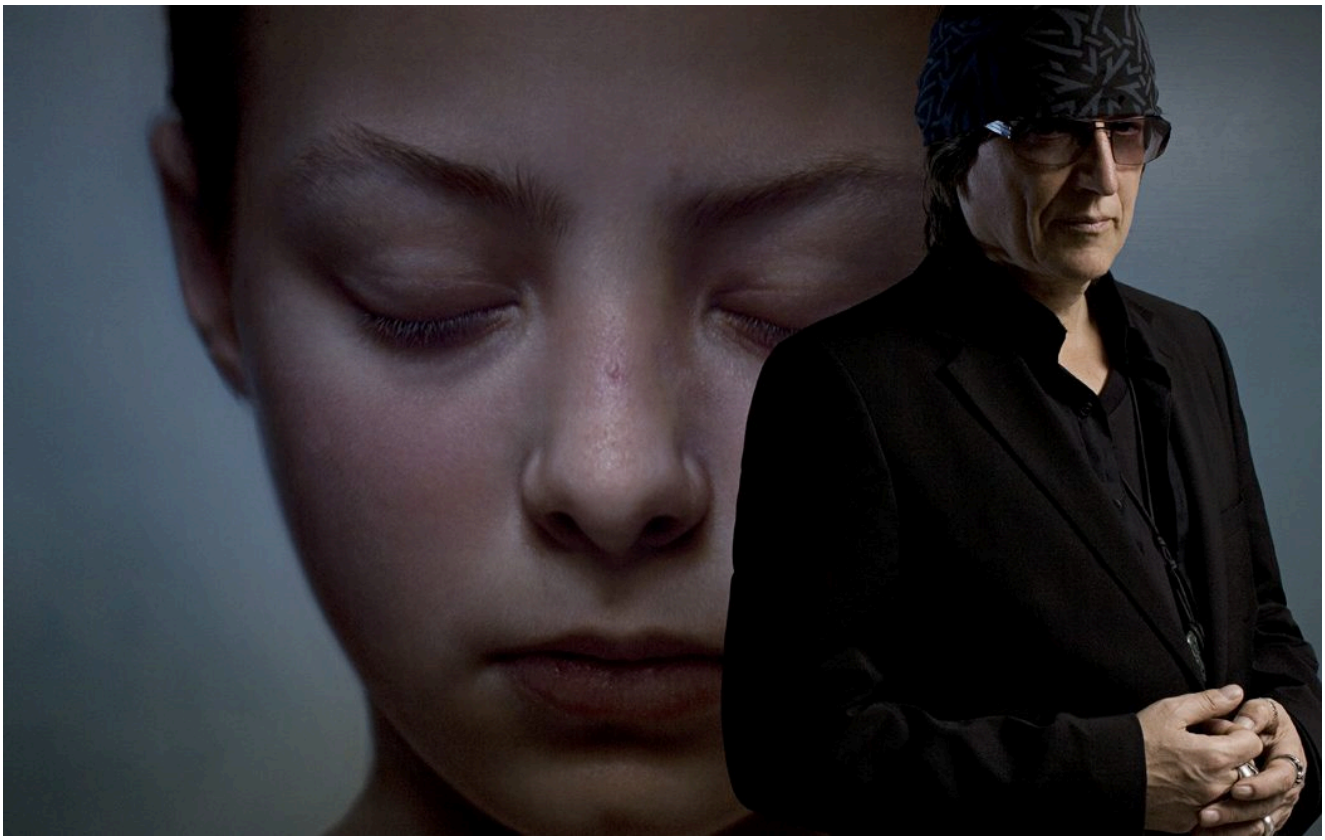
WHAT'S ON (HTTPS://STILLINBELGRADE.COM/ART-CULTURE-MUSEUMS-GALLERIES/)

Austrian Artist Gottfried Helnwein Exhibits in Belgrade

NOVEMBER 1, 2015



Gallery-Legacy of Milica Zorić and Rodoljub Čolaković (2 RodoljubaČolakovića St.)

Salon of the MoCAB (14 Pariska St.)

November 6, 2015 – January 18, 2016

(https://stillinbelgrade.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/gotfrid.jpg)

The Museum of Contemporary Art will be presenting a global artistic gem, the Austrian-Irish artist Gottfried Helnwein. As a prelude to the exhibitions Gottfried Helnwein is to give a talk on Wednesday 4th November in the ceremonial hall of University of Arts Belgrade in Kosancicev Venac.

