

## Exclusive Interview with Mercedes Helnwein, Part Two



### Interview by Tommy Tung

Mercedes Helnwein is an artist, novelist, filmmaker, WeSC activist, and banjo practitioner. Known for large-scale drawings of intrigue and suspense, she is one of the few artists today with divine control of pencil and paper. Her new exhibition, “East of Eden,” opens at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in Los Angeles on November 21. An email correspondence between Tommy Tung in Los Angeles and Mercedes Helnwein in Tipperary, Ireland discusses her burgeoning career. This is Part 2 of the 2-part interview.

**Your father lives the life of an artist and also the life of a family man. For yourself, do you see this sort of future? Could you balance a family with your artistic/literary lifestyle? How might you do it the same as he did and how might you do it differently?**

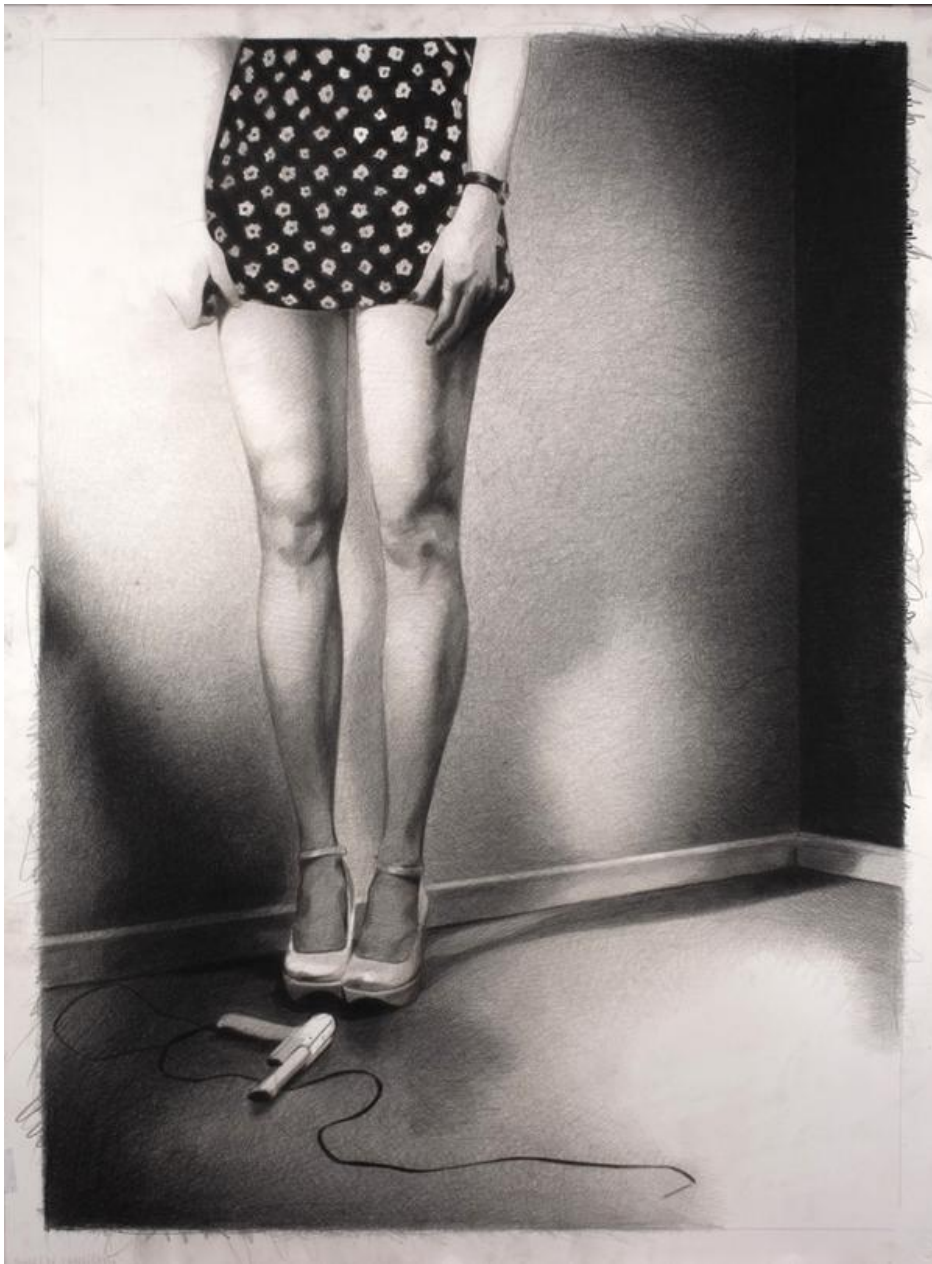
I think my parents are a good example that you can balance it all. I’m ready for it when the time comes, and I’m sure things will fall into their place somehow, even if right now I still feel very possessive of my time.

