

GIRLS INTERRUPTED

Writer and artist Mercedes Helnwein is adept at portraying women on the verge—though she herself remains far from it. By Kate Williams. Photographed by Jennifer Rocholl



Mercedes Helnwein's voice is impossible to place. At times, it's an Irish lilt; at others, that of a sardonic American. Helnwein herself is equally hard to pin down. She is not an artist who dabbles in writing, nor a writer who indulges in art, but a preternaturally talented writer and artist who exhibits internationally and who has also, at 28, just celebrated the publication of her first novel.

The daughter of artist Gottfried Helnwein, Mercedes grew up in a gothic fairytale, living in castles in Austria, Germany, and Ireland in between frequent trips to the U.S. She now splits her time between downtown L.A.—where she lives and works—and her family home near Tipperary, Ireland. (Incidentally, said home is a castle that served as the site of Marilyn Manson and Dita Von Teese's wedding.) As a kid, Helnwein spent much of her time writing and drawing, and was surrounded by art, mainly that of her father, who is best known for his controversial, hyper-realistic portraits of maimed children with weird scars and odd bandages. For Helnwein, such images have become as standard as family portraits. "We've all been in his paintings, depending on which kid was the most patient and could sit around the longest," she says of herself and three brothers. "And if we had any questions or didn't know what was going on, he would explain it. At this point, I have no problem with even his really intense paintings and drawings. I can hang them in my bedroom and I appreciate them."

With a life that is obviously full of stories, Helnwein had always planned on being a writer, and didn't start to get serious about art until a few years ago, when she settled in Los Angeles. "People would see the drawings and ask how much they were, and I'd be like, 'Uhhhhh...a hundred dollars?'" she laughs. "So I thought that if I was going to be drawing anyway, I might as well let people see it. I started doing group

shows, and then my work started getting a lot better, like not just being a portrait of a person, but having there be something interesting or weird about it." Helnwein's drawings—feminine and smooth as porcelain—portray her subjects as they cover their ears and shy away from unknowns; they sit with toy trucks, alligators, antlers, and handguns, all props that suggest that even though they wear high-heels and fancy dresses, there's still something not quite right.

Rather than shelving her writing as interest in her art grew, Helnwein kept on, and *The Potential Hazards of Hester Day* was released in February. "This is the first novel that I felt good enough about to publish," she says humbly. "I wrote two novels before that that were kind of... I mean, they had their merits, but the style of my writing was changing so rapidly in those years that I would come to the end and just be horrified with the writing at the beginning."

Helnwein's previous two novels were set in England, but *Hester Day* follows the titular character, recently out of high school and horrified at the prospects of her immediate future, as she erratically tears through the South and the Midwest. "I wanted to use slang and a more informal way of talking, which I always related to America," she explains. "When I was 14, I started reading Mark Twain and Steinbeck, and through them, I just fell in love with all these weird Midwestern states and the Mississippi River." Prior to writing this book, Helnwein set off on a winter roadtrip with photographer Alex Prager, and for her, nothing could beat heading toward the places most people can't wait to leave behind. "We got lost in Kansas one time, where it was just fields left and right and a teeny road, and I ended up putting that in the novel," she says. "It was so exciting. Nothing much was really happening, but I was just ecstatic."



from top: helnwein; chair, 2007; superlative conspiracy, 2007.

