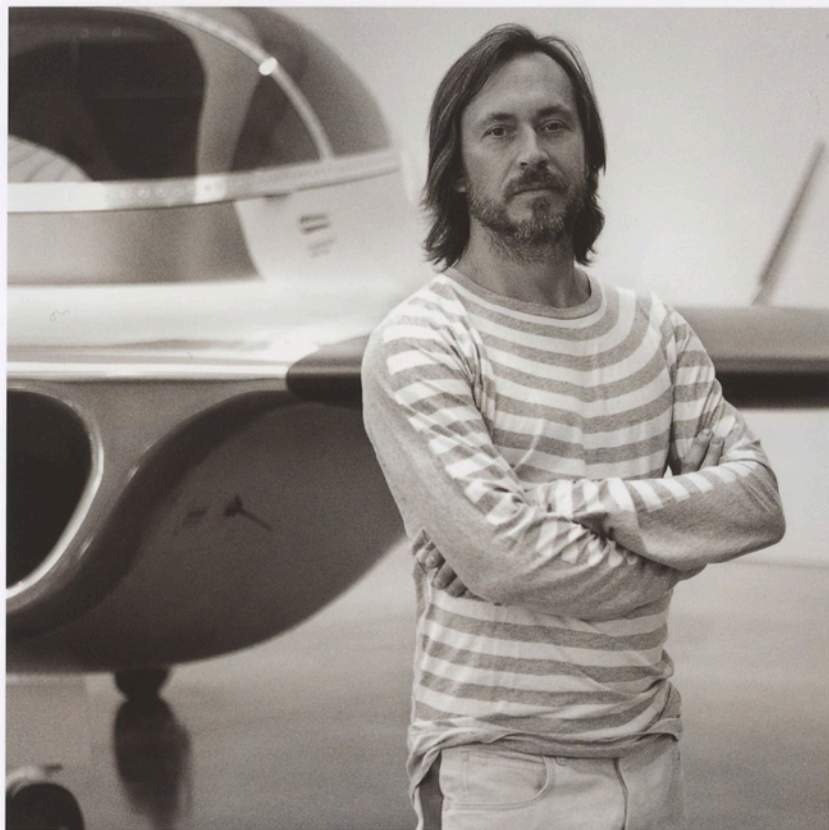


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THE NEW LUXURY

BRUCE WEBER, GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN, MARC NEWSON, ZAHA HADID

The Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein uses painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, performance, and installation to reveal grim aspects of the human condition. Born in Vienna in the wake of World War II, he creates work that engages social, political, and historical issues, while challenging viewers to consider how those issues influence their lives. In Helnwein's earlier hyper-realistic paintings, and later in his installations and photographic works, he has often included children — namely, bloodied and bandaged girls who have suffered some unknown or unspeakable act. These wounded girls are not literal manifestations of violence inflicted on children, but function as a metaphor for lost innocence. Such subjects have made him a contentious figure, with many viewing his work as provocative and controversial. When asked if he thinks his work is disturbing, he has stated, "No, but I am disturbed by this world."

Despite some backlash, Helnwein's work has enjoyed much critical acclaim. He has exhibited nationally and internationally at such institutions as the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art, the Albertina Museum in Vienna, and the Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague. His work is also in various public and private collections, including the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, and the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. Last year, he received the Steiger Art Award, which honors figures who have shown directness, openness, humanitarianism, and

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

tolerance. Throughout his career, he has maintained an impressive coterie of friends and patrons, including Sean Penn, Andy Warhol, Ben Kingsley, Marilyn Manson (who married Dita Von Teese in Helnwein's castle, where the host was the best man), William S. Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Lou Reed, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Lisa Marie Presley, to name just a few.

We met with Helnwein a day after his solo exhibition opened at Friedman Benda in New York. The minute he sat down and started talking, it was as if we were catching up with an old friend. He held nothing back. We discussed our respective childhood experiences, Austrian guilt, isolation, his practice, the importance of art, and what it's like to live in a castle. Helnwein is a real person.

BY AMANI OLU, PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAFAEL Y. HERMAN

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN: It was an interesting phase in my life. My parents' generation had just lost the Second World War, and people were depressed. It was a horrible time. I remember thinking that these are not my people, this is not my place, I shouldn't be here. I felt there was no culture and that there was nothing left. My parents — they're nice people, but they were kind of broken.

I remember I was always fascinated and horrified by the idea that somebody would cause pain to someone. The crimes of my parents' generation — nobody talked about it, there was no information, but I knew there was something. You looked at them and everyone looked guilty. I was a naive child, but I knew, so I kept asking questions. I kept asking and would see how they would squirm. I would look at the photographs of my father, uncle, and they were in uniform. That's cool — they were soldiers. What happened? And then I found out about the war. I was a horrible child, constantly asking. It was interesting for me to see that we lived in a country where all the people are absolutely incapable of talking about the past. I don't even think they were oppressed — it was as if the memory was erased in self-defense. It was gone, and until the seventies you didn't hear a word about the past in school. You learn everything, but the Holocaust was not mentioned at all.