**Jeff Buckley, the late musician, felt that after his first album, *Grace*, he wasn’t as happy performing on stage, because 1) he had new material to test out and 2) audience members had already formed expectations of him. Consequently, he began playing at open-mic nights around the world, under a pseudonym to gauge genuine reactions. So, now that you are a presence in the international art world, do you feel similar disadvantages, of being expected to produce a certain type of art—and of reactions that may be favorable, but not entirely honest?**

I think you can see through a dishonest remark. I’m not really apprehensive of flattery though -- I have bigger fish to fry. And anyway, I don’t see the advantage someone would gain in flattering me about my work, but not meaning it. Where would that even lead?

**How important is it for you to keep current on your peers in the artistic community? Would that somehow detract from your existence as an artist to be overly conscious about contemporaries?**

I’m not overly conscious of my contemporaries. I have good friends that are artists and I’m always interested in seeing what they are doing and engaging in collaborations with them, etc.



But I've been disappointed far too many times in going around big galleries and making an effort to be more informed of what the official art world is currently about. Modern art has gone down a very boring path. There are a lot of great artists out there, no doubt, but in general, the modern art world makes me go into a deep coma. I've seen so much stuff that is artificially presented and plastered there by force and calculation.

Too much stuff hanging around where instead of seeing the art, I just see some curator feeling shiny and "avant-garde" about himself.

**Something interesting happened when Coldplay made it big and told the world that Radiohead was a huge influence; Radiohead replied that they hadn't listened to Coldplay (nor did it sound as though they were making plans to). On that note, if critics were to hail a new artist as a student/disciple/follower of Mercedes Helnwein -- and**

**you believed the critics were wrong about the attribution, how would you react?**

Well, I don't know that I'd take a critic in any field of art very seriously to begin with unless they have something to show for -- intelligence, love for art, maybe. A lot of them don't have that -- a few do. And too many good artists listen to a critic's opinion of their work and let it stick to them.

**Related to this, you like people to have their own meanings when viewing your drawings. You once said, "There should always be some room for any viewer's personal plot." I imagine people might have told you some of these personal plots. What is the strangest one you've ever heard? What is the best one?**





Yeah, things come up. From fairytales to murders, all the way to sexual fantasies. I see some people laughing as they tour my exhibitions; others say it's very dark. I'm thrilled to discover that all these things are going on in my work. But I think the best plots are the ones people don't tell me.

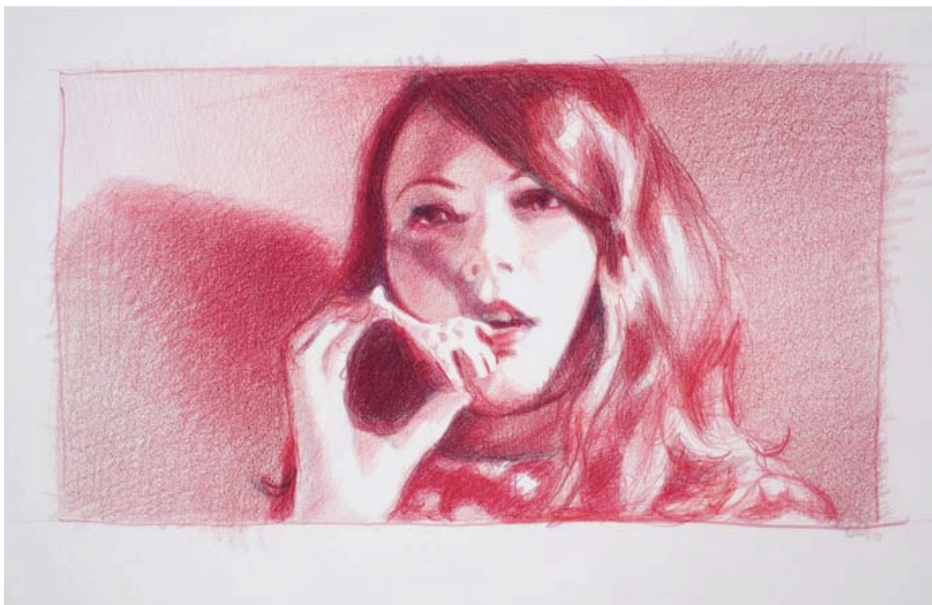
**You've commented that "the blues is something that cuts deep," In what ways has your artwork cut deep into you? What emotions or life lessons**

