
Art School Confidential

Short interviews with up-and-coming artists Mercedes Helnwein and Souther Salazar, by editor-at-large Nick Haramis.

MERCEDES HELNWEIN



Mercedes Helnwein, the daughter of Austrian-Irish art provocateur Gottfried Helnwein, rubbed shoulders with artists such as Keith Haring and Andy Warhol before she learned to say “post-structuralism.” Her most recent collection, *Strange Days*, at New York’s Bespoke Gallery, featured evocative drawings of women in a variety of languorous poses. At the beginning of next year, Simon & Schuster will release her new novel, *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day*.

What’s going on with the women in Strange Days?

Each drawing represents a frozen scene from a story, usually a weird one. I let viewers decide what it’s about, though. I don’t think it’s fair to hand them every little detail, so that they’re cut off from contributing—or, just as likely in the art world—I don’t want to give them something so conceptual and pretentious that they have to pretend to understand it for fear of being an idiot.

Is being an artist everything you’d hoped for?

Well, I’m lucky to be able to do what I did as a kid and get paid for it. When I was about five years old, my dad told me how boring art school was. I kept thinking, “Are you kidding? You drew all day in school!” I’d be lying, however, if I said there weren’t frustrations. Look at any genre of art and you’ll see that there’s a lot to be annoyed about as an artist with honest intentions. And yes, I discovered that there are parts of the process—especially when it’s a huge project—that actually can be boring. And yet, it’s somehow all worth it.

SOUTHER SALAZAR

“**S**mall town” is what Souther Salazar—who is from Oakdale, California—still calls himself. Living in Los Angeles, Salazar’s recent show at New York’s Jonathan Levine Gallery, *Space Cadets*, is a revelation of everyday oddities and otherworldly ink renderings of light-bulb hot air balloons, asthma inhaler jet planes, pet-like monsters.

Tell me about your art school experience.

I’ve talked to lots of people who are really jaded about the whole thing, but I loved it. I came from a pretty small town where there weren’t a lot of opportunities for artists. While I definitely believe you don’t need to go to art school to be an artist, I also believe that one of the noblest pursuits is to seek knowledge. Plus, it gave me the confidence I needed to avoid settling for a really crappy job that I would have hated.

Why Space Cadets?

I create characters that look like they’re disengaged because the world in each piece retreats into a different level of the imagination. Actually, that’s sort of what happens to me. My friends are always telling me how spaced out I am, so I figured I’d embrace it for this show.

The work is so dreamlike.

Actually, I used to write down every one of my dreams and turn them into little comics. I once had a dream where I had discovered a secret language in an old book in a library. Everybody had been looking for it. They were coming after me to get the knowledge. So I shrunk really small, escaping under the library door. I climbed into a bottle cap, and escaped through the gutter.

