

Gottfried Helnwein's disturbing images on display at the Crocker

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Gottfried Helnwein stands between two of his works, "The Murmur of the Innocents 1," left, and "The Murmur of the Innocents 5," during the installation of his exhibit at the Crocker.

Gottfried Helnwein looks more like a rock star than an internationally acclaimed artist. Dressed all in black, with a bandanna around his head and dark glasses hiding his eyes, he resembles, in a superficial way, Bono.

Like Bono, he is concerned about the most troubling issues of our times: violence, inhumanity and oppression.

"As a kid, I was always obsessed with the idea of justice, fairness," he said at Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum, where more than 40 of his major works are on view in "Gottfried Helnwein: Inferno of the Innocents."

Born in 1948 in Vienna, Austria, Helnwein's childhood was shadowed by the events of World War II. The Vienna he grew up in was a city without a memory.

"Very early, I knew something was wrong, knew something was really wrong," he said. "The whole city was dark and depressed. No one was able to talk about (the Holocaust). They tried to forget it. It was too big, too horrible. ... The city had lost its soul, its memory."

Helnwein began doing his own research into what had happened in his city and beyond when Hitler's forces annexed Austria and proceeded to commit what Helnwein calls "the biggest crime in history." He read for himself and saw all the pictures of the Holocaust.

He was deeply shocked when accused war criminals were tried in court and acquitted. The events led to his making a complete break with his parents' generation.

"At the beginning of my research, I asked why did people do that? I decided to be an artist and use the medium of painting to ask that question," he said.

Helnwein's earliest paintings were watercolors of wounded and bandaged children. He never planned to exhibit these works, but people came to his studio and saw them and the work had a strong emotional impact on them.

"People reacted with tears, aggression, laughter. It was a revelation to me to see how powerful images could be," he said.

Early on, his work provoked some negative reactions, including vandalism and governmental repression. But a show in San Francisco at the Legion of Honor in 2004 was a critical success and, he said, 90 percent of the reaction was positive.

"People hugged me and cried," Helnwein said. "They were emotionally involved, and I was personally moved and touched by the reaction. I have shown my work all over the world, but the most emotional response has been in the United States."

Like the San Francisco show, the exhibition at Crocker focuses on the child as a symbol of innocence and purity, unfortunately an innocence that is often betrayed.

In "The Murmur of the Innocents 3," he gives us a perfect child, one who epitomizes the essential goodness and vulnerability of children. Yet she is shadowed in darkness and has a wary look on her face as if she knows that danger is ever present.

More chilling is "Untitled (Disasters of War 10)." In this image, the child looks inward, head bowed to some higher power. She is dressed in a militaristic costume. Has she been co-opted by some neo-Nazi group? Is she soon to be sent off to war?

"Society takes children and sends them to war," Helnwein said. "Look at how much we spend on war and how little on education."

Helnwein's research has also led him to study the subject of child abuse in Austria and elsewhere. In his most wrenching images, children are presented with bloodied bodies. In one particularly disturbing image, "Untitled (The Disasters of War 3)," the innocent girl, bandaged and bloodied, stands next to a bed on which rests a lifelike doll with the lower half of her body missing.

One almost feels the image is exploitative in its provocation of emotional pain in the viewer. But Helnwein makes it clear that the children who pose for him are partners in the works, not objects. Other works hint at sexual abuse, as in an image of a prepubescent but knowing girl with her uniform opened in the front, or one of an abject young girl standing by a bed as if waiting for some inevitable horror.

Harkening to the tradition of Renaissance religious paintings, Helnwein also examines the Nazi past with "Epiphany 1 (Adoration of the Magi)." In this unsettling image, a modern Christ-like child (the perfect Aryan baby?) is admired by a circle of SS agents, deconstructing a traditional religious subject in 20th century terms.

The Nazi era is again evoked in the ironically titled "The Golden Age (Marilyn Manson)." In it, Manson poses in mouse ears and makeup that makes him look like an entertainer from the Weimar era.

Helnwein also introduces characters from popular culture – Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck – into double-edged scenes that pay homage to the noir settings of 1930s and 1940s B movies. Donald Duck and other Disney characters have special meaning for Helnwein.

"After the war, the occupying forces brought Disney comic books to us. Donald Duck was like a poem for us. You could read the pictures. I thought Duckburg was paradise," said the artist, who now lives half the year in Los Angeles, the other half in Ireland.

"We didn't have superhero comics. Donald was a loser, so he was easier for us in Europe to relate to," he explained.

But instead of the bright golden world these comics portrayed, Helnwein now presents the characters in ambiguous settings. In "L.A. Confidential (Cops 2)," Donald lies on the ground as two seedy detectives examine him. Is he victim or perpetrator? In other scenes, a menacing Mickey Mouse leers at the viewer or crouches as a young girl takes aim at him with an assault rifle.

There is a cinematic quality to all of Helnwein's works, which seem to be projected on a wide screen. These "stilled cinematic moments," as Crocker curator Diana Daniels calls them, are powerfully affecting.

"He deals with difficult subjects in a way that isn't propagandistic," Daniels said. "It's an open-ended way of dealing with historic subjects that are in danger of slipping away from us."

Many of the images are very disturbing, and the museum has issued a warning that some images may be challenging for sensitive or younger viewers. But the show is a powerful one, posing questions we all need to contemplate.