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## ARTISTS AT WORK

Gottfried Helnwein, known for his uneasy works, taps downtown for . . .

# dark inspiration

By LYTTELL GEORGE  
Times Staff Writer

FROM the outside you wouldn't know what sort of workshop this door obscures — the fantasies or nightmares. Gottfried Helnwein's modest studio sits at the end of a quiet downtown cul-de-sac; its largest window offers up an unhindered view of power lines, asphalt and a vast industrial space a few blocks away, whose intricate graffiti he keeps watch on. "Truly, it's quite remarkable."

It's not exactly the heart of the city. Perhaps though, you could say it is the spleen — the seat of L.A.'s spirit. This narrow curve of artery, crowded with faded brick or [See Helnwein, Page F8]



IN PLACE: Helnwein's brushes and works, including one from his "Disasters of War" series, are close at hand inside his L.A. studio.

ROBERT DOBELL, Los Angeles Times



Photograph by Robert Drivas, Los Angeles Times

**HIS SPACE:** Old paintings fill Helmut Peck's studio. The artist has taken harsh looks at war crimes, Catholicism and the Holocaust.

# Running free with some dark ideas

(Helmut, from Page F1)

concrete two- and three-story structures, rises above pool-surfaced asphalt that smokes through the edges of the arts district. Here on this concrete, slatery block, the Austrian-born artist left in love with Los Angeles and decided to descend his trash castle (part-time anyway) to call L.A. home.

As much as what he physically keeps close by while he works—the books, newspapers, CDs, rubber dolls and plastic figurines—the city's essence itself feeds his dark, uneasy work, which lends toward hyper-real renderings of violence and the grotesque: beheaded, broken children, scenes of torture, pooling blood, grating violence, "I'm not a parasite," he says, "but almost too. For my work I need an urban environment."

Some might think that Los Angeles—as an interesting site, its one-stop-from-reality perch—is an incongruous place for someone like Helmut. What he creates, regardless the medium—watercolor, oil, photography, performance art, sculpture—is a theory psychological excursion into our sublimated self, our obscured corners and dark heart.

His explorations into war crimes, Catholicism, displacement and the Holocaust are both unflinching and nuanced. "Epiphany I Adoration of a Magd," a 1996 painting, renders the infant—interpreted both as Jesus and Christ—as being stabbed by not three men but five, in U.S. uniforms. His work is in museum collections around the world, including those of LACMA and the Smithsonian, and critics have labeled it grotesque, fearful, disturbing and "screaming" dangerously close to offensive. People are surprised, he says, when they discover that he doesn't "seem insane."

The visceral reactions, he's come to realize, have as much to do with his already in the viewer's head as what he's created. "It's not my place of care with the reactions of people," he explains. "The... art... has the potential of putting that finger on the spot, and it can trigger something in you that you'd rather not like to look at, that's [belonged] in your own mind. But what I think art can do."

L.A., says Helmut, "has this strange magic." He's been visiting for years, and something about the city took hold. "I can give you a long list of things that are going bad right now, but if you want to look for something good... there is a place that comes close to reality, total freedom, L.A., that place.... L.A. allows you the freedom to dream up impossible things."

## 'Struggling with the world'

It walks the seven miles from his studio to the studio from his home, often in the dark of morning, always surrounded by the thousand of his thoughts. "I had a bad start every day," he says. "The ideas are always in me. Most of the time I'm working in my head, not on the canvas. It's a struggle with the world around me."

By the time he's in his studio and has made a cup of tea, Helmut has already processed the morning's news. It breathes in his head. The walk allows him to breathe.

Helmut stands in the studio's entry room, a spacious, high-ceilinged space surrounded by 21 grand, new



**CONTROVERSIAL:** Helmut's works have been labeled grotesque, fearful and disturbing. "There needs to be somebody who holds it in your face," he says. People are surprised, he adds, when they discover that he isn't insane.



**UNGLAMOROUS:** Helmut's studio sits near an industrial space and is a short walk from his home. "I need an urban environment," he says.

canvases in various stages of near-completion—a hand-drawn young girl with a bloody head wound, the nose of a gun pointed at a doll, a raging Molotovier in black. Helmut himself is as shrouded as one of the cause-wrapped, dark-furred. "Signed in those paintings—his forehead is wrapped in a bandanna, and glasses with opaque lenses hide expression, intention. He's just noise, a flash of smile, a sick rowdier of their jolting up, eluding capture."

Although he lives with a lot of disquieting images in his head and on his walls, there are plenty who eagerly pay to possess them—Nicolas Cage, Sean Penn and Robert Wilson among them. He's collaborated with Marilyn Manson, done cover art for the Sex Pistols, designed sets and costumes for U2 and European opera, including a month discussed L.A. Opera production of Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier" in 2005.

