

## One Million Questions for One Mercedes Helnwein | by Tommy Tung



In the drawing seen above, “Man Holds a Car,” the vehicle is on a collision course. The target: a woman. The perpetrator: a man. He gazes sidelong, promise in his posture, but whether the car will reach the woman is not drawn. Only the shadow is parked there, on the side of her mouth. Her expression holds the arcane.

“Man Holds a Car” belongs to Mercedes Helnwein’s new exhibition, “East of Eden,” opening at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in Los Angeles on November 21.

Like most of her drawings, it is monochromatic and photorealistic. Pencil strokes achieve a superior level

of detail. The starring characters are usually women, their coiffures antiquated, their fashions timeless, yet all so appropriate for these freeze-framed film noirs. Humor and mischief dance by a dark candle. Mysteries are large-scale.

This is how Mercedes’ art has been since her first exhibition in 2003 -- a breathing enigma, warm-blooded infinity -- because you don’t view her work; you commune with it; you build alternate

universes and reincarnated realities.



Her origin story is lore by now: Raised in Austria, Germany, England, and Ireland, Mercedes is the daughter of artist, Gottfried Helnwein. She nourished her senses with such things as Russian literature, Mark Twain, the Blues, Robert Crumb, and black tea. This training would lead to her literary refinement and success, as well as her command of pencil and paper. In 2000, she began dual residency in Los Angeles and Tipperary, Ireland. Five years later, an art installation by her, Alex Prager, and Beth Riesgraf called “America Motel”

led to sponsorship by WeSC (We Are the Superlative Conspiracy). Since then, her exhibitions like “Strange Days” and “Whistling Past the Graveyard” have caught international attention. 2008 saw the

publication of her first novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*.

The story ahead now begs for discovery: her career trajectory, recent inspirations, personal evolution, and secrets to take to the grave.

In this interview, I cannot detail Mercedes' reactions, body language, or vocal quality. Our conversation was over email, between Los Angeles and Tipperary. Instead, you may imagine her, as I remember her, from the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in September 2008:

Mercedes stands tall, cascading hair, rutilant on ivory skin. Her voice is a curious composition -- American English, hints of German and Irish -- the accent neither strong nor singularly national, but a sea of subtle tones. She has many smiles. The one I revere most is equal parts bashful and wise. It occurs in the middle of sentences, with a breath of laughter, eyes cast away. This is her humility and this is startling -- she seems blind to her gift.

She sees clearly, of course.

She just doesn't practice aggrandizement.

She is a creative soul and this is a fact and this is her life.

She has much to tell us.

**Mercedes means "mercies."  
How accurately does that capture you?**

Mercedes is a Spanish-Catholic name referring to the Virgin Mary, Santa María de las Mercedes as in our "Lady of Mercies."

Yes, I think that explains me to a tee.

It was also the name of Edmond Dantès' lost love in *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Dumas, which is one of my favorite books. And if anyone is going to read it, I forbid them to pick up any abridged versions of it.