WW: *Because they felt guilty?*

GH: I think, in retrospect, what happened here was so big and so horrible that nobody could grasp it and understand it, and then you realize to some degree that you played a part. Yes, you had no choice because you had to go to war, and yes, you thought, "Okay it's for the Fatherland." Then later, after the war, it was found out what happened, and then the Allies had all these pictures of the mountains of corpses in Auschwitz and shoved it into the faces of these people. It was too much to handle.

WW: *Are you implying that they didn't know what was really happening?*

GH: To a certain degree, they all knew a little bit, but not enough. They saw people with stars walking on the street, but nobody wanted to ask why. Nobody wants to be in trouble.

WW: *How did you experience art in this environment?*

GH: My family was Roman Catholic, so I spent a lot of time in big churches where I first saw paintings of tortured saints and people squirming, pierced by arrows. This celebration of death in Christianity, but especially in the Roman Catholic Church, was fascinating as a child. There was nothing else at the time, until I was five years old and my father brought home a Donald Duck comic book by Carl Barks. That really changed my life. When I opened the comic, it was like ecstasy. I was so excited. I couldn't read the stuff, but I could step into a two-dimensional world with color. It was the first time I experienced color, speed, and movement. It was like being home where I belonged. The Donald Duck comic had an enormous cultural impact in Europe. That's an example of how art, even in the form of a comic, can have an enormous impact on people. For my generation, people born after the war, there was nothing — we had no comics. The only thing we got was stuff that came from America.

WW: *Did you always want to be an artist?*

GH: I always liked to draw, and I drew comic characters and war scenes. There was always lots of action in my drawings. In school, I started little comics, made little books, and sold them to friends, but I never actually wanted to become an artist. My concept then was that artists were boring old people, and I hated that. As a kid, I wanted to be a revolutionary. I was always daydreaming about changing the world. I was opposed to my world from the beginning and didn't want to be part of that. I thought, like many in my generation, that things were wrong. Seldom in history was there such a break between two generations than with ours. Suddenly young people rejected all the values of their parents and wanted to have a different world. In our case, it was easy and obvious once we found out that our parents were actually partly responsible for the Holocaust. For me it went so far that I rejected everything: European culture, Austrian traditional values, et cetera.

WW: *Everything?*

GH: Everything. I never wanted to go to a museum. I didn't see an art gallery until I was 25. When I later went to university for fine arts, I still didn't visit a gallery, because I didn't want to — I considered myself an outlaw. I could relate to trivial art, street arts, comics, Jimi Hendrix, and I thought, "That's my art. That's my world." And I could identify with that. Until I was 18, I didn't even want to be an artist. I was constantly searching, asking myself, "What should I do? Where could I have the effect on the society that I want?" Politics was kind of too unreal. Suddenly, after scanning all the possibilities of society and all it had to offer, I realized there was no place for me. I didn't fit into that society, and then I realized I wanted to be an artist. I knew as an artist I would have a lot of freedom and be a little bit out of society, but have more authority to make my own rules, decisions, and do whatever I want. I could even speak out. All the things that were bothering me I wanted to do something about. This was the only way to do it without compromising too much.

WW: *When did you start making paintings of children?*

GH: When I was at the Academy for Fine Arts, I asked them what I needed to do to get in. They said you have to show your paintings. I had never done a painting before, so I said, "Okay, I'll sit down and make a painting." I made a painting and didn't think about it. I just sat down and painted two kids. They were comical. One had a bloody knife and the other was dead. It was a very spontaneous, naive thing — something I couldn't explain.

WW: *Was there any theory behind your work at this early stage?*

GH: No. I didn't believe in intellectual explanations or irrational conclusions. I believed in spontaneous, intuitive things like rock and roll. I felt a part of rock and roll street culture and comics. That I understood because you don't have to know theory. You only need to hear it, see it, and you know it. That's actually the power of the so-called trivial or low art. It's instant and deep, penetrating. You hear Keith Richards and what do you need to know? You feel it in your gut. That's how I painted.

WW: *Is childhood a safe place?*

GH: I think it's harder to try to be safe than it ever was before. What a six-year-old sees today goes beyond what grown-ups would have seen 100 years ago. At six, you play computer games against 3,000 people, and in a very short time you see their brains all over the place, and it's all fun. I think it's very hard to keep what we call innocence of a child, if it even exists. In my work, I don't necessarily mean a very young human being only; it's also a spiritual, philosophical concept of the potential innocence that's in everybody.

WW: *What motivated and influenced Epiphany I (Adoration of Magi)?*

GH: All the great painters painted an *Adoration of Magi*, and then I realized that every painter that painted it depicted the scenes in their own time. None of these paintings depicts the Biblical era, so I decided to pick up this tradition and paint it from the viewpoint of someone who lived in Germany after the Holocaust. I was also dealing with my own strict Roman Catholic upbringing. Until then, I had never done anything religious.