**have you explored? What understandings have you gained? What specific pieces demonstrate this?**

Drawing: I really depend on drawing. I will always be doing it, no matter what. No matter if I completely switch careers and become a lawyer -- I know that I would still draw when I got home at the end of the day. I'm not trying to be pretentious about it; I just get cranky when I don't do it. I have witnesses.

The Blues: The blues is one of the cleanest forms of art I have ever encountered. It really cut down to the marrow of my bones when I first encountered it and saved my life in a specific way.

In my mid-teens, I was severely lost in terms of the culture that was out there and the music on the radio that was supposed to cater to my age group. It's not that I hated it or that I even condemned it -- just that I didn't get it. I badly wanted to get into it, but I always felt like a thief or a con artist when I forced myself into that mind frame.



When I was 15, I heard Blind Willie McTell for the first time. Instantly all that stress about where I belonged culturally leaked away. This music, although so much rougher and more helpless, was the first to succeed in completely blowing my mind.

I felt like I wasn't being lied to for once, and I didn't have to pretend. No one had ever been that honest to me before with a song. Or hit me with so much horsepower.

I went on to discover that there were a whole bunch of kids in the 60s that had felt the same way and some went on to form bands like The Rolling Stones. I became an enthralled nerd, and spent a lot of days at the library, looking at pictures, reading biographies, and renting videos that documented the birth and history of rock n' roll. Suddenly there was an endless supply of music that I tore through and discovered.

I'd ask my parents, "Did you know about this?" And then I discovered of course that my parents had all those records.

It was funny, because I even understood the kids in my own time period more. I mean, I could understand how they felt when they were going to concerts. I felt like that too now -- just with different music. The first time I saw Bob Dylan perform, I nearly passed out cold; I was so scared and happy.

From all the amazing works of art I have encountered in my life, the blues was the one that most directly affected me and safeguarded my sanity. I was good from there on out.

Did I derail from the question?



**Is it important to handle things that intimidate you, as an artist? Or do you rather do projects that you're completely comfortable with? Can you remember times in your career in which you were unprepared but had to keep going?**

Yes, it's important to handle things that intimidate you. Otherwise you'd probably never get anywhere. I think you learn a lot from wrestling your way out of uncomfortable situations. Personally, there were lots of things I had to come to terms with in my career. Doing taxes, for one.

**You do large-scale drawings. What does that size afford you? What do you think it does for the viewer?**

It's always nice to have an image in front of you in large scale. It might be a pain in the ass to put it there with all those lines, but in the end, it's worth it. You can go into extreme details and play with shadow and light and body position. A drawing like that can really assault an audience. It's like a large window that gives you a decent view of some incident or frozen moment.

But on the other hand, a very small, rough, half-finished sketch can be just as powerful. It's just powerful in a different way -- more delicate, intimate and secretive.

**You once said, “I’m very old fashioned when it comes to ideals and aesthetics. I think this modern age has lost a lot of qualities that were once part of everyday life.” How does your creative work reflect this classic sensibility?**

I don’t know necessarily that it does.

I don’t know that I’m very interested in depicting my ideals. I often get my inspiration from the banal and the mediocre and the claustrophobic small-time lifestyles -- things that are far from my ideals.



**You create drawings, films, literature, and even fake office Christmas parties. How do these expressions altogether make you feel whole (for instance, what does filmmaking do for you that a staged corporate holiday party does not)?**

If you want to express totally different things, the more ways the better. There are things I do when I write that I can’t do when I draw. And things like movement that I can only play with in video films.

I have different moods and different urges. The important thing is to get them out somehow. Even if it’s something like the fake holiday party in an office.

