

Artist Mercedes Helnwein on Her Work and Culture in America



To look at [Mercedes Helnwein](#)'s work you wouldn't guess that she's a young, contemporary artist living in Los Angeles in 2010. Her drawings portray subjects that appear to be plucked out of another era—one in which modesty and conservative, feminine dress were still en vogue and taking the time to fashion one's hair was a given.

Helnwein is best known for her drawings, but has produced several videos as well—live and choreographed interpretations of her styled characters—as well as a novel, "[The Potential Hazards of Hester Day](#)," which was published in 2008 by Simon & Schuster.

Helnwein graciously took time out between projects to answer some questions for Curated and share her thoughts on her process, culture and education (or lack thereof) in America, and her childhood interest in Archie comics and "Murder She Wrote."

For those who don't know your work, how would you describe it...in 5 words or less?

Southern Gothic occurrences in a vintage insurance office.
That's eight words, sorry.

You create art in more mediums than most (drawing, creative fiction, video to date). How do you express yourself differently through each of them?

Different media give you totally different opportunities. What I can do with video, I obviously can't do with a drawing. It's liberating to be able to work with movement and saturated colors and sound after using just a pencil and a paper for so long. But then again, the chaos of a few lines in a drawing can be extremely powerful and satisfying in a way that a film can't – it almost feels more private.

And writing is more dangerous than visual work, in my opinion, because it's more explicit. Ideas are less vague and forced into actual words so I have to be more exact with what I want to say, since I'm actually saying it. I've often mentioned this, but it's true: writing feels like surgery. You can't afford to slack off while you're doing it.

You only arrived in the States and Los Angeles as a teen. How would you compare America's appreciation of the arts to that of European nations?

I guess it's a known fact that the level of education here is incredibly low. Culture and knowledge in the humanities are to a large degree non-existent in people's lives in the U.S. I'm not talking about everyone, but of the majority.

You can weasel your way through high school and not know shit from shit by the end of it. And even if you paid attention, I'm not sure that you'd learn a lot. People know how to read, yes, and sometimes how to do

some math, but there is no solid foundation of any cultural or historical knowledge when they leave high school. You're left on your own if you want to get involved in art. And if you've never been inspired or learned to be fascinated by it, then why would it occur to you that this is important? Especially if a bad education is coupled with the force-feeding of television, magazines, computer games and American Idol type fabricated music. There's so much junk to keep everybody's attention busy.

But that being said, I find L.A. pretty benign and generous towards any creative endeavor. It has its monstrous film industry, which is like an over-fed god – but while everyone is busy concentrating on this deity, all kinds of interesting things are going on. You can find great artists and sub-cultures and a vast variety of weirdos creating fascinating things in the crevices and being able to survive because of the film industry.

You're really allowed to come up with ideas here.

Your father is an artist. Your brother's a musician. Is it fair to say that culture breeds culture?

Yes. Seeing other people create makes it more do-able to create yourself.

The subjects in both your videos and drawings are mostly modestly dressed females with fabulous hair. What's your inspiration here?

I don't like using contemporary clothes or styling for my characters. To me that makes it look more dated, oddly enough. But also, modern every-day clothes have become so boring, sloppy and uneventful. There's nothing there that would crank up a story in my mind.

I gravitate towards old-fashioned, artificial propriety. The aesthetic of weird patterns and colors, solid shoes and a general middle-class sense of small-time glamour or drama. And although I have nothing against nudes, by keeping my characters clothed I get the idea they can hide more secrets.

Your videos' subjects move with great intention. Is choreography another of your great talents?

I love choreographing things. I mean, honestly, I'll get my fingers into anything that seems like it will help bring an idea across. And for me, approaching ideas from all different angles helps to keep the ideas loose. I would get stuck if I concreted myself to one set of rules or limitations.

With your skill set so varied, do you imagine a more multimedia approach to your work at some point? Or do you prefer to focus on one art form at a time?

Yes on multimedia. I'll basically do anything that I feel like I want to do or try, and I'll do it all at the same time.

Is art created better alone or collaboratively?

Depends what kind of art. Having your idea or vision be unadulterated is kind of important, and the artist needs that complete control or dictatorship over his work – you want details to be exactly like you want them to be without having to compromise or step aside for someone else’s input.

But in bands for example people co-create all the time and I can see how that kind of maelstrom of ideas with the right people can be electrifying. I envy that because I actually love working together with other people, but writing and drawing are mainly done alone. Working on video films with my brother Ali who is a composer, or collaborating on group shows with other artists, doing album art, working with fashion or music...all that kind of stuff is good for working with other artists. I think if you get along aesthetically with another person, then there’s a lot of potential for collaboration.

Is it better appreciated alone or with others?

Both. I don’t think there are any rules about how you take in art. Listening to an album alone in the car is always great. I love doing that, since it’s such a good way to let imagery float to the top of my head uninterrupted. But mostly I like to experience art with other people – or discuss it with others, stretch it out, chop it up and examine it through other people’s viewpoints.

When you’re really excited about something and you can’t talk to anyone about it, it’s frustrating. When I was sixteen and living in Florida, I was the only one I knew who was obsessed with old Delta blues and it was a bitch trying to find someone to share that with on the same level of obsession. Kids my age were on a whole different planet where taste in music was concerned.

What’s your favorite cultural institution?

Museums that have old art are always a good bet.

Do you have a guilty pleasure when it comes to consuming cultural content?

I used to read Archie comic books when I was about eight. We spent our winters in Florida a lot and that part of the culture soaked through. I’d get a comic book every time we stood at the checkout in supermarkets. Definitely an addiction. I also watched a lot of “Murder She Wrote” back then – I have no idea why that would have been interesting to an eight-year-old actually, but I was really into that show.

These days, I don’t have a T.V. anymore and it’s considerably harder to have an embarrassing guilty pleasure without one.

Does the web’s ability to help share content have any allure for you? Might it factor in to the kind of content you create in the future or the way you distribute your art?

It’s good to know you can upload something and everyone and their mother can be exposed to it (and this has it’s dark side too). I think it’s hard not to factor in the Internet at this point, whether you love it or hate it.