The exhibition "Between Innocence and Evil" will be officially opened on Friday, November 6, at 18:30, in the Čolaković Legacy, and afterwards the gathering in the Salon of the MoCAB is planned to take place at 8 PM

The speakers at the opening in the Čolaković Legacy: the Executive Director of the MoCAB Slobodan Nakarada, the Ambassador of Austria in Serbia Johannes Eigner, the Director of the Austrian Culture Forum Johannes Irschik, the artist Gottfried Helnwein, and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Information Saša Mirković.

On Saturday, November 7, at 13:00, a conversation with the artist Gottfried Helnwein will be organised (in English).

With the statement „My art is not the answer, it is more like a question", Gottfried Helnwein has explained his work in the best possible way. This artist deals with the critique of the political situation, the crimes committed during the WWII, Nazism and

Holocaust, bringing these together with the burning issues such as violence on children, violence by children and pedophilia.

The experience from the childhood spent in the post-Nazi Vienna, where nobody ever spoke about these issues seem to have frustrated Helnwein, and so throughout his artistic career he has expressed his critique and revolt against atrocities of war and the politics of National Socialism. Instigated by the atmosphere of such an environment, he began studying the history of the phenomenon of cruelty and violence on the helpless and the innocent, mostly focusing around issues related to children. In his first water color piece of art he presented a wounded child blood splattered all over , by way of which he laid the foundation of his own visual iconography that is to remain his idiosyncratic style throughout his entire career as an artist, with realism and hyperrealism as his main stylistic features. By painting children in a rather unsettling way, but also in their unrivalled beauty, the artist presents them as symbols of innocence and the evil at the same time.

(https://stillinbelgrade.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/download.jpg)

Apart from the child images taking up the central place in his paintings and the critical-historical subjects, the artist also did a series of photos—self-portraits in which showing himself in the act of self-torture, referring to the vulnerable and the oppressed existence of contemporary individual. The selection of subjects and the forms of

representation makes his works both disheartening and inviting, at the same time, the spectator to feel the agony and evil Helnwein is making us painfully aware of, and to condemn them as the artist himself did.

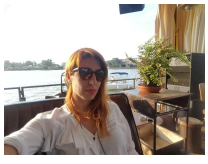
The exhibition Gottfried Helnwein—Between Innocence and Evil showcases 33 artworks from different stages of the artist's work. The exhibition is set in two spaces: the Gallery-Legacy of Milica Zorić and Rodoljub Čolaković, with 17 paintings (oil and acrilic on canvas) from different series (Epiphany, The Murmur of the Innocents, Disasters of War…), whereas in the other space, The Salon of the Museum, the audience is presented with 16 photos, mainly self-portraits, but also the photos from the series created in cooperation with Merilyn Menson.

(https://stillinbelgrade.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/10.-GH-10029.jpg)

Gottfried Helnwein (1948, Vienna, Austria) is an Austrian-Irish painter producing photos, installations and performances. Since he provokes rather visceral reactions on the part of the spectator, the fact that his exhibitions are amongst the most attended exhibitions of a contemporary artist comes as no surprise: his retrospective show in the Viennese Albertina museum organised at the end of 2013 drew in 250 000 visitors, which makes it the most sucessful exhibition in the entire history of this museum. Except in Albertina, he had one-man exhibitions in Museum of Modern Art in Strasbourg, Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, Russian State Museum in Sankt-Petersburg, California palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, Rheinisches Landes museum in Bonn, as well as in many other internationally acclaimed galleries and museums, and participated in numerous group exhibitions around the world. Also, Helnwein is appreciated for his stage designs, and theatre, ballet and opera costumes. Using his photo lens, he immortalised famous people from the world of show-business, art, film and music in his series of photos faces: Muhammad Ali, Charles Bukowski, William Burroughs, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Jackson, Norman Mailer, Arno Breker, Leni Riefenstahl, and yet others, as well as the members of the bands Rammstein, The Rollingstones, etc. Currently, he is living and working in Ireland and Los Angeles.

The curator of the exhibition is a curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Mišela Blanuša (MA). The exhibition is opened every day from 12:00 to 20:00, except Tuesdays.

The exhibition is organised with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia, the Embassy of Austria in Serbia, the Austrian Culture Forum, and Uniqa insurance company.



Dragana Kostica (https://stillinbelgrade.com/author/admin/)

Writer. Blogger. Traveler. Researcher. Electronic Music Lover.

(https://www.instagram.com/stillinbelgrade/?hl=sr)

(https://www.pinterest.com/stillinbelgrade/)

Lost Innocence, Enduring Resistance: An Interview with Gottfried Helnwein

By Hayley Evans November 2, 2016

In Art, Dark Art, Hyperreal, Interviews, Painting, Portraits, Special Feature

In a world fractured by the war machines of capitalism and exploitation, it is all-too-easy to feel distant from the stories of violence that pervade our media and political histories. However, as the renowned artist Gottfried Helnwein has shown in his courageous and provocative work, it is extremely difficult to ignore the suffering of a child, whose pain and stolen innocence exposes the failure and cruelty of the system.

