

MERCEDES HELNWEIN

“SHADOW, LIGHT AND SUSPENSE ARE ESSENTIAL”

"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted". Mercedes Helnwein remembers the first paragraph of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It's the creative and life slogan of this artist with a style without frontiers.

By Luisa Bernal

Mercedes Helnwein was born in Austria and lives between L.A. and Ireland. She is provocation artist Gottfried Helnwein's daughter and has inherited from him the belief of an art without frontiers. Mercedes draws, takes part in multidisciplinary projects, films videos with her brother, the musician Ali Helnwein; and writes (she published her first novel, *"The Potential Hazards of Hester Day"*, in 2008 with Simon & Schuster). She is currently preparing an exhibition at Merry Karnowsky Gallery in L.A. for November 2009.

I don't know if it can be annoying that usually there's a reference to your father, when someone introduces you. Did being Gottfried Helnwein's daughter make your life different from the those of your classmates when you were a kid?

No, I never felt that the difference between who my parents were and who other kids' parents were was an issue.

Two more of your siblings are also dedicated to creative stuff (music and photography), has it got anything to do with the atmosphere that surrounded you?

Yes, definitely. Besides the fact that we were always surrounded by the living art world, we also grew up with the idea that whatever we wanted to do would be possible. Our parents never stopped us from trying things out or going in different directions. They always supported us with what we wanted to do, and helped us in whatever ways they could.

Writer, photographer, painter, video artist... is your appearance in Beck's Gamma Ray video a first step into musical area or do you leave it to your brother Ali? How came this collaboration with Beck?

I actually contributed artwork for Beck's album *"The Information"* a few years ago, and then recently he asked if I would be in his video. But I have always had a strong affinity to the music world long before that. Music is so essential to the work I do, and has helped to inspire so many ideas in my writing and fine artwork, that I don't even know if I could get anywhere without it. I have always wanted to be mixed up in this field, and I intend to go much deeper into it with collaborations with artists -- I'd love to do some music videos.

How did you start sharing projects with Alex Prager?

She lived in the same building as I did when I first moved to L.A. and we got along pretty much right from the beginning. I think although we are very different people and do very different work, we have had the same standard, appreciation or taste in aesthetics. We clicked in that way. Plus, she was always the easiest person to collaborate with in terms of work ethics or excitement.

Could your paintings and photographs be the perfect illustrations to your books? Is there a common story behind them?

Although the book was very visual to me while I was writing it, my drawings have nothing to do with the book and to me are very different in style. Sure there is evidence in the drawings and the writing that connect them to the same person, but I indulge in different themes and emotions for each of them. I let loose in different ways. But who knows, to someone else's eyes there might be far more similarities than to me.

If I gave you a notebook and a pen right now, what would be more probable -- that you would write a story or draw something?

It would depend on the day and the circumstances. But I doodle an awful lot, so most likely I would draw something, even if words were to follow.

Is the play between light and shadow the main area you like to experiment with in your different works?

Light and shadow are very important to my work, but they are not the only or even the main thing I concentrate on. The story, the expression on the face, the oddity or the suspense that the subject matter is caught in -- all that is just as crucial. I feel like there has to be something, some emotion or communication, that people can excavated from my work -- traces of a plot that people can piece it together however they want.

I love when everyone tells me a totally different scenario to one of my drawings. I've had people tell me my exhibition is great because it is so dark and creepy, and someone else that same night come up to me laughing and telling me they love the humor of the work.

What or who inspires you?

Everything about Tom Waits, Charles Bukowski's poems, 'Maybellene' by Chuck Berry, the blues, Steinbecks' "East of Eden", The White Stripes, the movie "Rushmore", my dad's drawings and etchings, John Register paintings, Robert Crumb's blues drawings, the American south and the Midwest.

What makes The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn so special for you?

"Huck Finn" is so brilliant from so many different angles, that I won't be able to properly answer that question in full, but here is a partial answer: I was fourteen when I first read that book, and it blew me away -- everything about it, starting with the Notice at the beginning: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted..." I really lived in that world while reading the book -- in fact, that world was more real to me than my actual surroundings at the time. And when I was done I developed a homesickness for old America, and a strong longing for the South and the Midwest. Years later I finally made it to the Mississippi river -- it was winter and there were blocks of ice floating on it and I had a cold, but I was so thrilled I could hardly breathe.

After living in different countries since your childhood, have you found your ideal place for living and for working?

I live in Ireland and Los Angeles currently, and I'm very happy with this balance. They are like opposite sides of a battery, charged with different electrical currents. The quality of life can't be beat in Ireland (in my personal opinion) -- the air is amazing, the countryside, the people and just the general sense of relief and feeling of sanity. But Los Angeles with all its chaos, diversity, and the battle between good and evil, is a great breeding-ground for ideas and the atmosphere is perfect for working.

Will you come to Spain?

I would love very much to visit Spain and show my work there.