

MERCEDES HELNWEIN

Story : Heather Seidler

Photographer : Joshua Spencer

Art: Mercedes Helnwein

In the often openly litigious modern art world, it takes a lot for a particular artist to stand out as one of the shining stars of an art scene, yet that is what artist Mercedes Helnwein has managed to do in a relatively short time. The 29 year-old, Austrian-born Helnwein, currently lives and works among the island of old concrete warehouses and slugged brick buildings, known as the "artist district" in downtown Los Angeles.

Helnwein's work, can be described as a photorealistic hybrid between painting and drawing, with its blend of the figurative and ambivalent, radiating a sacrosanct beauty that is magnetic. She has exhibited nationally and internationally with her collections "East of Eden", "Strange Days" and "Whistling Past the Graveyard"—all the work from which was acquired by the legendary Damien Hirst and presented by A Gallery in London. Her latest series of oil pastel drawings, "Temptation to be Good," debuted November 2010, at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery.

In the series "Temptation to Be Good" Helnwein's fictional portraits seem to subtly remark on disenfranchised Americana sensibilities and identities, an ambivalent comment on the invisible struggle within its pawnshops, strip-malls and living rooms. The carefully crafted noir-esque portraits echo the observant and reflect the eye of Helnwein; often expressing through a somewhat detached and old-fashioned viewpoint, a mischievous representation of contemporary American urbanity. To some, America is the land of the free, to others, it is a broken-promise land; that world capital of aggressive, self-interested business and fabricated liberties, full of deflated dreams, like all the stuffing leaked out of an old pillow. "Even the banal lifestyles stored safely in between the top and the bottom of this country interest me—maybe because I refuse to believe that there isn't something unbearably weird hidden within the fat layers of what is normal," Helnwein explains.

In her various works, Helnwein's meticulous attention to detail and texture accent her mastery of technique, resulting in richly executed imagery. She continues to build mystery

and narrative in her portraits by fusing classicism with modernity, elevating the female form from a mere woman to a kind of clairvoyant creature with an undeniably cryptic personal story. Her images can depict merely the head of a young woman or just their limbs tangled over a chair, precociously removed from everything that cryptically exists just outside the frame. Helnwein does not so much address her viewers as confides in them, her style is a kind of eavesdropping, full of whisperings and tacit confessions.

When asked if she has a theme in mind from the beginning or if she creates simply what surfaces in her mind, "The theme of an exhibition is never really something that is extremely clear to me in terms of words. It's clear to me in other ways, but not necessarily in neat packages of words," she answers. "When I start working on a new show, I don't start out with an entire plan on what everything is about and what I'm trying to say and what my 'message' is. I tend to work in a far more chaotic fashion. Things happen along the way, and that determines more about what happens next. Ideas kind of fall out of each other and onto each other and pretty much do whatever they want. Just because I'm the one creating it, doesn't necessarily mean I have all the answers to what is going on in my work. Maybe the reason I enjoy doing it, is because I can be a spectator as well."

Despite her steady ascent in the art world, Mercedes' atypical story stretches back to when she was a child, growing up in a castle in Tipperary, Ireland. At the age of seven she had already penned and illustrated a series of comic books. About her earliest inspirations to draw, she recalls, "I have no idea what was the initial inspiration to need to draw. Is there one for children? It just seemed like the best way I could spend my time. I never went anywhere without papers and some kind of pen or pencil."

Mercedes didn't attend formal art school nor receive training from any self-appointed expert, clearly proving you don't need a pedigree to make exceptional contemporary art. Being the daughter of the prestigious, world renowned multimedia artist Gottfried Helnwein, Mercedes' early exposure to art may have been a catalyst behind her talents and though having such a highly-esteemed father does have its advantages, her achievements can by no means, be chalked





GOODNIGHT IRENE, 2007; BLACK PENCIL ON PAPER; 40 x 30 INCHES.



PAM'S FEELING, 2010; BLACK PENCIL ON PAPER; 30 x 22 INCHES.

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up to nepotism. "He never gave me lessons in drawing or painting, and the actual technical tidbits he gave me, I can probably count on one hand," Helnwein explains, in regards to her father. "Oddly enough, that's not what I'm interested in getting from him. Where technique is concerned I almost want to be left alone and battle things out on my own. I like seeing what I come up with and how I develop without any interference other than inspiration from other works of art that I admire."

From a young age and even now, Mercedes continues to be influenced by the Bible Belt, Middle America, along with the cacophony of Huckleberry Finn, the Delta blues, Robert Crumb, Tom Waits, Bukowski and Steinbeck; and is generally fascinated with the unusual.

Despite being as beautiful and intriguing as her paintings herself, Mercedes is earnestly down to earth, humorously self deprecating and quite well-spoken. Without revealing too much about her own inner labyrinth, Mercedes expounds upon her reasons for making art and how the reception of her art affects her as an artist. "It's true that I do art sometimes for very selfish reasons. I do it to scratch my own personal itch, because it feels good in much the same way as a guy having a beer at the end of a long day and watching sports. I mean, that's how I began," she explains. "I loved drawing and didn't really know what to do with my hands if I wasn't drawing. It was personally gratifying. There were no aspirations or plans. I always thought I would be just a writer. But things change of course. And as I got more and more into fine art and got the chance to exhibit it—to have other people placed in front of my work, and feel the reactions and how the drawings hit people, it changed things. I realized that the whole point of art is to have it leave the artist and arrive with an audience."