On the afternoon of this visit, an exhibition deadline breathes down his neck. "But," he stresses, entering an index finger, pressure is the best catalyst for his work. "My canvases always arrive wet. They dry on the wall. How it's like the last days of Pompeii." One of his sons will come by later to carefully cart up and ship the work. "That's why you have children. They have to help you." A flash of teeth, a laugh follows. "Seriously, we have four children," he says. "I like it when kids are running through the studio. We are like a band of Gypsies."

He walks through the narrow hallway that runs parallel to a series of smaller rooms—hidden nooks, a loft where his wife, Renate, makes a stream of business calls. On the south-facing wall of his work space hang several unfinished canvases from a current series titled "Daughters of War." It is in memory of Francisco Goya because 200 years ago, when he

## Shaped by World War II

One end of the brick-walled room, a long rolling table is a jumble of paint tubes and brushes. There to sit through for quick reference, magazines, volumes on Vermeer and Bosch, "Monks of the Thirteenth," "The Crucifixion," "The Last Judgment," "A Century of American Magicians." Another table is a long stretch of his work in progress are a set of steel baker's racks holding a monochromatic palette of CIE—Beethoven, Schubert, Bach. "I listen to classical music and the blues. My daughter Mercedes... knows anybody who ever was singing the blues." The rest of the shelves are taken up with audio books—"Buddenbrooks," "The Fire," James Ellroy's "Blacklist Hill." "There are all these things that I want to read, but I don't have the time to do this in front of me," he explains. "Because when you paint so much, you need to read what is really going on; and so I read out that I can listen to it silently."

His work routine extends his obsessive study of the world. "The task for me, for my life, since I was a kid, [is] I want to find out what is really going on," says Helmut. "I was born in Vienna after the Second World War. Vienna was a very depressed place. And it was dark. I remembered never seeing anyone smile at me. I never heard a song. People were broken. The Second World War was lost... the Nazi time was over... people were angry. Overnight, everybody was for democ-

racism. So you can guess what that means."

The turnaround made him suspicious. It also filled him with questions that made people squint. "Yet, for myself, it was a way to carry on this research in an aesthetic means. You always have to question: Why is that guy saying that now?"

Just behind the CD stacks, a few hundred or so, rubber daguerotypes, manga characters, dismembered Karpis, blackhead salt and pepper shadows define on a shelf. "These are some of the models for the paintings," Helmut says. "What I'm really interested in is the aesthetic. The strange reality—like you have in these video games and animated movies."

He may splice the dots together with scenes of everyday reality—an image drawn from his loop of thoughts. "The powers are terrible," he says, "like one from scene of a story. There is always something after this and always something before it. That's what I pass on to my viewers, 'the unknowns.'"

Much of his aesthetic inspiration, he explains, comes from America—its, rock 'n' roll, cinema. "Because when I was a kid, I was living in this limbo. My parents seemed strange to me. There was this strange silence. Somewhere in that black, dark space, I heard an American comic book, the adventures of Donald Duck."

"It was like stepping into this ridiculous universe.... There were no limits. You could be played with a ball and walk again. I felt right again at home," he says. "America was shining throughout the world as kids, there I wanted to identify with heroes. And Donald Duck is the opposite. In Europe, where everything was destroyed—Donald Duck the loser, fatted much more. I love this duck. It's amazing he made it at all."

What occupies most of the wall space, like a still-to-be-thought thought, is a sampling of the past, under the sun, each a starkly different point on a map of his evolution. A mid-range scene based on "The images of my childhood, like black and white movies." A monochromatic slightly distorted to writer Antonin Artaud. "He was one of the great, amazing artists. Completely failed of course. He was too radical," Helmut says. And grouped on a few wall, a photo montage, "All Points," images distorted to that they mimic the effect of peering through steam or clouds.

"It's people who died a violent death," he explains. "I collected the photographs from different sources, I made them photographed them again, and then again until it started to get blurred. Each frame is connected to a real and a dream."

"When you come closer, the lens is out. But if you get away the more you see. Close up, it's just an abstract nothing. About nothing. It's concerned to a real human being's story, but at the same time it's fading away like a old memory."

He steps closer, then steps away; now the medium once again you have to force people not to sleep. This is why Cops painted all of those cars. Because, like because he saw a soldier but because he knew they forgot. That's what I want to say. I want to stand. There needs to be somebody who holds it in your face. All the time."

April 6, 2006, at the Los Angeles Times