After growing up in post-Nazi Vienna, Helnwein began exploring the theme of the wounded child in the 1970s as a protest against the silence surrounding the war

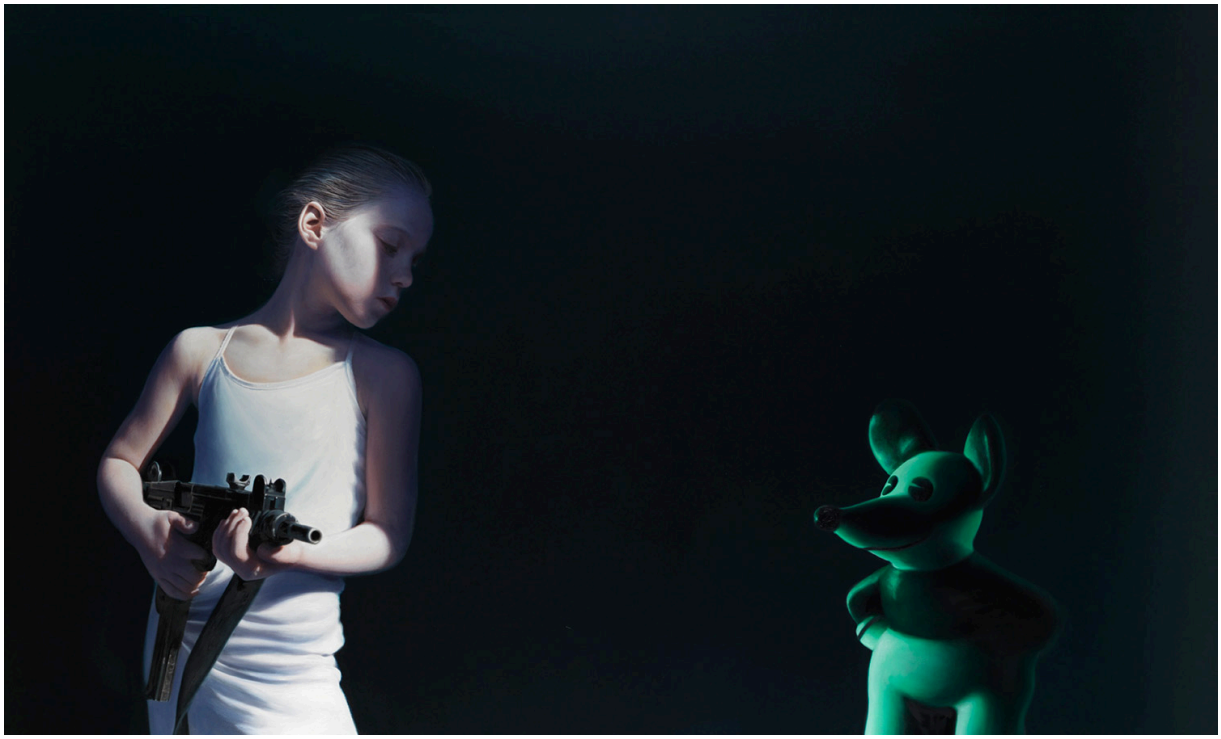
iconography that has shaken the art world to its core.

Among his many internationally exhibited and acclaimed works are the "Disasters of War" and "The Murmur of the Innocents" series, both comprised of large-scale hyperrealistic paintings of children. By mixing together images of children, torture, and cartoon characters, Helnwein uncovers stories of extreme pain (both physical and emotional) and enduring virtue, as well as the way mass-media culture (i.e., Disney) has replaced childhood innocence with manufactured, emotionally-bankrupt mascots. In a series of photographed self-portraits he made in the 1970s and '80s,

Helnwein made *himself* the torture subject, applying bandages and bizarre apparatuses to his face. Confronted by these works, the viewer cannot help but to feel the pain Helnwein and his figurative children embody—and that is the artist's goal.

At age 68, Helnwein remains active in both his politics and art. I had the honour of asking him a few questions about his past and ongoing work, his views on violence in the media today, as well as his connection with the late David Bowie.

Top: Helnwein uses shadows and light to create a somber mood that reveals the child's quiet strength.



The cartoon characters in Helnwein's paintings have a dark and unsettling demeanor.

At age eighteen you began creating art as a means of questioning authority. How do you enact resistance through your art today?

I always wanted freedom and independence more than anything else. I want to look for myself, think my own thoughts, dream my own dreams, I want to draw my own conclusions, and to make my own decisions. I don't need any belief-system or self-appointed authority to tell me what to think, what to do or not to do. I was never violent; I am no danger to society in any way—so I don't need to be monitored and controlled by anybody. I can take care of myself.

