

ART

It's a flourishing sibling revelry

The Helnweins are cutting a wide swath through Los Angeles' various cultural scenes — the kind of creative energy that seems to come naturally.

JESSICA GELT

As children of the Austrian-Irish artist Gottfried Helnwein, siblings Mercedes and Ali experienced an unconventional and charmed upbringing. They lived in castles in Germany and Ireland, attended a private arts school in England and accompanied their father on trips to America, where they sold their drawings to hotel guests to buy stuffed animals at the gift shop.

When he was little, Ali engaged in a faux boxing match with his namesake, Muhammad Ali, and had Keith Haring draw on his hand. As a teen, Mercedes fell in love with the blues and read "Huckleberry Finn" to her brother because she was afraid he wasn't reading enough.

These days, Mercedes, 31, and Ali, 29, are drawing on that background in their own artistic endeavors: Mercedes as a novelist and visual artist and Ali as a composer and musician, with an emphasis on classical music. They bring a fresh, somewhat ironic playfulness to their chosen mediums that has attracted a raucous group of young fans not typically associated with traditional galleries or classical music concerts. In this way, they stand at a colorful intersection of L.A.'s literary, pop culture, visual art and music scene.

And they are rarely at rest, working on several projects at once and often collaborating with each other on videos or performances.

Since moving to Los Angeles with their parents more than 10 years ago, Mercedes has published her first novel, "The Potential Hazards of Hester Day," with Simon & Schuster, and staged a solo art show in L.A., London, Dublin and Berlin. This month she opened her 16th group show, "Asleep in the Wind," at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery with Patrick Morrison and Glen Baxter, which runs through Nov. 5. Damien Hirst, Wim Wenders and Nicolas Cage are among her collectors.

All composes concertos and film scores and conducts the avant-garde Traction Avenue Chamber Orchestra, which he founded in 2006. His music has been heard in both Disney Hall, as the soundtrack of a film screened there by Brian Lott, and at skate parks, and his fans include Beck and screenwriter-director Michel Gondry. Members of the L.A. Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra have performed his compositions.

If their path to this point was made easier by their privileged backgrounds, their talents will take them far, says prominent arranger, composer and conductor David Campbell, whose son is the musician Beck, collects Mercedes' drawings and employed Ali as his assistant years ago. He also



GARY FRIEDMAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES

COLLABORATION: Sister and brother Mercedes and Ali Helnwein have attracted a young and culturally astute following in L.A. — Mercedes with her literary and artistic pursuits and Ali with his avant-garde forays into classical music as a composer and musician.

conducted Ali's violin concerto "Rain" — hosted by Kat Von D — at the historic Million Dollar Theater in downtown L.A.

Campbell says Ali brings a fresh perspective to classical music that delivers it directly to the "Everyman" and gets it out of the formalized music presentation state that exists in a lot of concert halls.

Just because of what my dad was doing, it seemed very possible to become an artist. Being a lawyer would have been weird.

— MERCEDES HELNWEIN

Sitting in Gottfried's studio in downtown's Arts District on a recent windy Tuesday, Ali helps Mercedes unroll huge sheets of watercolor paper on which she has created a series of oil pastels for a solo show she's staging next year. She's been working from images on old postcards that she picks up at flea markets. For a long time she was working fairly exclusively in detailed pencil drawings on paper, so this is a new style for her and one she is excited about.

"These new pieces are more ob-

stract," she says, her red hair shining in the afternoon sunlight. She is wearing a deep blue skirt and shirt with thick red thigh-highs and wedge sandals. "When things get too fine and detailed they kind of go dead."

The picture is of a group of men who seem deeply involved in an unsavory secret that tickles them. They appear to be leering, and an unsettling menace emanates from the page. Gloomy areas of loss or impending doom are leitmotifs that run through much of Mercedes' work, whether she is drawing the disembodied legs of a girl in a short skirt or, as in the series that can be seen at Merry Karnowsky, chubby Catholic school girls, their hair in braids, peering uneasily into an open refrigerator.

To be powerful art should be honest, direct and thought-provoking, says Mercedes. It should shake you up, take you out of your element. Making people uneasy is one way to do just that.

Her father's work influenced the look and feel of her own art. Known for his dark, often controversial hyper-realistic watercolor photographs and multimedia installations, Gottfried Helnwein was an inspiration to both children.

"Just because of what my dad was doing, it seemed very possible to become an artist," says Mercedes. "Being a lawyer would have been weird."

Their mother, Renate, lives with

Gottfried in Ireland and is the only member of the family who is not an artist. She keeps the business side of things working, though.

"You need someone to be sane and organized," jokes Gottfried over the phone from his castle in Ireland, where Mercedes lives part of the time.

Some of their mother's grounded nature rubbed off on Mercedes and Ali, says photographer, friend and collaborator Alex Prager, who met Mercedes in 2001 and whose short film "Despair," scored by Ali, recently screened at the Museum of Modern Art. Mercedes is "the most focused friend I have. I didn't know many people who were taking art that seriously and doing it every day."

It was actually Ali who began painting before Mercedes, says their father. "He sold some of his paintings and with the first money he made he bought a violin and stopped painting, because that was what he had always wanted."

"By the time he was 23 he had composed his first string quartet on an out-of-tune piano in Ireland while waiting on a new visa. The music is precise, lilting and edged with a wistful sense of passing time."

"I remember him being a teenager wearing baggy pants and listening to Rage Against the Machine," says Mercedes, sipping green tea at an old wooden table surrounded with jars of colored pencils and boxes of pastels. She

smiles at Ali, who blushes and runs a hand through his tousled brown hair. "Then you gave me one of your classical compositions and I was like, 'When did this happen?'"

Ali and Mercedes have an easy back-and-forth that comes from being the siblings closest in age sandwiched between an older brother, Cyril, who works as Gottfried's assistant, and a younger brother, Wolfgang Amadeus, who is a budding essayist and passionate about Irish politics.

The children are named for figures and people who have been influential in Gottfried's life. Ali's full name is actually Ali Elvis Donald Dagobert Lancelot Helnwein, although Ali says all of those names appear only on his birth certificate. Mercedes has only one middle name: It's Xenia, which is Russian. Renate is a fan of Russian literature and art, so that was her call.

"We're a very close family, everybody is an artist here," says Gottfried. "At lunch we sit together at the same table — husbands, girlfriends, everyone — it's like an old-fashioned extended Italian family with lots of kids and noise, and we talk about history, philosophy and politics."

In a month Ali and his wife will have a daughter of their own. Will she be an artist? All shrugs and smiles, but the odds would appear to favor it.

jessica.gelt@latimes.com