**The open-minded approach you took with “Strange Days,” disregarding theme in the beginning, creating what simply surfaced in your mind and heart -- do you still adopt this approach when you create artwork? And what new revelations or consequences have you learned about following this method?**

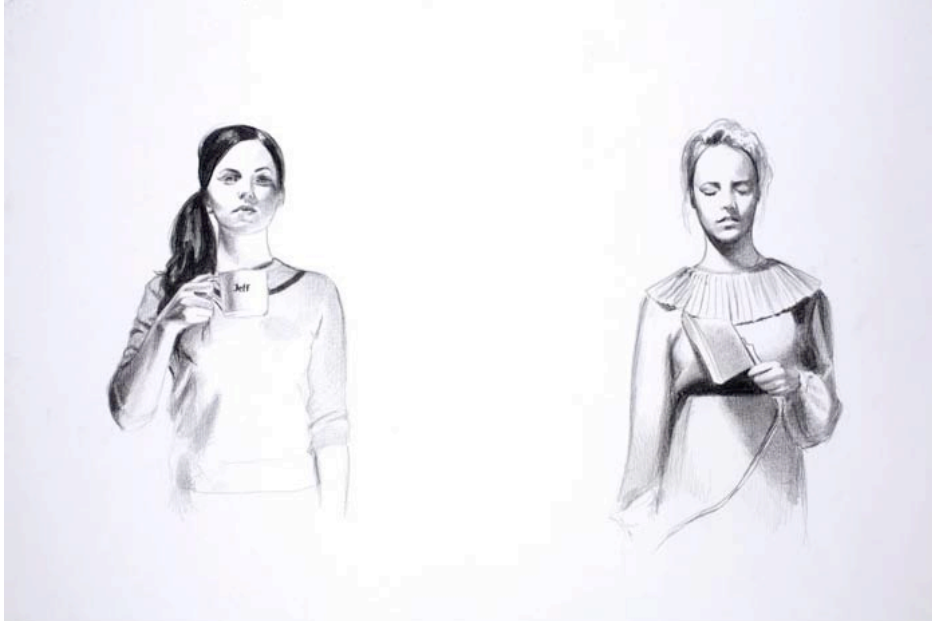
I think that’s pretty much always how I work. I’m not joking when I say that I can’t work it all out on an intellectual level. It never leads anywhere good that way.

**Bret Easton Ellis likes to write longhand, standing up in the kitchen. Every artist has their own way of working. How do you prepare yourself, emotionally and physically, before drawing? Is there a Mercedes-Helnwein-workout that the world should know about? How important is a regular setting or habit for you, when creating art? Is a cup of black tea obligatory? What kind of music feeds your senses while you draw and how do you think that music has manifested in your drawings?**



There are no emotional or physical preparations before I draw. I'm too closely related to paper and pencils at this point. We're over introductions and any awkwardness.

But there are things that make the process more palatable: Tea definitely never hurts.



Music is good because it gives you an instant mood. I go so far as to save songs or even whole albums just for drawing.

Audiobooks. There comes a point when music can't do the job on its own anymore. When I have to go for many hours of tedious background stuff, I listen to audiobooks.

It's good to have enough light and not to be freezing or too hot. So air conditioning and heating is a plus. Not vital, but it helps.

**How does your artwork differ when you work in Los Angeles versus Tipperary?**

It doesn't differ, except maybe I use different models or props.



**In Alex Prager's interview on your Web site, you say that women are your primary models for sketching and that a male model, if used at all, might take the form of weird-looking businessmen or a chubby boy, such as in the piece, "Abrador." Why did you choose him for "Abrador" and how was the creation experience different than with a female model?**

I do draw men. Not as much as women, but I do, and they are a vital part of my work. I guess you

*Abrador*

can't trust everything that comes out of my mouth when somebody shoves a camera in front of me.

I found the kid for "Abrador" in an Irish country pub. He was playing the spoons. I asked him if I could use him as a model and he agreed. He had a great mix of innocence and the attitude of a grown Irish man.

In male models, I search for people who look like they would be good characters for a story I'd write. If you know my stories, then I guess you know what kind of men I'd use.



**Describe the selection process for your female models.**

There's no process other than how I like a person's face. And usually I like a person's face because I can imagine an abnormal history to it.

**Film directors often explain a scene to actors, with regard to dramatic conflict and character choices. Since you are a filmmaker, too, please share how you direct your models during photo shoots/modeling sessions. For instance, in "The Accomplice" (I and II), did you choose the stegosaurus for the model, did she choose it, or did the stegosaurus choose her? What about the postures?**

I chose the stegosaurus. I found him at Rite Aid, and liked him right from the start.

I think it's very easy to be one of my models. I put them under a light and say things like, "Turn your head a little that way." Sometimes it can get more complicated, but it's usually pretty quick and painless.