Unfortunately, the last thing any human society wants are free beings. Don’t wait for somebody granting you freedom, it will never happen; if you want freedom, you have to seize it. Creating art is one way of doing it, and for me it’s the most effective way.

Nothing scares authoritarian regimes more than art and free creation. Why would Hitler burn mountains of books and paintings and ban all arts? Why would Stalin—the master over life and death of almost 300 million people, a man who commanded the biggest army and secret service that ever existed—be afraid of the poems written by Anna Akhmatova? Why would Mao be so obsessed with destroying China’s entire cultural heritage? Why would FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, while denying the existence of organized crime in the US, put so much effort into harassing and investigating every artist of any significance from Hemingway to John Lennon? On this planet, creating means to stand up, to rebel, to resist, it means striking back.

The bandaged eyes inspire pity for the child’s vulnerability, and the gun signifies the perpetuation of violence.

You've described your work with the following statement: "My art is not the answer, it is rather a question." What fundamental questions do you hope viewers will ask themselves, their political systems, and the world itself?

That's entirely up to the onlooker. In all the years I have shown my work, I have seen people reacting very emotionally to it. Curators are always amazed when they see people in a museum crying in front of one of my paintings. It seems that at times my images tend to touch sore spots.

The children who avoid the viewer's gaze seem to be staring into another world, dissociating like the survivors of trauma.

The world has changed so much in the years you've been active, but in many ways it has stayed the same, with xenophobic politics and civil wars. What global trends or events are biggest on your radar when it comes to the production and sharing of your art?

What we are experiencing right now looks to me like the ending of a civilization, the second Fall of Rome. Children walk into schools to shoot other children, others blow themselves up in the midst of a crowd. Almost every hour an American soldier or veteran kills himself, which means that the majority of American soldiers die through

suicide, not in combat. As far as I know, that never happened in history before. It looks like the death wish of a society for which life lost its meaning.

Only art, aesthetics, and spirituality can transcend death, and the “authenticity of the creative artist can supply meaning to the despair and absurdity of existence,” as Nietzsche asserted. Or as David Bowie [quoted], “Religion is for people who fear hell, spirituality is for those who have been there.”

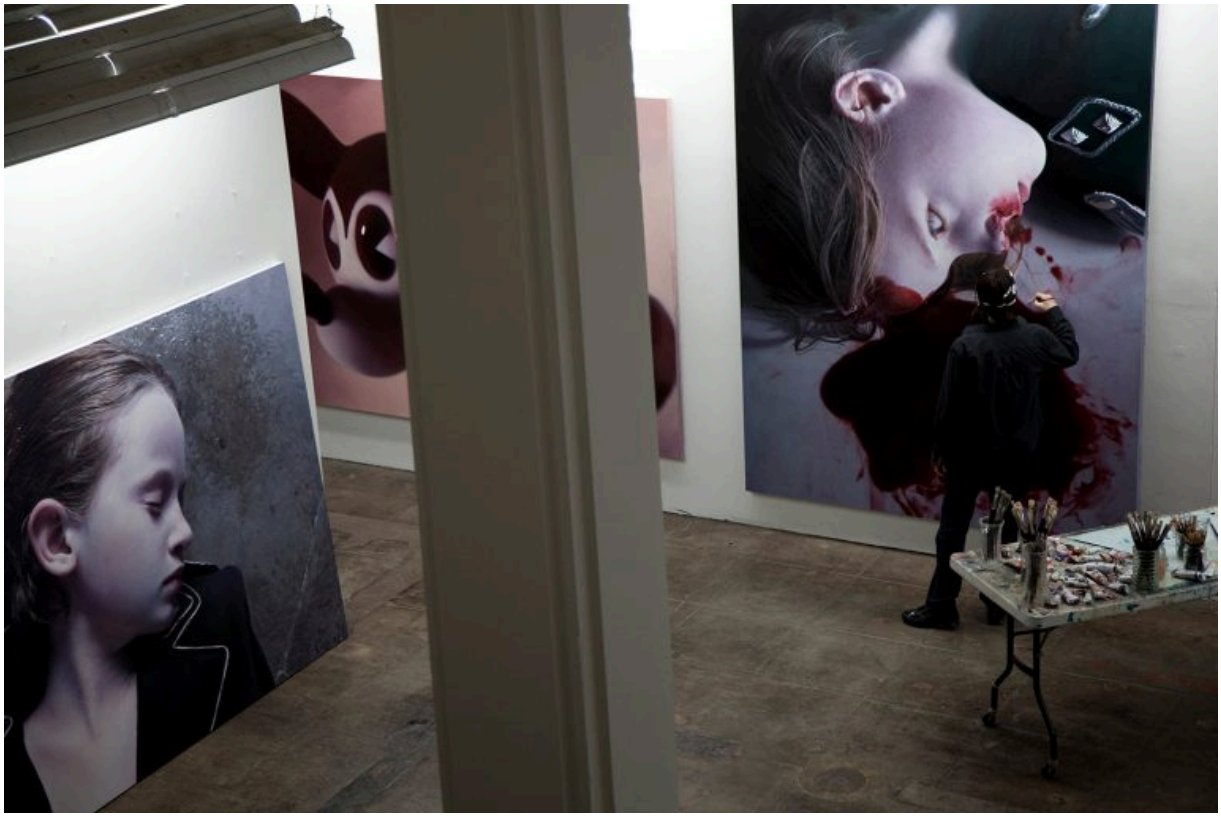
This bloodied and serene child resembles a martyr who has suffered immensely in the forces of war.

