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Culture

Gerry McCarthy

BLOODIED BUT UNBOWED

Fury greeted Gottfried Helnwein's Waterford Installation, but his art deals in public trauma, says Gerry McCarthy

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Instead, Helnwein's work speaks of a deep psychological need for meaning, even as it takes the form of violence and confrontation. Such an approach is rooted in the uneasy silences of growing up in post-war Austria and the shattered illusions of his early adult life, yet is still infused with an uneasy idealism.

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They left Mickey Mouse undamaged, says Gottfried Helnwein. Whoever attacked his photographic triptych, *The Last Child*, as it was displayed in a Waterford street, concentrated their fury on the Image of a girl with a bloodied face. "Somebody slashed it from bottom to top," he says. "But we will keep it on view. When you put art in a public space, the reactions are part of it."

If Helnwein seems unfazed, it is because he has been in situations like this before. The artist, Austrian-born but now an Irish citizen, has a long history of attracting controversy. His paintings employ impeccable technique in the service of disturbing Images.

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His own paintings hang on the Walls inside, vast in scale. A human foetus, 50 times larger than life, seems to have the face of an old man. Others Works are loosely based on Goya's Disasters of War. The castle's huge rooms can barely contain them.

Such opulence is a long way from his roots. He was born in a poor quarter of Vienna in 1948, when the City was still occupied by the Allied powers. His family lived in the Soviet sector: he remembers grim-faced people and Russian tanks on the streets. But while the effects of war were everywhere, there was little talk about the root causes of such devastation: the subject of the Holocaust was taboo.

"Nothing was mentioned in school, there was complete silence. It didn't exist," Helnwein recalls. "But I researched it on my own, I talked with witnesses. I was obsessed with the search: it had to do, in a naive sense, with justice. When I found out all these gruesome details about concentration camps, everything stopped for me. I didn't belong. I didn't want to be a part of that society."

Helnwein's generation turned against their parents. "They were all part of it in some way," he says. "But they were unable to reflect on it." Yet he also scorned the revolutionary styles of the 1960s. "There were Trotskyites and Maoists, all middle or upper class, all fighting one another. They talked about the working class, but the real working class thought they were weirdos and idiots. I was more interested in the victims." For a while, he had sought redemption elsewhere: "America was my first hope. In the darkness of my childhood, when I

got my first Donald Duck comic-book, it was like opening the doors to heaven."

But this hope soured, too, first with the Kennedy assassination, then with the Viet-nam war. He began to make paintings based on atrocities committed by American troops, while remaining aloof from those who marched against the war. Marching, he says, is a very German thing to do: "Every country has its dark side, but that's the Germans. They need to march, and to beat people up. We know they are very efficient when they work in groups. I don't say Austria is better. You don't have neo-Nazis marching, but you have people with cellars. And a second family down there."

There is nothing coincidental, he adds, in the fact that the notorious cases of the imprisoned Natascha Kampusch and the incestuous Josef Fritzl have lately come to light: "Austria is more covert. It's all at home. You have your little concentration camp underneath."

Yet for all that, Helnwein admits he has not been able to leave his homeland totally behind, particularly when it comes to the uncomfortable concerns of his work: "My art is rooted in Austrian art. That's something you can't escape. I'm in that tradition. It always had a very dark side – look at Kafka or Egon Schiele."

When he began painting, however, he knew little of art history or the art market. He was taken aback when visitors to his first show asked about buying some works: selling them had not occurred to him. He had been too busy painting obsessively, combining a prolific output with his parallel research into atrocities.

His obsession now is globalisation and the corporate forces he sees behind it, mostly American. He was delighted, too, when Ireland voted against the Lisbon treaty: "It shows that the people are still stubborn, still have independence left; they're not completely carried away by the propaganda. This treaty would have ended the sovereignty of every country in Europe."

For someone, seemingly, so sceptical, Helnwein still exudes the air of a dreamer, particularly when it comes to his adopted home. In Ireland, he says, he has found peace, and a sense of being at home. This came as a shock to him. He was already middle-aged, married with four children, wealthy from his art. He had turned his back on his original home in Austria and grown estranged from his surrogate parent, America. He did not expect to experience the sense of belonging anywhere again.

"I look out of the plane, I see Ireland and I almost get tears," he says. "I feel so attached and so connected that I think it's where I belong." Does he know where this feeling comes from? "It took me a while to figure it out," he replies. "The landscape is great, but it's the people and their culture. I don't mean the high culture, I mean

the culture they have passed on for a thousand years."
But he has noticed that Ireland, too, has built silences around certain topics. When he first arrived, he was eager to talk about Michael Collins, whom he sees as a great hero – "a genius, politically, doing the right thing at the right moment and changing the course of history." But he saw the shutters come down when the civil war was brought up.

But having grown up among much deeper silences, Helnwein understands our occasional evasions and reticences. He respects them: they are "qualities in people that don't exist in other places – I never felt any prejudice here, which is weird".

Even so, he anticipated that there might be some negative reaction in Waterford. Art is one thing when confined to a gallery, but when out in the open, it stakes a claim on public space: "There are some very tough pieces, children with uniforms covered in blood. I suddenly realised, Waterford is so innocent compared to other places. It's not New York or Vienna."

This explains his phlegmatic response to the attack: he had expected it. For Helnwein, it even validates the work.

By confronting us with images of brutalised children, he has goaded somebody into brutalising an image of a child. It is this Pavlovian dance of image and reaction – which goes far deeper than merely trying to shock – that his work aims for.

"Whatever I do comes out of inner necessity. That's how I started to paint: it was my response to the world around me. At first, I was surprised by how emotionally people would react. Then I saw the response in the media, and I thought, I have a really powerful language."

Despite the repeated failure of his icons, Helnwein remains a dreamer. His earlier illusions turned to ash: now he is starting to dream of Ireland. Apart from some landscapes and one of the children depicted in Waterford, he has not yet used Irish themes. But he says that he is thinking about it.

This may be a more difficult task than he knows. For a man whose art is so deeply rooted in pain and secrets – in Austria's Nazi past and America's betrayal of hope – it may be impossible to move serenely on to less disturbing work. For all his new-found sense of belonging, Helnwein is still the artist formed by the country where he was born. A man may change his nationality, but an artist needs deep roots – however repellent he may find them.

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