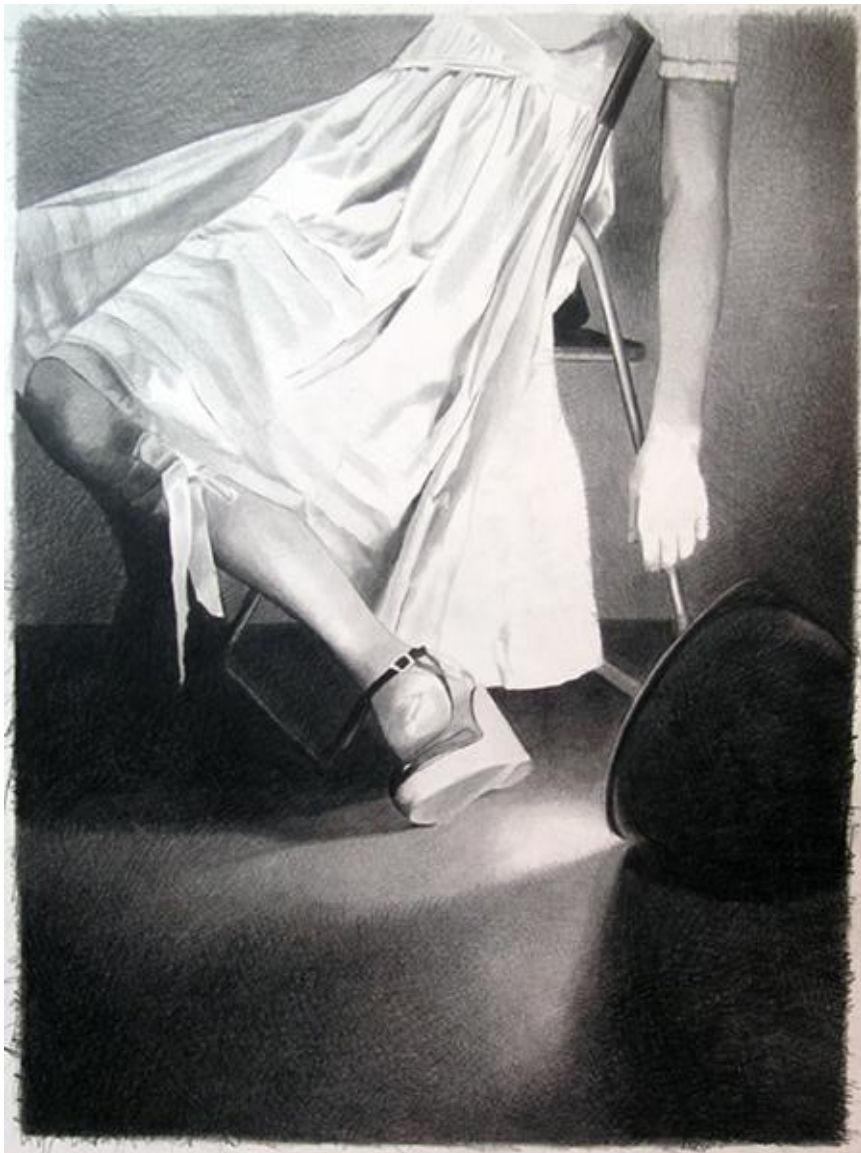
**How are your banjo skills developing? What sort of compositions are you making? Do you sing along to them? How does playing music release your soul?**

That's funny. People usually don't take my banjo serious enough to ask me about it in an interview. But yeah, I have a huge enthusiasm for the world this instrument represents to me. Porches, pies -- all that.

I have a seriously beautiful 4-string tenor banjo for Irish tunes. It's from the 1930s. I bought it because I saw it in the window of a little music store in Ireland and I was obsessed with having it. I know that sounds corny, but it's true. I didn't know the first thing about playing a banjo, just that they looked so beautiful and reminded me of the underwater scene in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* with that banjo floating in the water.

My plan is to become ridiculously good at playing banjo. I'm not there yet, because that drawing thing keeps on getting in the way. But I will get there.

**Your doctor said that your heart beats twice as fast as an average person's -- congratulations on not being average -- and so how has this affected your life? Your art? Do you have twice the passion of Average Jane? Does the inhuman speed at which blood goes to your brain account for your keen imagination and wit?**



It's not my heart that's the problem -- it's the doctors. I get a nervous reaction when they are anywhere within 50 feet of me.

**In your novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*, on your Web site, in your artwork, your humor is wry, shrewd, and inviting. Some journal entries state that it's "too easy to be an asshole," that you are a "hopeless romantic," that you've outgrown "the adolescent middle finger." Today, do you still believe in these opinions? Are you a hopeful romantic? Is assuming the role of an asshole increasingly difficult these days? What kind of middle finger is currently attached to you?**

I am a romantic. Not in the sense of romantic comedies, but in the sense of the 19th century romantics. Like Chopin's "Ballades" -- they sum up that spirit maybe better than anything

else. I like the ideals that are larger than modern day concerns. I like the days when there were still ideals.

