me to get them down on paper.

In my teens, I began with the cross-hatch style, and I believe it was inspired by Robert Crumb's drawings, as well as a series of Edgar Allen Poe illustrations that my dad did a long time ago. They are all dark, amazing ink drawings – extremely detailed, but loose at all the right parts, and very much alive.

As an early fan of your drawings, I've been asking you to paint for almost a decade. What took you so damn long to unleash your Austrian fury with brush and canvas?

I think it has to do with a deep-rooted obsession of drawing. I love drawings. It's hard to explain exactly why you love something. For me, there is a raw energy in good drawings that is really exciting and oddly satisfying. I feel like someone's talents are squeezed through a more primitive filter or something like that. There's less to hide behind and maybe more to do in order to prove yourself. But I love that with paints you can get an intensity of colour that is not possible in the same way with colour pencil. That's really what attracts me to painting – the glow of the colours.

Your father is Gottfried Helnwein - one of the greatest living artists today. Was this stultifying to have such a high standard looming over you, or was it inspiring?

Inspiring. I grew up very close to the living, breathing art world – around my dad's work and also a lot of other artist's work, so for me this was what life was always about. No one around me had a normal nine to five job, or took vacations on cruise ships or read the Wall-Street Journal. Everything always revolved around some form of art or another. And so, it never even occurred to me to do anything "normal".

Initially I thought I was only going to be a writer, even though I drew every single day. When people started to buy my drawings or asked me to exhibit them, I was surprised. It was very flattering and encouraging to know that people liked what I did. That's how that started. And my dad's work is so different from mine that it's never bothered me. In fact, it's a great advantage for me that his studio is right around the corner from where I live. There is no one else I can talk to about art with like my dad.

Who are your top five favorite painters? (sans Papa).

Rembrandt, Goya, Egon Schiele, Lucian Freud and John Register.

I'm also going to mention Robert Crumb and this Austrian turn of the last century artist called Alfred Kubin. Both mainly did drawings, so they don't really qualify for your "painters" question, but since I have that thing about drawing, I have to add them. Their work splatters my reason in all directions. I came across Kubin in Austria when I was seventeen. I just saw a little drawing of his on a pamphlet, but it was one of the most eerie things I have ever seen. My whole stomach plummeted – in a good way.

Crumb of course is so weird and talented that how could I not adore him? Funny thing is, he once said of my dad's work: "Helnwein is a very fine artist and one sick motherfucker". This from a guy who's probably illustrated every single sexual fantasy for us that he's ever had. I love him.

Your first novel "Potential Hazards of Hester Day" blew me away. Being born in Austria and raised in Ireland, how the fuck did you write a book about a middle class family in Florida?

I'm flattered it blew you away. The way I grew up was the complete opposite of the way Hester Day grew up, but I've always been attracted to the extreme mediocrity and the banality of the middle-class as material to use in any aesthetic form, whether in writing or drawing. For me it's such a pliable subject matter. I get excited, writing about claustrophobic circumstances of that world and – to me – the weirdoes that occupy it. I've never known people like that, so I can't be sure exactly how they materialized in my imagination – they just did.

What about me do you find so damn attractive? Your art collection.

Did you study writing, or did you just sit down at a typerwriter one day and not stop 'til you had a book?

I specifically didn't study writing. I didn't want anyone telling me anything about writing. I didn't want any experts or critics throwing out solid oak "facts" about writing that later on would only cripple my work.

The best way to write, in my opinion, is just to write, and most likely in your teens you'll go through some pretty embarrassing writing

phases, but like a lot of other embarrassing teenage phases, you should grow out of it. I ended up with a style that I am very comfortable with and I can call my own. I basically just figured out how I like to talk on paper.

Is there another book in your horizon, and if so, is it about me? If not, what's it about?

No, it's not about you. It's about a guy called Donny Meesterson. Actually, it has L.A. as a background and right now I'm working on a cast of characters to supply the plot. They actually kind of create themselves. All I can do is to start things up and watch how the characters interact with each other.

I love writing dialogues the most probably. There's something very fascinating about listening to people throw words around, and I'm quite serious when I say that my characters sometimes leave me entirely out of the conversation.

L.A. is a great backdrop for almost any kind of story you could care to think up. It has pretty much everything. Comedy, tragedy, the bizarre, the mediocre. Every kind of culture. Every kind of person.

Do you ever find yourself painting and all of sudden distracted by thoughts you need to put down on the typewriter – or vice versa?

Yes, to the point where I'll start writing weird sentences and combinations of words on the drawing table, because I'm too lazy to grind the drawing process to a halt. These two forms of art are totally separate and yet completely complementary and somehow entwined for me. They help to cross-pollinate each other. And when I'm very pissed off about drawing, I'll write – and vice versa. It's a good technique of not wasting time. I hate to sit around and be frustrated because I'm at a dead end with some project.

Do you listen to music while you paint or write? If not, does music ever inspire you creatively?

YES. I have no idea what I'd do without music. I've written scenes before where I just felt everything dead and stagnant and every idea that comes to mind is a drag, but if I put on the right music it jolts everything to life. I get emotions and images and words almost instantly. Music is maybe the most important form of art to me personally.

I always hate the question "what are your three favorite bands?" because there are too many different genres of music. So, name your three favorite bands in three different genres.

The White Stripes, Tom Waits and Beck
Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan
Blind Willie McTell, Howlin' Wolf and Son House
These are not totally accurate or fair, because there are too many blues guys I blindly adore. How could I leave out Robert Johnson with a clean conscience? Or Mozart for that matter. Classical music is another category I feel strongly for.

I love you?

I love you too.

Leave Ireland and come back to America soon... We miss you!

Alright, I will. Thanks! And sorry for butchering some of your questions.

I like being butchered, it makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside...