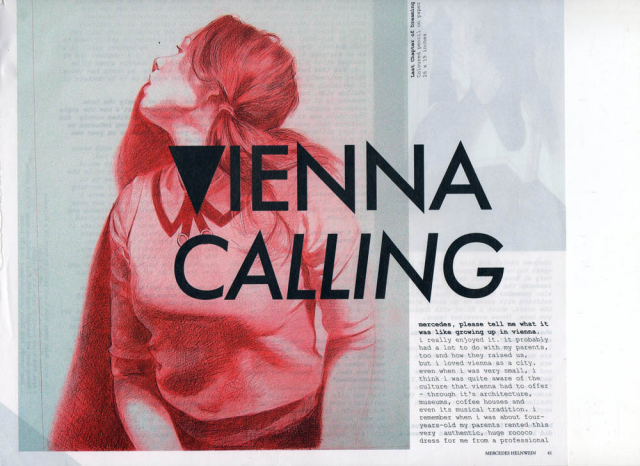


This young Los Angeles based artist charmingly provokes our focus with her temporary layoff 'Strange Days', an exciting mixture of purity, mysticism and raging beauty that follows the concept of no rules. Having first discovered drawing at an early age, the daughter of Austrian/Irish art provocateur Gottfried Helnwein took some time for herself to re-examine her proper skills and showed up with her first exhibition in 2003. For herself, the perfect time to start exhibiting. It would have been a little premature if I had shown my work any earlier', she vindicates. Still going strong, her paintings, stunning detailed sketches and art installations made their way to the public, followed by massive appeal on the international art scene and praise from notorious publications. Also, she just launched her own publishing company together with her brother Ali. So here we are, with a blessed young lady, who never stops working, that will enthusiastically haunt you in emotions. A lucid fairytale, Mercedes Helnwein.



# VIENNA CALLING

mercedes, please tell me what it was like growing up in vienna. i really enjoyed it. it probably had a lot to do with my parents, too and how they raised us, but i loved vienna as a city. even when i was very small, i think i was quite aware of the culture that vienna had to offer - through it's architecture, museums, coffee houses and even its musical tradition. i remember when i was about four-years-old my parents rented this very authentic, huge rococo address for me from a professional



costume rental and took me to see this opera called "Die Pappentee". i felt very at home in that dress, and i still remember the music of that opera. i also remember that i had this little matching silk purse to go along with the dress, which i filled with duplos, you know, those oversized legos.

what was the point of moving to los angeles then?  
 l.a. is a great city to be in if you are doing anything creative. there are a lot of great artists there, and the art scene is quite genuine and a lot less pretentious than N.Y., for example. it feels kind of like a wide-open space and if you accept the challenge you can make pretty much anything happen there.

beside your fascination for america, did it push you somehow? did it have a

positive effect on your work?  
 i think it is hard not to be inspired by l.a. in some way if you live here long enough. the america i was initially fascinated with actually did not include l.a. or any other big city for that matter. when you come here as an european it is easy to be annoyed at it a little at first. l.a. has this bad reputation of being extremely shallow - and it certainly does have that shallow side, but it also has an underbelly of truly fascinating, creative people. not to mention that there are so many different cultures that make up los angeles, so many different parts of that city that feel like entirely different countries, and a really interesting history that turned a little desert town into one of the most prominent places on earth. you have everything in l.a. - the whole spectrum - and that makes it more interesting than if it were flawless. it's very easy to draw inspiration for any art form from this place.

don't you have a strong relation to ireland as well?  
 yes, i've lived there since '97. i love it. it's a beautiful, electrically green country that has managed to hold onto it's ancient roots and traditions in music and literature in many ways. you can still go out into old country pubs in the absolute middle of nowhere and people are still playing music and dancing. it's like time traveling, but it still exists there, and i hope it won't die out.

galleries, museums, theaters and art collectors defined your childhood already, since your father is a well known artist as well, would you say that your career was kinda pre-conceived?  
 possibly, but not necessarily. the fact that our life revolved around the arts certainly made us more aware of it and all the different aspects of it. we went along on many of the projects my dad did and experienced a lot of art from 'behind the scenes'. this

was what we knew as 'normal'. i think my brothers and i were tremendously influenced by all this art one way or another, and whatever personal intention there was in us natively to create was probably just inspired under the circumstances and allowed to really take off. my brother cyril is a photographer, ali is a composer and my youngest brother amadeus seems to be going into writing. we never had those parents who wanted us to be doctors or lawyers.

violence, pain or simply the term 'shocking images'. that's how the style of your father is described mostly. did those images had a strong influence on you in your childhood or on your own creative process?

the subject matter of his work never disturbed any of us. if we had questions about anything, he would just explain what was going on in the paintings, and it made sense to us. his work was never actually shocking to me. the older i got, the more i understood the work though, and once i got more seriously into drawing and art in general, i was very inspired by the work. i began to appreciate it on different levels. the different techniques began to fascinate me, but also the intensity of the work, the humor, the subtle and bizarre occurrences the paintings depicted and even the titles of some of the work.

it seems like coloured rainbows or political messages for example will never find their way to your paper... definitely not coloured rainbows! as for political messages: that hasn't been my intent so far. maybe at some point i will feel like putting a political message into my work, but i have a feeling it would be very subtle if it ever came to that - maybe so subtle that it would be lost.

your style is kinda mysterious, emotional and you're giving a lot of attention to the detail. skillful surface treatment i would say... yes, i can see that. my intention when i start is not so much to make it mysterious but rather to create a scene that leans towards the slightly

left photo: James Jones 2005 Black pencil on paper 14 x 11 inches  
 1. 1997 photo: Steven King 50 bottom / left to right  
 2. Mike 2005 Black pencil on paper 8 x 10 inches  
 3. Micky-nike and One-half Days 2005 Black pencil on paper 11 x 14 inches  
 3. Juan (scrub) 2005 Black pencil on paper 18 x 22 inches

weird. i feel there should always be some room for any viewer's personal plot.