*The Accomplice II*

**Do you have props, sets, backgrounds, or wardrobes in mind, before you choose your models -- or does the order of such choices not matter so much?**

Just depends. On some occasions I have no idea what I'm about to do, on others I have slightly more of a clue, but I usually never start with a foolproof battle plan. Once I start seeing how everything looks and is working out in the lighting, I begin to target very specific visuals.



**Correct me, if I'm wrong: you shoot photos of models and use the images to finish your drawings, when the models are not present. What are the advantages of drawing your pieces this way? How much drawing do you do while the models are in front of you?**

I'm very respectful of my models. So I wouldn't want to ask them to stand there for me for hours. Plus, I like my privacy when I work.

I've actually modeled for other artists from life though. I'm a very accommodating model if I like someone's art.

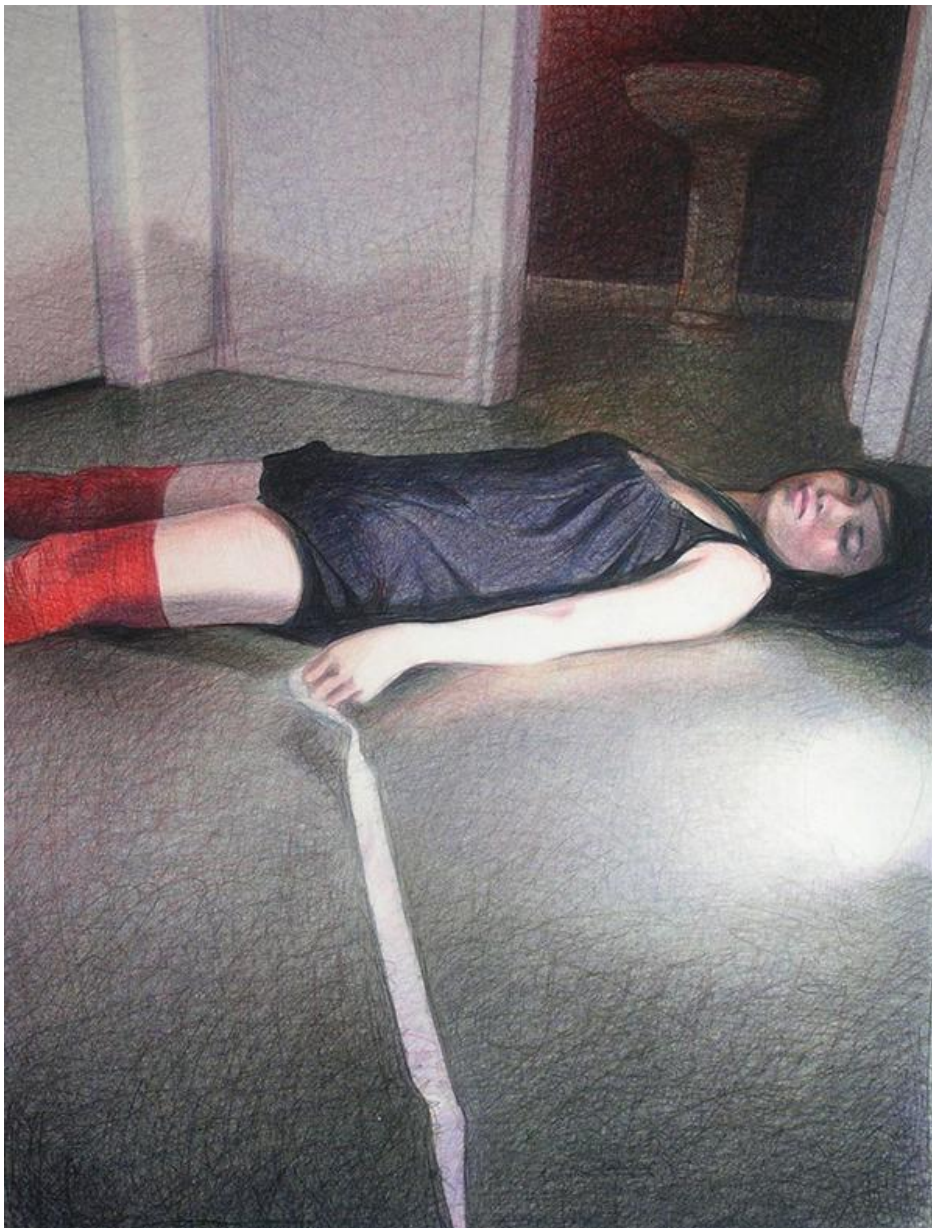
I've done handstands in insurance offices with all my clothes falling over my head while people were typing on computers next to me, been underwater in a bathtub that

probably hadn't been washed in ten years, stood at a railing on the edge of the Grand Canyon in high winds (I'm scared of heights), let someone make a plaster of my upper body and face, etc.