I’m certain you’ve seen it: the image of the Syrian boy covered in dust and blood that went viral recently. It stirred up a lot of discussion and emotion on social media. However, as *The Washington Post* observed, “despite an outpouring of global woe and lamentation, little changed.” In your opinion, what makes such photographs so ephemeral, and why does the greater public so easily sweep them under the rug of social consciousness?

We are bombarded daily with an endless flood of horrifying graphic and pornographic images of violence and death on television, social media, internet,

movies, and video games, which is just overwhelming and desensitizing, leaving people with a feeling of utter numbness and helplessness.

Since WWII the western war-machinery has never stopped killing. It keeps invading, bombing, torturing. The standard solution to any problem with regards to foreign affairs seems to be: threatening and “bombing them back into the Stone Age.” All in the name of “Democracy.” Of course, none of these campaigns ever solved anything; they only created new bigger problems and left scorched earth, blood, tears, and millions of corpses. But war is good business, and as long as we are ruled by bankers and the insatiable military-industrial complex, nothing will change.



Helnwein’s large-scale paintings deepen their impact on the viewer.

Your works have maintained an impact since the ’70s—what makes political paintings timeless, compared to the images we see reproduced on social media?

In 2002, when I moved into my new studio in Los Angeles, I thought for a moment: *maybe painting is a completely anachronistic activity*. How can a traditional simple painting compete with all these powerful special effects of the omnipresent electronic media that permeate every aspect of our daily life? Would anybody in all

this noise and hype bother to look at a painted piece of canvas? And then at my first American museum solo show at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, something totally unexpected happened: I saw the most emotional reactions to my work that I have ever experienced. People spontaneously came up to me and hugged and thanked me, and some cried. A woman said to me, “You probably don’t even know how important it is that you show your work here and right now.” I was taken totally by surprise, and I was somewhat humbled. It seems that a piece of art can have a much deeper impact than mass media with all its might and sophistication.

This painting from “The Murmur of the Innocents” shows both fear and bravery in the child’s face.

In your paintings, I’m fascinated by the deep, complex messages in the children’s eyes—they seem calm and distant, almost as if they have transcended their pain to give the viewer a message. What is the impact of painting unsettling expressions on the faces of suffering children, as opposed to adults?

My work is about the human existence. For me the basic nature—the essence of a human being—is manifested in its purest form in a child. Injustice, abuse, injury, and

violence are most evident and unbearable when inflicted upon a child. Anybody who is not completely insane will feel an impulse of empathy and sympathy and the urge to protect, to help, to console.

At the same time, children are exposed every day to the horrors of the grown-up hell they have to live in. It was the image of the wounded child that haunted me so much that one day I started to paint it, and I continued painting it—over and over again. I don't know, maybe I wanted to force others to look at it, too.

Helnwein's self-portraits explore vulnerability and the experience of being both a victim and a martyr.

On a lighter note (but still tinged with sadness)—your screenshot of David Bowie garnered a lot of attention on your Facebook feed, with people saying that they saw a lot of similarities between "Lazarus" (his final video) and your style. Your studio clarified that "while Gottfried was not involved in the making of the video, . . . it certainly looks like he helped inspire it." In what ways do you read similarities?

Bowie was an exceptional creative being. Only he could transform death into a work of art and say goodbye with such a brilliant and touching last performance.

His bandaged head reminded some people of my self-portraits in which I bandaged and distorted my face in endless variations—starting with my early performance and photographs in the seventies, and later also in my paintings. I met David in the ’90s in Los Angeles several times—he knew my work. I don’t know if my pictures were an inspiration for his “Lazarus” video, but I’d feel honored if it was.

There is much to see and learn from the ongoing projects of this living legend.