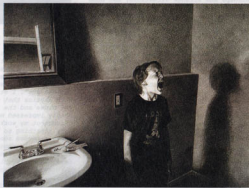
most of your self-portraits are very sensitive and personal in a way. how do you feel when you see them exhibited in galleries?

the reason i do these drawings in the first place is to have people see them. there would be little point in it to me if all my work just ended up in my own studio for the rest of my life. so i'm actually very happy when a drawing is finally up on a gallery wall, being viewed by an audience, no matter how personal the work. i feel like that is what i have been working towards - to have someone else participate in it. besides, to this person looking at it, it could mean something completely different - maybe it ends up being very personal to themselves.

your recent exhibition 'strange days', its not following a certain concept, right?

these were all images that somehow appealed to me at the time. i wasn't constricting or directing my ideas to fit into any specific theme. i just decided to let myself create scenes as they came to me, without any rules. in the end, the work still fits together very well, and looked almost as though i had worked within a certain theme. and the title 'strange days' seemed to unite the images well - whatever was happening in the drawings was definitely a little strange.

tell me about the things you feel religious about.. art, for one. and the blues in fact, i once wrote an essay called 'the church of blues'.



so, did you ever tried to express yourself in music as well?  
not professionally. i play classical piano a bit, and i'm learning the banjo at the moment - i intend to get very good at fast-paced banjo tunes. a lot of my friends are great musicians though, music is one of my favorite art forms, so i try to keep it close around me in my life.

**but your career started with writings and short stories for literary journals, right?**

i was ten years old, and i had a private tutor helping me out with school work. she handed me a pad of paper one day and asked me to write a short story as a grammatical exercise. i remember saying, „what do you mean? just write down a story?“ she said, „yes -start writing“. it was a little daunting at first, but soon felt like a god, being able to create and destroy anything on that pad of paper that i wanted to. some of the stories that followed were called „the celery stick who became president“ and „the fat lady who could not get out of disney world anymore“. that's how i began writing, as i got older my titles became a little more refined, as did my style. it was still an exhilarating feeling, being able to create people, dialogues, mishaps and strange situations, but once i started work on a novel, it became apparent that you don't always feel like a god when you're writing - sometimes it felt more like a bone-marrow transplant.

**please tell me about the novel you completed in 2000, the debut...**

actually i completed it about 2003. it started as this little idea that i fell in love with and had to write a whole novel about. the story of course developed much further from the initial idea, and ended up including a love story (of a sort) and a bizarre little trip through the american mid-west. it's on the humorous side - i didn't want to take advantage of using tasteless, heavy drama. it will be published in february 2008 by Simon & Shuster. i'm still in the process of giving this novel a title since i had to change the original one.

**you mentioned mark twain, robert crumb & charles bukowski as massive influences once...**

i read „huck finn“ when i was 14, and i have never been the same again. i completely fell in love with mark twain and this america that he wrote about - about - the mississippi river, the innocence, the drama, the crudeness and the idyllic life-style of america's „golden age“. i struck up a love affair with america that welded over into the blues and the south, which again, deeply impressed me and left residues throughout my work since then. there was just something so honest about these badly recorded songs, that some guys with a guitar sang into a microphone in some hotel room decades ago. i had never heard anything so to the point. all these modern songs with all these layers and layers of instruments and voices and technical equipment were completely flattened by the power of

some of that inspiration into your own work. inspiration can come from any field of art and do something to you that might not even be something you can describe in words. the outcome of how you then put it into your own work can be completely different - have nothing to do with the work that inspired you - and yet, still, having seen this other art work somehow brought about what you are doing.

**are you surprised by your own talent sometimes?**

(laughing) i'm happy with my progress - sometimes more than others..

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words: christoph johann rabow



something charlie patton sang for example. this was something that cut deep, and i instantly had the utmost respect for this amazing form of art - the blues. not to mention that some of the lyrics in these songs can stand up to any poet from any era you'd care to mention. as for Crumb - my dad had told me at one point if i want to see someone who can really draw i should look at Crumb's work. so for a while i just lived with in the crumb sketchbooks and was quite content there. he was a fascinating guy to me. a weirdo, yes, but a brilliant one. i bought a whole bunch of ink pens, and began a series of ink drawings, quite rough, which constituted most of my first exhibition. and Bukowski is just a genius. the first thing i ever read of him was this collection of poems called „bone palace ballet.“ there were some things in there that were so incredibly funny, i couldn't even believe someone could come up with this. after reading those poems i put bukowski on the shelf with the rest of the people i idolized. when other people's work inspires you, i don't think this necessarily has to mean you visibly or obviously put