WW: *Peinlich is an interesting work. The painting pulls the viewer in through aesthetic tropes, but once they're in, it feels as if a door has been shut and locked and the viewer has to deal with the painting's content. Can you talk about this work?*

GH: That's a very good interpretation. That's actually how I saw it later. Everything is in pink colors and it's very nice with detailed work, so people are drawn in. Then suddenly they realize what they are looking at, and holy shit, but by that time it's too late — you're already in. I had my first exhibition at the Vienna Künstlerhaus with four other artists. I was hanging out and watching people to see how they would react. They would say, "Oh, my God, this guy's sick and insane." Since I was standing there, they had the urge to talk, and they talked to me, not knowing I was the artist.

They would ask: "What do you think? This guy must be insane. He has an obsession. His mind is sick. He's talented, but insane." We would talk about it, and I would say that I'm the artist, and people would say, "Oh, I am sorry." Because I looked like a normal guy, they always wanted to know if I had any traumatic experiences in my childhood. Had I been abused? I would tell them no, I was not abused, and then they would keep asking why. The question was always there. I realized that what people need is an explanation, and then they would be relieved. But you have to deal with it, look at it, and think, and handle it. That's what art is. I've done my 50 percent, but now you must do yours.

The only time I learned something was from naive art lookers, not from professors or art history. I had an exhibition once in a gallery that was in the House of the Press, where all the magazines and papers were printed. Three days into the show I was called and they told me to come pick up my paintings, that the exhibition was over. I didn't understand. I went and the paintings were already off the wall and the curator said I could take them home. No one would tell me why, and then a journalist from the conservative paper came in and asked if I was the guy. He was upset and screaming at me: "You know, because of you I can't sleep at night." He was talking about *Peinlich*. He said he couldn't get rid of the picture, that it was following him and that he couldn't sleep because of the crap I painted. He asked me why I was doing it, and I said, "Before I answer that, let me ask you a question. Have you been in the last war?" He said, "Yes, sure, everybody was in the war." "Did people die?" "Of course, it's war." "Did you kill somebody?" "Probably." "Can you sleep?" "Sure, no problem." Then I asked him, "As a journalist, don't you sometimes get pictures of horrible, mutilated bodies and pictures that you cannot print because they are too graphic?" He said yes. "Can you sleep?" "Sure, no problem — it's part of my profession." I said, "You know what's interesting," and I took the painting and said, "This is cardboard, and there are tiny particles of paint on it. That's all it is. There's nothing else. Isn't it interesting that this robs you of your sleep, but all the real horror that you confronted and participated in has no effect." That is when I realized that the pictures that trouble people are the images that they have buried back in their minds. It's not my piece of paper or canvas at all. It seems that, as an artist, you poke your finger into something that's stashed away. Art was always a dialogue and process for me, the process of getting to the actual painting, and how it is received by the people. Without that process, I would have not painted. I always somehow needed that to continue painting.

WW: Can you describe your version of Mickey Mouse? You have turned him into a monster, which is odd because he is the friendliest guy on earth.

GH: Mickey Mouse was once a cute, innocent character from Walt Disney, a genius, I think. What he did with *Fantasia* and *Snow White* is unbelievable. When you talk about installation art, Conceptual art, this is the man. I think the most powerful artists of the 20th century were Picasso and Disney, which were two different concepts, but very powerful in turning the world upside down. All art after that is influenced to a certain degree by one of those two guys. When you look at the Disney Corporation today, it is easy to understand my new, wicked Mickey Mouse.

WW: You have a close relationship with Marilyn Manson. He's quoted as saying: "Art that doesn't cause strong emotion has no meaning." Do you agree with him?

GH: Yeah, it's pretty much what I believe, too.

WW: All of art, if it's not emotional, has no meaning?

GH: No, I would never say that because nothing is black or white. I think art can do anything. There is no rule in art — that's what Kandinsky said. Art has no rules and no laws. Art is free, so you can do anything. There are lots of different conceptions about art. They're all legitimate, and thank God they all exist, but there is also an unbroken tradition in art that artists create something that has a deep emotional impact, and I think that's very important.

WW: How does it feel to wake up in a castle every day?

GH: That's what I expected as a child. It's a very practical thing. I have a huge family. I need lots of space. I need a studio. I recommend having a castle because of space: Nobody's stepping on each other's toes, and everybody can create and hang out. I always wanted that, so in our Irish castle in the summer we have all our kids there, grandchild, friends, other artists, and that's always the life I envisioned, even as a kid. I want the big table with strange people sitting there, eating, listening to music, and talking about philosophy, politics, and literature. I bought art. I love it. That's what I like. That's the great thing about a castle, that's what they were built for, big groups. It's meant to fill it up with people and animals and to have fun.

