

The Book of Disquiet

Julie Alvin

A young girl sits in the warm waters of her bathtub, undressed, hair slicked back and plastered to her neck and shoulders. But this is no typical bath time ritual. There are no bubbles or rubber duckies. She stares at the camera with an unsettlingly stern and almost seductive gaze, her lips painted a garish red, her head cocked suggestively to one side. "LUST" spells the letters in the corner of the frame.

One would rarely name a four year-old girl a sinner, depict a hungry infant as gluttonous, or a lowly office worker as prideful. But in Mercedes Helnwein and Alex Prager's *The Book of Disquiet*, the two illustrate the seven deadly sins in a way that is simultaneously dark and comedic, often cryptic, and always unexpected.

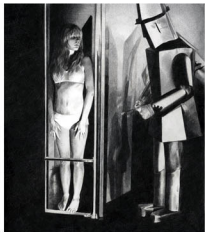
"I think the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy just creates a good balance," Helnwein said. "The seven deadly sins are a sinister subject, generally, but I think it is far too boring and too easy to have purely heavy tragedy and finger pointing when using it as a theme in art. The right kind of humor makes the whole thing palatable."

Presented with the thick cardboard pages and small dimensions of a children's book, the work is a combination of black and white sketches by Helnwein and color photographs by Prager, with each artist contributing seven pieces, each piece representing one of the deadly sins. The pair largely drew their inspiration for the work from a book of the same name by Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa, Prager tells me. She specifi-

cally noted a quote of his that discussed how the middle class is oblivious to the pains and evils of the world, a quote that moved the two to explore their own interpretations of such evils, specifically within the sometimes crooked and misguided world of Los Angeles.

Some of these interpretations are lucidly tied to those sins they represent while other images hold mere scars of wrath, pride or sloth, forcing the reader to grapple with the gaps or logical disconnects in the images. Asking their audience to fill in the blanks and create their own ties between the image on the page and the sin printed in the corner makes the reader an integral part of the art. "The mixture of my images and the audience's own life experiences and imagination can





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make for endless amounts of communication," Prager said. "The audience and I work together to form stories. That's why it's essential for art to be seen. It's only half a story if there's no audience to contribute."

For Envy, Prager's brash, almost hypercolor photograph shows a woman in a satin nightgown kneeling beside a bed, licking an ice cream cone as her elbows rest between the nylon clad legs of her bedmate. It is these limbs she is envious of, as the haunches she kneels on are prosthetic, made of plastic and metal.

For the same sin, Helnwein's shadowy drawing shows a young woman with a menacing face holding a rifle cocked toward the ceiling. The first interpretation of the sin is

both witty and tragic, while the second is initially dark, and only becomes darker as it asks the viewer to explore his own associations with the ominous image.

Although the messages communicated in the works are more often dark than comedic, the artists themselves seem to have approached the project with a sense of humor. "At one point we were determined to actually experience each deadly sin," Helnwein said. "We started by going to Sizzlers and eating about five servings of popcorn shrimp for the purposes of gluttony. Afterwards, we dropped the idea."

Either way, the two always strive to immerse themselves in their art. For the purposes of a previous collaboration, the pair

left Los Angeles and headed towards middle America with nothing but a rented Kia and five hundred dollars. What resulted was the haunting *America Motel*, a compilation of Helnwein's writings and Prager's photography that came together to create an eerie portrait of the American Midwest. This project seemed to be a prerequisite to *The Book of Disquiet*, as one explores the simple ideals of the Midwest and the other the more decadent and corrupt lifestyles of Los Angeles.

And, if *Disquiet* is any indication of things to come from these artists, we are waiting in anticipation to see what they will produce next. □