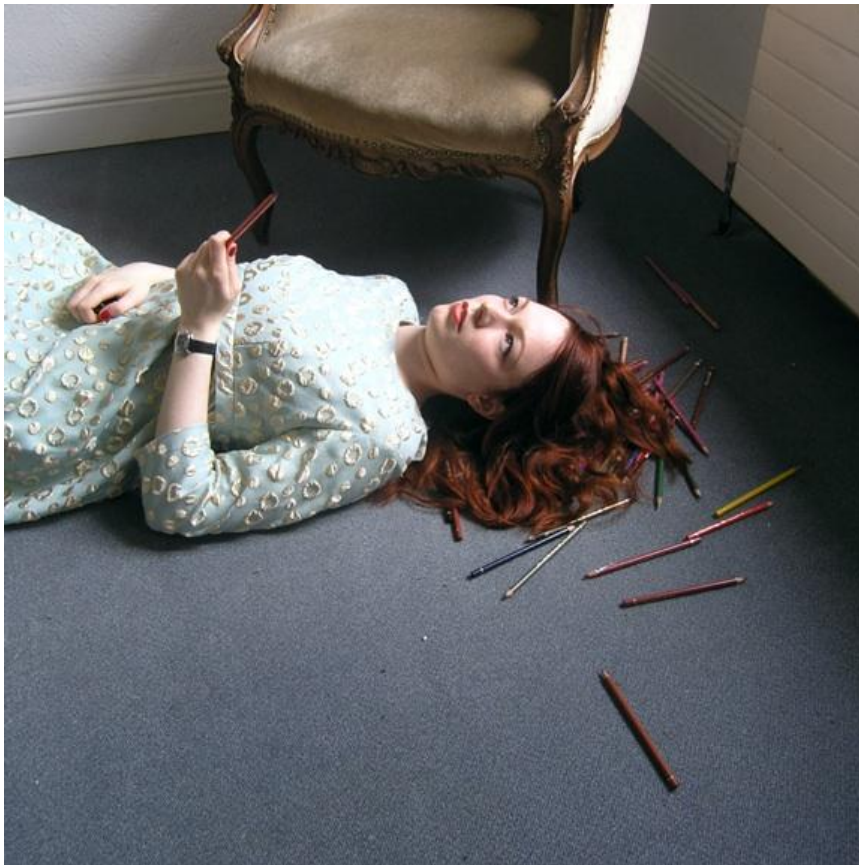
The whole “asshole” theory...yeah, I remember writing about that. That was a specific thought process I had at the time and it’s all well documented in that essay, so it’s best to go there to dig out what I meant.

As for these days: I think there’s no reason to judge a decent person. People can dig themselves a hole, fuck things up, do something stupid (and I have yet to meet a person who hasn’t done something stupid) and they can just as well climb out of there and straighten it all out again.

I don’t feel the need to look down on someone for what makes them human. There’s just more interesting things to do with my time.

That’s on a good day.

On a bad day, I can still be merciless despite my name.



**Tell me about your portraits of Kate and Laura Mulleavy, of the fashion label, Rodarte, for the magazine, Achtung. Why did you do it? How was the experience? And are portraits of fashion designers a habit-forming activity for you?**

I was asked by Achtung magazine to do portraits of the Rodarte designers. I love what they do and the beautiful and strange world they’ve created.

When I draw a model for my own purposes, I can make that person be anyone I want. With a portrait, it has to be exactly that person, and I like that responsibility. I like the idea that in a hundred years from now people will look at that drawing and extract the personality from it.

I wouldn’t say that I’m going to make a habit of doing portraits of fashion designers in particular, but rather that I’d like to document interesting personalities in general. I love doing portraits of other artists that I admire. I’d love to do a whole series like that.

**What can we anticipate regarding your upcoming exhibition, “East of Eden,” in November 2009 at the Merry Karnowsky gallery? Will we see drawings? Films? How will the work differ from “Whistling Past the Graveyard” parts 1 and 2? Feel free to share anything you worked with (or plan to work with) -- types of models, props, mantras, music, muses, etc.**

It'll be drawings and video, as far as I know right now.

I like the combination of these two mediums. They help each other out.

I think the [preview video on my Web site] gives a few clues as to what might be going on in the drawings. Or not. Maybe the video only drags up more questions. Either way, they help each other out.

I get the idea that the characters of this series are all somehow involved in the same invisible disasters. They all seem to be reacting to something or dealing with something -- interacting with one another, even if they are not on the same paper.



I don't know what that disaster is. Maybe they're plotting a murder, or maybe it's just a matter of a Christmas party faux pas and everyone is trying to suffocate the embarrassment. I don't know. Some days it seems more serious than others.