Do you have any collaborations, projects, or exhibitions that we can look forward to seeing from you in upcoming year?

I am struggling with many ideas, but nothing concrete enough that I could tell you now. Usually I don’t plan too far ahead; I think I would hate to know where my work will end up in the future. I want to be surprised, too. I can only suggest: stay tuned.

Follow the artist on Facebook and Instagram.

Gottfried Helnwein: the angel and the demon

Published on: 9 June 2025
By: Hervé Lancelin
Category: Art Critique
Reading time: 9 minutes

Gottfried Helnwein transforms hyperrealism into a weapon of resistance. His children with bandaged faces and his scarred little girls reveal the hidden violence of our societies. This Austrian artist, who became Irish, refuses any compromise, using art as a ruthless revealer of our deepest collective shadows.

Listen to me carefully, you bunch of snobs, for here we are faced with one of the last true provocateurs of our time, a man who still dares to do what art should have done since always: slap us with the truth of our human condition. Gottfried Helnwein is not one of those contemporary artists who indulge in the self-satisfaction of a sanitized art market. No, this Austrian turned Irishman has confronted us for more than fifty years with our deepest shadows, through a work that makes martyred childhood the relentless mirror of our societies.

Born in 1948 in a Vienna still haunted by the ghosts of Nazism, Helnwein grew up in that atmosphere of complicit silence so well described by Stefan Zweig in his memoirs of exile. This broken city, where no one sang or laughed, where adults tried to forget in a collective amnesia, forged the rebellious artist we know. From adolescence, he refused conventions, dropped out of school, rejected authority in all its forms. His first artistic transgression, that supposed portrait of Hitler painted with his own blood which earned him his expulsion from art school, already announced the radicality of his aesthetic commitment.

The hyperrealism of Helnwein transcends mere technical prowess to become an instrument of resistance. His children with bandaged faces, his little girls with gaping scars, his toddlers holding weapons of war are not gratuitous sensationalism but an imperative inner necessity. As he himself declared: “From my earliest age, I have always seen violence around me and the effects of violence: fear” [1]. This violence, he transforms it into disturbing beauty, into grating poetry that forces us to look at what we would prefer to ignore.

His first Viennese exhibitions in the 1970s triggered violent protests, exhibition closures, and police confiscations. The bourgeois public of the time could not bear these images of tortured children that too crudely referred to the recent crimes of History. Yet, Helnwein persists and signs, convinced that art must serve as a goad to the collective conscience. His watercolors of mutilated children quickly became his aesthetic signature, a trademark that never ceased to disturb.

Helnwein’s work is deeply rooted in the European literary tradition, particularly in the Kafkaesque universe of the absurd and alienation. Like Franz Kafka, the Helnweinian individual finds himself trapped in a system that inexorably crushes him. The bandaged child becomes the universal metaphor of modern man, a victim of social mechanisms that he does not understand and cannot control. This kinship with the Prague writer is not coincidental: both grew up in the dying Austro-Hungarian Empire, both witnessed the collapse of bourgeois certainties, both made existential anguish the heart of their creation.

In Kafka, the protagonist literally transforms into an insect in The Metamorphosis, undergoing a mutation that makes him a stranger to his own family. In Helnwein, the child undergoes an inverse metamorphosis: he retains his human appearance but bears on his face the stigmata of a violence that transforms him into a hybrid creature, half-angel half-

demon. This transformation occurs through wounding, through mutilation, through the addition of medical accessories that dehumanize while paradoxically revealing the very essence of humanity. The Austrian artist pushes the logic of the absurd even further than Kafka: where the writer maintains an ironic distance, Helnwein plunges us directly into horror with no escape possible.

Helnwein's creative process is akin to Kafka's in its quasi-obsessive method. Like the author of The Trial who wrote at night, haunted by his nightmarish visions, Helnwein works in absolute solitude, surrounded by his mutilated dolls and his visual references gleaned from European morgues. This solitary dimension of creation, this necessity to cut oneself off from the world to better reveal it, constitutes a common trait between the two artists. For both, art is born from the impossibility of living normally in a world gone mad.

Helnwein's hyperrealistic technique serves this aesthetic of unsettling strangeness dear to Kafka. His children with photographic precision faces evolve in indeterminate spaces, out of time and space, exactly like Kafkaesque characters evolve in anonymous and labyrinthine urban settings. This precision of detail in the service of the unreal creates a constant sense of unease in the viewer, who can no longer distinguish dream from reality, nightmare from normality. Helnwein's art functions like a machine for producing anguish, exactly like Kafkaesque literature.