Helnwein's process starts with finding a model and setting up a photo shoot, which helps her then figure out angles and lighting, as well as composition. After that, she takes the photographs and uses them to tweak the realism she employs into a more conceptual realm, preferring to focus on her version of reality rather than the mediocrity of a sometimes mundane world. "It feels almost like writing, because you are creating a fictional person. There's usually nothing of the actual model left in the finished work. There'll be a totally new story that sits in the face."

Having followed her work for several years and being privy to its various incarnations, I inquired about the evolution of her work. "My work has definitely gone through some stages. With time you just want to try more, try bigger, try different media, try stranger things," she tells me. "You want to get better, and you never want to be totally satisfied that you have reached a plateau where you can camp out for the rest of your life."

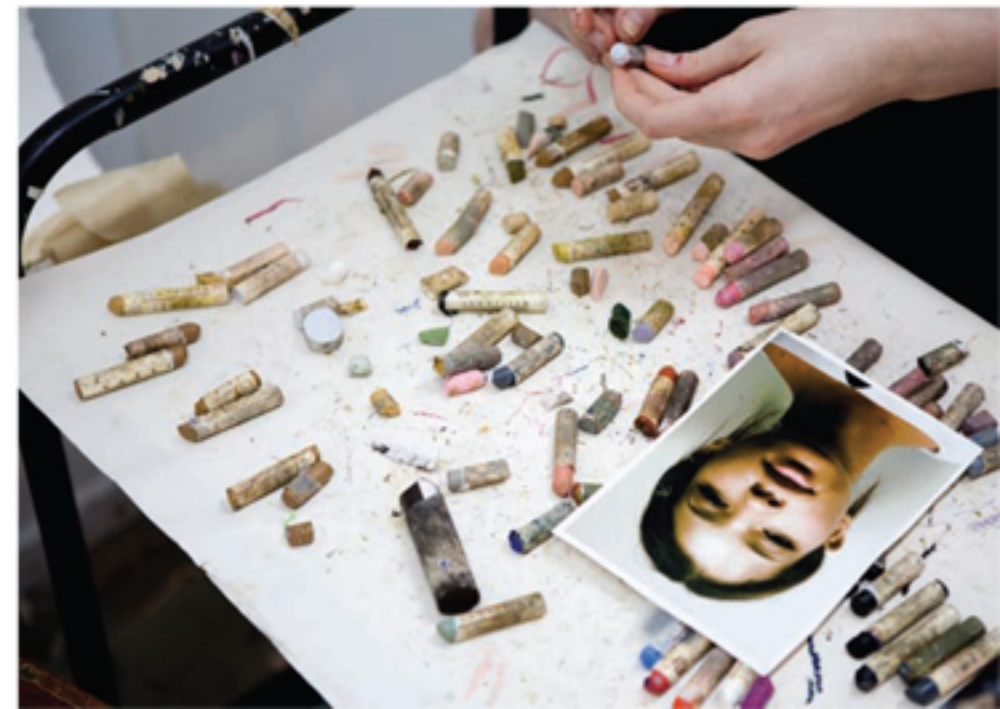
It is furthermore refreshing to see an artist who is crossing

disciplines and not sticking to just one medium as the only outlet of expression—the dexterous Helnwein is also a novelist, film-maker and self-taught banjo player. Helnwein's films carve through space—backwards, in slow manipulated motion, a choppy melody of movement; for which the music is adroitly provided by her composer brother Ali Helnwein. Her first acclaimed novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day* was published in 2008 by Simon & Schuster. Her many artistic pursuits affirm that there had never been any box she thought inside of. "It's better to have many different ways to say things. Every medium is suited for different things," she states. "When I write a story, what I do is far more explicit than what I do in visual works. I mean, it's right there in actual words. You can't get around using words in writing. There is much more going on in my head. Visual work is so much more 'gut' oriented. You never need to put anything into words. It's on another dimension entirely."

Whatever dimension Mercedes is operating in, accolades aside—it's certain that she is a real contender in the art arena. "There is a general attitude that art is a luxury—something to indulge in but not really the norm or a necessity," she discloses. "There is the idea also that art is something only a certain crowd can understand or should understand. I don't like that attitude, by the way. Nobody needs a degree in order to be moved by a work of art. If you walk into a gallery and you are unimpressed by a piece of string hanging from the wall, then in your eyes it's crap, and that's the truth for you."

The quality of her artwork is simply within its communication and whether or not it makes you think—stimulates your imagination. I could easily fill pages describing her work and in turn, ask her to describe it. However the greatest art isn't about giving answers, but asking questions. Helnwein's cinematically mysterious protagonists definitely invoke examination and suggest a thousand questions.

Mercedes Helnwein's collectible art will next appear in Berlin, when she brings "Temptation to be Good" to the Pool Gallery April 29th. In addition, she is also working on more films, having just completed one for Orla Kiely for their Fall/Winter collection 2011. You can also view her past and current work at www.mercedeshelnwein.com



FROM LEFT; SUMMER, 2010; OIL PASTEL ON PAPER; 57 x 44 INCHES. ALICE, 2010; OIL PASTEL ON PAPER; 60.5 x 44 INCHES. ANGIE, 2010; OIL PASTEL ON PAPER; 50 x 44 INCHES. PAM, 2010; OIL PASTEL ON PAPER; 70 x 44.5 INCHES.