**Tell me about the experience of reading John Steinbeck's East of Eden. Then tell me how you viewed the world afterwards.**

I'm a sucker for good literature. John Steinbeck is one of my favorites. He's so good, in fact that I didn't even notice until

about half way through The Grapes of Wrath how good he really was. It crept up on me. There was a sentence -- I marked it and then lost the page, so I have no clue what it is anymore -- but this sentence almost made my heart stop it was so damn good. And East of Eden was even better. It really moved me.

I have so much respect for someone who can put together a beautiful sentence. That is an artform that I feel is running a little thin these days -- the art of really knowing how to make language sound good.

**How does the title, "East of Eden," match the work for your exhibition?**

I like the imagination that surfaces when these particular words are strung together. There's the Steinbeck book of course, and he got his title from the Bible -- I am not trying to directly reference either of them. I just like the sound of those words.

"East of Eden" could mean so many things.





**What were the inspirations for the work in “East of Eden”? How did they come to you (for instance, the filmmaker, David Lynch, claims Blue Velvet began with red lips, green lawns, an ear in a field, and Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet.”)?**

I think there are always many different things. The stock market crash was inspirational -- visually speaking. All those expressions of grown men breaking apart. Fashion has also become very interesting to me recently. If the characters in my drawings are wearing certain clothes, I think that can slap on another layer in terms of the stories you could get out of it. I’m not that picky when it comes to things inspiring me though. I’ll take anything that sweeps up against the curb.

**Tell me about the other recent shows: “SCOPE Basel” in Switzerland and “Sister Cities” in Berlin. What work did you share in these group exhibitions? After doing solo exhibitions, what were the**

**challenges of sharing the stage with other artists? What were the benefits? What are some valuable lessons you’ve taken away from both types of exhibitions?**

Solo shows are great because you can take charge of a whole gallery space and do whatever the hell you want. There’s always that little jolt in my stomach at the prospect of doing that.

Group shows are nice in a different way -- you have less stress. You usually get handed a theme and all you have to do is try and outdo all the other artists. It’s a lot of fun. It feels like a weird homework assignment.



**What is the difference between the work in “Whistling Past the Graveyard,” Part 1 and Part 2, and how did you make your selections for each one?**

After the “Whistling Past the Graveyard” exhibition in Los Angeles, I wasn’t totally ready to quit that series. I had another show coming up in Berlin and so I decided to go a little further with it until it really felt done.

**What difference do you notice in the reception of your work, between the American galleries and the European ones? Do you find yourself behaving differently in the galleries, as a result? How has this shaped your American-European identity?**

I missed some of my European openings, so I don’t feel I can accurately answer that question.

But at my show in L.A., I was pretty much pinned against a wall and bombarded with questions and opinions. For the entire opening, I couldn’t move from that spot. It was flattering and surprising. I was thrilled to know that people cared that much, and that what I did was important to them.

Drawing is a relatively isolated activity, but it’s never complete until the work collides with an audience. So that point, when people finally lean over your work and then seek you out to tell you about it, is the proper end of that cycle.





**Put on a tweed jacket. Pretend you're an art historian: "Since the artwork of Mercedes Helnwein debuted in 2003, how would you describe the evolution of her work? What period was she in back then, what period is she in now, and what explains her development?" Extra credit if you answer in the third person.**

I think with any artist, even if the technical aspect of their work changes, the themes and the subject matters come and go, and different media surface -- I think that there are always traces of the artist's fingerprints to be found.

There's always an identity there somewhere, even if it's invisible.

I used to do a lot of messy, little ink drawings. I encounter them sometimes in my collectors' houses, and it always takes me by surprise. I'll turn down a hallway and then come face to face with something I did in my teens. It feels like I did them in another lifetime, and I'm intrigued at how I drew lines back then, how I was able to be so loose and sloppy. It always makes me want to run home and try to emulate my old style.

It's fun to come across old work. It's like coming across a twin's work. It's got your scent all over it, but looks differently done.

See, just talking about it makes me want to clean my ink pens.



**Along these lines, some people think of a five-year-plan for their career, their stock investments, their number of offspring, etc. What would you like to see happen for you over the next five years?**

That's a secret.