The influence of American popular culture on Helnwein's work constitutes the other pillar of his aesthetic. Donald Duck, this tutelary figure of his Viennese childhood, traverses his entire artistic production like an obsessive leitmotif. This attachment to Disney's duck may seem incongruous in an artist who denounces the violence of the contemporary world, but it actually reveals an aesthetic strategy of great coherence. Donald Duck embodies for Helnwein the antihero par excellence, the magnificent loser who resists all adversities without ever losing his dignity.

This fascination with the Disney universe is part of a broader sociological approach that questions the mechanisms of mass culture. Helnwein uses the aesthetic codes of American comics to better divert, pervert, and turn them against themselves. His grimacing Mickey Mouse, his cartoon characters transformed into threatening creatures reveal the dark side of the entertainment industry. The artist operates a radical critique of consumer society by using its own weapons, its own symbols, its own references.

This strategy of diversion finds its apogee in his monumental installations like Ninth November Night, created in 1988 in Cologne to commemorate Kristallnacht. One hundred meters of life-sized children's faces parade between the Ludwig Museum and the cathedral, irresistibly evoking the selections of the concentration camps. The public cannot escape this forced confrontation with History, exactly like consumers cannot escape advertising in the urban space. Helnwein turns the mechanisms of mass communication against itself to create a counter-propaganda of memory.

Helnwein's art is also rooted in a sociological critique of education and institutions. His bandaged children implicitly denounce educational systems that format and mutilate young minds. As he himself explains: "Childhood is that short innocent phase of life

where an intact human being still possesses creativity and imagination before external educational systems destroy them" [2]. This pessimistic vision of school and education is part of the critical sociological tradition inaugurated by thinkers like Ivan Illich or Paulo Freire.

The Austrian artist extends this critique by denouncing the hypocrisy of democratic societies that claim to protect childhood while sacrificing it daily on the altar of their economic and political interests. His works function as so many revealers of our collective contradictions, our willing blindness, our compromises with institutional violence. The Helnweinian child becomes the symbol of all the collateral victims of our social systems, of all the innocences broken by our organized indifference.

This sociological dimension of the work finds its most explicit translation in his collaborations with musicians like Marilyn Manson or his works for the opera. Helnwein refuses to confine his art to the traditional spaces of elitist culture, preferring to invest in the circuits of popular culture to reach a wider audience. This democratic strategy of art joins his deep political convictions: art should not remain confined in bourgeois galleries but must descend into the street, be displayed on magazine covers, challenge the ordinary passerby.

The 2018 installation on the Vienna Ringturm, showing a blonde girl pointing a submachine gun at passersby, perfectly illustrates this desire for direct confrontation with the public space. This monumental work transforms the historic center of Vienna into an open-air gallery, forcing residents to question the violence that permeates their daily lives. It does not matter if the image disturbs or shocks: the essential lies in its ability to make people think, to challenge certainties, to awaken sleeping consciences.

Helnwein's work is also part of a psychoanalytic reflection on collective trauma and memory. His wounded children can be read as so many symptoms of historical repression, as the return of the repressed in the European unconscious. Post-war Austria, this amnesic society that refuses to face its Nazi past, necessarily produces obsessive images that haunt its collective dreams.

The artist functions here as a psychoanalyst of society, revealing buried traumas, forcing speech where silence reigns, imposing truth where lies prosper. His bandaged self-portraits, his mutilated faces refer each of us to our own wounds, to our own shadows, to our own compromises with violence. Art becomes collective therapy, exorcism of guilt, revealer of the repressed unconscious.

This psychoanalytic dimension explains the violence of the reactions that Helnwein's works provoke. As art historian Peter Gorsen notes, the abused child constitutes "an original invention" that shatters our idealized representations of childhood [3]. This break with our reassuring mental constructions causes a salutary shock that forces us to reconsider our prejudices, our blindness, our denials. Helnwein's art functions like a ruthless mirror held up to our societies: it reflects an image of ourselves that we would prefer not to see.

The recent evolution of Helnwein's work, marked by his critique of "cancel culture" and political correctness, reveals the coherence of his artistic commitment. For more than fifty years, this man has refused all forms of censorship, whether from the right or the left, religious or secular, political or moral. His creative freedom is not negotiated, not bargained, not compromised. In a world where contemporary art seems increasingly formatted by market imperatives and ideological injunctions, Helnwein maintains intact his power to disturb.

This intransigence earns him today the criticisms of those who yesterday applauded his rebellion against the bourgeois order. But the authentic artist cannot choose his battles according to intellectual fashions: he must remain faithful to his vision, whatever the cost. Helnwein pays the price of this fidelity to himself, of this refusal to submit to new conformisms, of this will to remain a free electron in an increasingly normalized world.

