

Painting innocence

Photo-realist Gottfried Helnwein uses children for perspective in his artwork

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PHOTO BY SHOKA

Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein likes the viewer to recognize that photography is the source for his paintings. Here, he stands before his oil-and-acrylic piece, "The Murmur of the Innocents 1."

Born in 1948 in Vienna with a Catholic upbringing, the physical and emotional postwar environment profoundly affected young Gottfried Helnwein. And his steadfast disdain for authority, as well as violence and injustice, are all major themes in his artwork. His series *Murmur of the Innocents*, for example, involves young girls, sometimes holding guns, sometimes in bandages, sometimes lying in pools of blood.

Gottfried photographs his subjects, hired models or acquaintances, then projects the images onto massive canvases, where he traces details then creates extraordinarily convincing photorealistic paintings.

Although he left Austria in 1984, his accent remains, as SN&R discovered during a meeting at Crocker Art Museum this past week. Dressed head to toe in trademark black with tinted glasses and skulls—printed on a bandana that wrapped around his cranium, nearly pingpong-ball-sized skull rings—Gottfried explained why he paints Disney characters, why talking technique is annoying and what almost made him cry.

He spoke in front of two towering photographs of Marilyn Manson wearing Mickey Mouse ears; Helnwein famously hosted Manson's wedding to Dita Von Teese in 2005 in his castle, Gurteen le Poer, in Ireland, where he lives during the summer. He inhabits Los Angeles during winter.

I read that Marilyn Manson calls you a mentor. Do you have any mentors yourself?

No, not really. There's many people who inspire me ... but I never had anybody that I would be directly inspired by painting like them. It was more indirect, more the spirit. My main artistic

influence, or inspiration, was when I was a kid, I read the Donald Duck comics by the [The Walt Disney Studios] artist Carl Barks. He's the best artist that Disney Studios ever had, I think. He was a genius.

So a Disney artist is the inspiration for the cartoons in your paintings?

As a kid, it was the first, the only great culture that I really encountered, because I lived in Austria after the war. It was a devastated and depressed place. ... And when the first American comics came, it was only [*Disney's Donald Duck Stories*].

Is there anything contemporary that has an impact on you?

There's not much that I like in contemporary art. I think much of the stuff is overrated; it's crap. Some of it is crap, some is mediocre, and just due to amazing marketing strategies, you have to pay millions for a piece. I mean, the most successful artists are just marketing geniuses—absolutely amazing. But it's kind of detached from the artistic aesthetic qualities these days.

How's your work different?

I think my work is really different because I was always very independent in the fashion of art. ... I didn't like, from the beginning on, any of society's rules. And the art market became a very tight society with very strict rules. I always like to break rules like that. ...

But the art market today is a little different, yeah? It's like, the artist is the expert, the public is just listening to the expert because they don't understand the art in the first place. ... So the interpreter, the theorist, the writer becomes more important than the artist. ... Very few people collect stuff they like. Investment is much more important than anything else. ... So curators become enormously important.

Some people think you're trying to generate shock with kids holding guns, but you say shock is basically useless when it comes to art?

If someone really tried to do that, it would be stupid and senseless. But if someone looks at the work and sees what I'm doing is something really different, with more layers and aspects, I don't really care what the evaluation by other people is. It's not really influential for me.



"The Murmur of the Innocents 16" by Gottfried Helnwein, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2010. Private collection.

So you know you're successful if you are copied?

Yeah, I get copied a lot. Thanks to the Internet, I can see when Chinese artists are looking at my website, which they do very much, and I can see they have paintings of bandaged girls,

which is very close to what I do. I think I was the first one who really used children in art. Because before, it was not a theme in art history: Children were never a subject in art, as such.

...

If they were in portraits of kings or queens, or a Medici princess, then it was used. In the 19th century, Victorian art, it became a kind of kitsch movement with cute little kids. But for me, it was more the child was the center of the art.

Why?

Because art was for me a way to deal with the issues that was burning for me at that time, that fascinated and tormented me ... the question of violence, especially on children or women. Even at an early age, as a kid, I realized something was going on, especially learning about the Holocaust that was caused and witnessed by parents' generation. That was something, like basic shock, that changed everything for me, because I was eager to find out how this mediocre, introverted little beeper of my parents' generation committed the biggest crime of mankind in a very short time. ...

[But everything] was completely forgotten. Nobody remembered, everyone had amnesia, so all my questions were unanswered.

Do you feel like you've reached a level of understanding now?

Yeah, I would say so. I mean, still I don't say I can answer the questions, but as a gradient of my work and study, it would be bad if I had not made some progress.

Can I ask you about your painting process? You're a photographer as well: You paint from the photos you take yourself?

I like that you see the source of my painting is photography. Photography is a medium that interests me for many reasons, mainly because photography is shaping our reality. ... Most of what we know about the world came through secondhand information through photography. And it's interesting how much people trust the photographic image. ... But nothing can be easier manipulated, distorted, faked as well as photography, and it's done all the time.

It's like, I live in Ireland since a long time, and often people say to me, "Oh my God, how can you live in that country?" Like, Americans. Why? What's the problem? "Isn't that the country where bombs go off all the time?" Oh, you mean Northern Ireland. That's a different country.

And you live in a castle there. What's yours like?

For a castle, it's nice. It's medium-sized. It has 40 rooms, it has 30 fireplaces. I must say, since I was a kid, I always wanted to live in a castle. It was for me. Any other way of living was unacceptable.

Do you listen to music while you paint?

Yeah. Bach, Beethoven, but also blues. I also listen to audio books. It's a great invention, 'cause I have to spend many hours on an easel when working with realistic paintings, and listening to audio books is fantastic because you can read world literature, everything. ... All of Thomas Mann, almost all of German literature I've already heard, French literature of the 19th century, Russian, all of [Fyodor] Dostoevsky. And literature is very important to me, I must say, very inspiring. But I think in my work, there's a narrative, so I think it's related to literature. Writers have told me they are very much inspired by my work, so it goes both ways.

I was showing others your work online, and they couldn't believe they were paintings, not photos.

For some people, it's the subject that startles them. ... It's usually when I have a reaction, it's from young painters. They write to me, "How do you do it?" And this is something, unfortunately, I care the least [about], because I was never interested in technique, to be honest. So even though my work needs a lot of technique, I just developed whatever I needed ... but I have a problem if artists talk about technique all the time. It's a dead-end street.

The important thing is what is it that comes out of it? Is it something that has power and intensity? ...