

Dark and detached, the art of Gottfried Helnwein demands a response. He now accepts that viewers may deface his works.

Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic
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Gottfried Helnwein

Beautiful Victim I (1974) is a photorealistic watercolor work on cardboard by Gottfried Helnwein. Many of the Austrian's works have upset viewers in Germany.

Gottfried Helnwein's exhibition at the Legion of Honor includes documentary pictures of an outdoor installation he did at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 1988.

A long canvas mural of huge photographic portraits of children, titled "Selektion," the piece marked the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the November night in 1938 when the Nazis went on a rampage, attacking Jews and their property throughout Germany.

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"I called it 'Selektion,' " Helnwein said in conversation, "because I thought 'selection' was the keyword of the Third Reich. That's what it was all about -- the idea of the small group that can select who has the right to live and who not. The Nazis had these allegedly objective criteria of how you can tell whether somebody's superior or inferior. So I wanted people to confront all these pictures, children from all backgrounds living in Germany today, and I was amazed by the reaction."

Some got the drift of his intentions. But one night, soon after the pictures went up, somebody slashed the throats of all the depicted children. "We don't know who or why," Helnwein said. "We even had cameras there but they didn't see anything. My work has been attacked before, so I'm used to that." But he can never foresee people's responses to what he does.

In his first gallery show, someone pasted a label under each picture that read "degenerate art," the Nazis' insult to all creative work that offended the regime.

Some visitors may react fiercely to the work in Helnwein's current show: giant color portraits of stillborn babies, paintings that merge Nazi-archive photographs with pictures Helnwein has taken, enigmatic portrayals of apparently wounded or menaced children.

In a large, monochromatic painting titled "Epiphany I: Adoration of the Magi" (1996), a group of SS officers looks reverently at a woman holding a naked, standing child on her lap, a mockery of the whole Nativity scene tradition. "Everything is as it originally was," Helnwein said of his source picture, "the respect, the adoration, how they stand -- because the person that was originally there was the Fuhrer."

In Helnwein's revision, the soldiers revere a modern Madonna because "there are so many connections between the Third Reich and the Christian churches in Austria and Germany."

He brightened at the question whether people admit to seeing humor in a painting such as "Epiphany I" or "American Madonna" (2000), in which the naked child points accusingly at two cops lifted from '40s American film noir.

"I think many of them have an aspect of humor in them," Helnwein said. "It doesn't mean that they're meant to be funny. But everything depends on the person who sees it. You have 10 people seeing a picture from different backgrounds and, for them, it's a completely

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different picture than for me. It's amazing how subjectively people see. It's like Duchamp said, the artwork is really a collaboration -- 50 percent is the artist and 50 percent is the viewer, which I totally agree with. I always have to remind myself that it's just a little bit of pigment on canvas and the rest is totally illusion."

The vehemence and range of people's responses to Helnwein's work surprises him partly because "although I'm using the media of painting and photography mainly, the way I approach themes and techniques is that of a conceptual artist."

Visitors to the Legion who saw "Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002 may find connections to Helnwein's work. Richter, too, bases paintings on photographs, some of which he takes. His retrospective included a portrait of "Uncle Rudi" in a Nazi uniform and a series based on newspaper photos related to the suspicious deaths in prison of Baader-Meinhof gang members. They struck a key of cool provocation close to that of Helnwein's work.

"It's funny that in America, as soon as people have any education in art they tend to make this association," Helnwein said. "But this is hard for me to see because there are very significant differences. The only thing I can say is that Richter and I are coming from the same background. He's 10 years older, but it's the same past, the same part of the world. Very often in art history people working in the same town or the same region without knowing it have similar themes or techniques. So when you look at my work and his, you might guess that we lived in the same part of the world. But I was not exposed to Richter's work until very late because I lived in Austria and he lived in Germany and I was not that much into contemporary art really."

Surprisingly he feels more of a connection to another German painter, Anselm Kiefer, "not in the style, not on the surface -- but in spirit" of Kiefer's work. Kiefer, too, has made a project of confronting the Nazi calamity and its repercussions.

Helnwein found that realism was one of the most rebellious directions he could take as an artist in the early '70s. "Vienna was always into expressionism," he said. "Schiele was still a big influence there and, of course, Arnulf Rainer and Actionism."

Rainer famously defaced self-portrait photographs in which he often appeared disfigured by bonds and grimaces.

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Actionism was the unusually violent Viennese strain of performance art that got started in the '60s at the hands of Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler and others. Performance art sprang up on the social activist fringe of the art world. "In Germany it had a different flavor, represented by Fluxus, more playful," Helnwein recalled. "But Vienna was probably the most brutal, self-destructive form of it. Remember Vienna was where Sacher-Masoch lived," from whom masochism takes its name. "It's where F.X. Messerschmidt worked," the demented 18th century sculptor famous for his intensely grimacing heads.

"If you don't live there it's very hard to understand," Helnwein said. "But for me, Vienna is the darkest city there's ever been in the world, it has many layers behind the Biedermeier facade. I've never seen a city that has such a dark side. The most cynical people I've ever met come from Vienna."

Helnwein has not lived in Vienna for 20 years, but his preoccupation with the dark side of modern history, including its abuse of images, has never left him. He did a whole series of paintings (the Legion show includes a couple) so dark as to appear imageless. But he intended them not as mirrors of dark times but as counterthrusts to the aggressive reach of so much contemporary culture.

Despite the grotesquerie it contains, the Legion show also has elements of pathos.

Helnwein nodded yes when asked whether he has made a theme of innocence. "It's a dangerous word, it's so abused and misused, but yes that's probably the basic essence of what I'm interested in."

But he paints children, Helnwein explained, because they symbolize humanity better than adults.

"As soon as somebody's grown up they have so many issues," he said. "When you look at a person -- what social level, what country they're from, what fashion they affect -- all this stuff comes in, but I'm interested in the stage of a human being where it's not so important whether it's a male or female, before we can tell any social background or anything, it's just ... abstract, almost."

Former Bay Area collector (now based in Vail, Colo.) Kent Logan first told him that the child was the center of his work, Helnwein says.

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Probably few visitors will appreciate the detachment in Helnwein's work. They will more likely respond to his concern with the power of images. We willingly subject ourselves to their power every day without really understanding it. If nothing else, his pictures, no matter how confrontational, stand still and permit us, even defy us, to understand how they work upon us.

The Child: Works by Gottfried Helnwein. Paintings and works on paper. Through Nov. 28. Palace of the Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, San Francisco. (415) 863-330

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