A pencil is one of your trusted tools. What happens in your artwork, when you employ pastels, oils, gauche, crayon, etc.? Are those other tools in agreement with how you work?

I'm pretty sure I can make them agree with my work. But yeah, pencils are my crack cocaine.





*Unusual Domestic Event*

**What universes open up, when you use more than one color in your work? What occasions your usage of color? For instance, why did you choose it when creating “Unusual Domestic Event” and “Emily Standing”?**

There’s not really a rule as to when I’d use color and when not -- at least not a rule that would make sense if I put it into words. Some images can stand being turned into color and others I just know will look better in black and white.

I feel like with a color drawing you have to know where to stop - - restrain yourself by force. Either that or you have to go all the way with everything you got and just hope the drawing can handle that many layers. And sometimes it can.

I did those three large-scale full-color drawings (“Unusual Domestic Event,” “Emily Standing” and “White Soap”) because I basically wanted to

see if you could “paint” with colored pencil. You can, but it’s very painstaking work.

**Your drawing and your short film have the same title, “Faking It.” Is there a relationship between the two creations, what is it, what does the title signify in each work, and in what life experiences were you “faking it” (hopefully not this interview)?**

Sometimes I use a title for more than one work.

As for “Faking It,” maybe there is a relationship between the drawing and the film on some level. It’s quite possible that artworks, which are very different visually, can be spiritually related somewhere.



I really don't fake things very often. I'm a sort of handicap when it comes to lying. It's something I need to work on.

**This is a long question, but I swear that there is a destination in mind.**

**When describing "Whistling Past the Graveyard," you say, "When I start drawing, I don't go about it intellectually ... Fine art is too far a visual process to include much rational thought (and maybe I speak for myself here). In fact, sometimes I feel it's beyond visual -- like some organic process in a phantom organ behind my liver."**

**And in *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* by Lewis Hyde, the poet Theodore Roethke says, "There are few artists who have not had this sense that some element of their work comes to them from a source they do not control." He continues, "Suddenly, in the early evening, the poem 'The Dance' started, and finished itself in a very short time -- say thirty**

**minutes, maybe in the greater part of an hour, it was all done. I felt, I knew, I had hit it. I walked around, and I wept; and I knelt down -- I always do after I've written what I know is a good piece. But as the same time I had, as God is my witness, the actual sense of a Presence -- as if Yeats himself were in the room. The experience was in a way terrifying, for it lasted at least half an hour. That house, I repeat, was charged with a psychic presence: the very walls seemed to shimmer. I wept for joy ... He, they -- the poets dead -- were with me."**

***And the question is: Do you feel your creative process bears any similarities to Roethke's spiritual one? If it does, what is like to feel empowered by a muse or a spirit while you create? Is your phantom organ the same as a muse?***

Boy, that's really an amazing description. I like it, and I believe him, and I understand what he means. There is no doubt that inspiration works on a spiritual level. The way Roethke puts it is so nice, I wouldn't want to try describing it in a different way right now. I'll stick with his description.

**Is there anything you'd like to share about your next novel?**

Messy love story?

**Tell me about how *Strayed Dogs* is going (it is "a company dedicated to the production of pure, unadulterated art").**





Strayed Dogs is moving mainly over to my brother, Ali's musical projects. He composes music for film and various orchestral projects. What he is doing to classical music is really unique. I can only advise people to get on his mailing list at [www.tractionorchestra.com](http://www.tractionorchestra.com). He's always coming up with strange concerts in strange locations. His passion for this is very thorough and pure, which are the best circumstances under which to create or witness anything.

**What does the future hold in store for you and WeSC?**

WeSC is sponsoring "East of Eden." They're a great company that has a unique relationship to the arts. I really appreciate that about them.



**What is your biggest hope?  
Your biggest fear?**

I hope to be able to know the artists that I admire. Corner them in a room.

I'm not partial to spiders and needles.

But I don't think I'll disclose my actual biggest hopes and fears.