The work of Gottfried Helnwein traverses the decades without aging because it touches the universal human. His wounded children speak to all generations, to all cultures, to all sensibilities. They remind us that behind our masks of civilization hides always the same primitive barbarism, that under our beautiful humanist speeches persists the same indifference to the suffering of others. This disturbing but necessary truth makes Helnwein one of the rare contemporary artists still capable of moving us, of questioning us, of transforming us.

Faced with his monumental canvases, we can no longer feign ignorance or cultivate indifference. Art becomes again what it should never have ceased to be: a weapon of resistance against all forms of oppression, a cry of revolt against all injustices, a call to dignity in a world that cruelly lacks it. Gottfried Helnwein reminds us that the authentic artist is never a public entertainer but always a troublemaker, never a decorator but always a revealer, never a courtier but always a rebel.

In this era of generalized confusion where art is lost in the meanders of spectacle and commodification, Helnwein keeps alive the tradition of aesthetic commitment. His works prove to us that it is still possible to create without compromise, to denounce without concession, to resist without weakening. For this alone, he deserves our recognition and our admiration.

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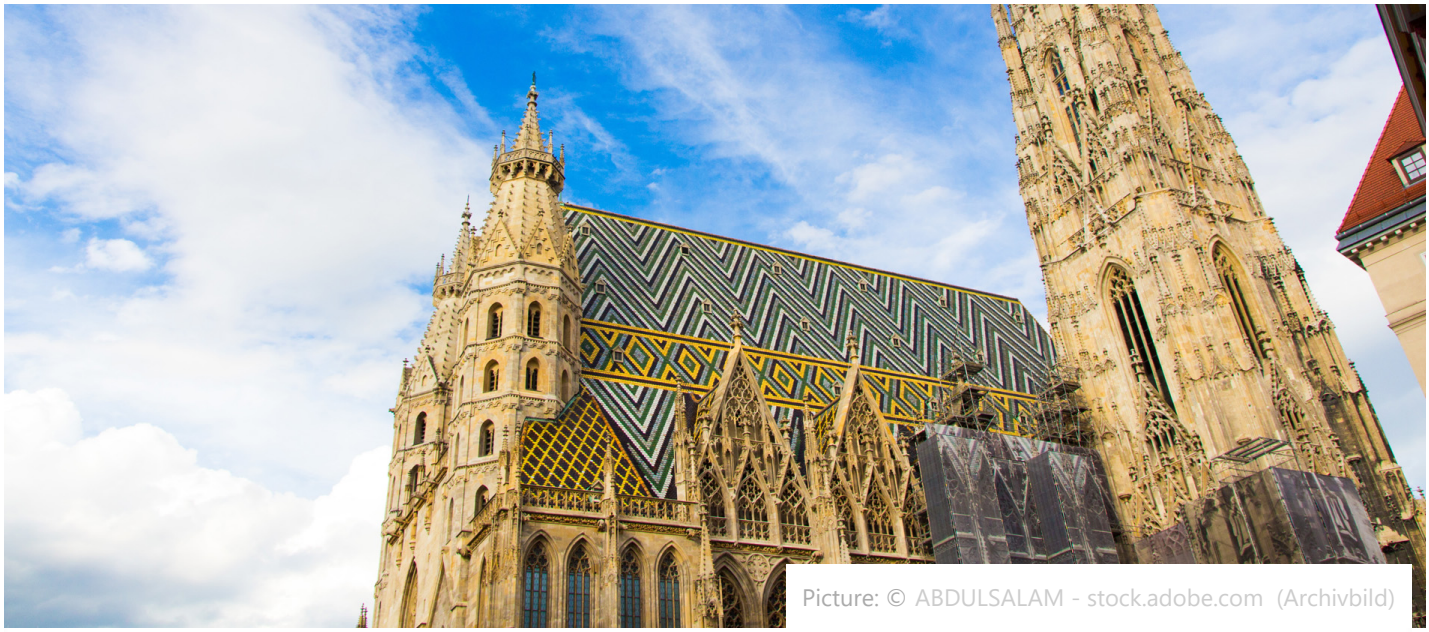
1. Gottfried Helnwein, quoted in Los Angeles Review of Books, "Confronting the Intolerable", January 2017
2. Wikipedia documentation on Gottfried Helnwein, June 2025
3. Peter Gorsen, quoted in the Wikipedia documentation on Gottfried Helnwein, June 2025
4. Interview with Max magazine, "Der lange Schatten", June 2024



Picture: © ABDULSALAM - stock.adobe.com (Archivbild)

Controversial artist exhibits at St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna

Painter Gottfried Helnwein: Admire Christian art

VIENNA - Gottfried Helnwein caused a sensation decades ago with his "shock images". Now he has varied the Christian tradition of the Lenten cloth for Vienna Cathedral. Because, according to the renowned artist, he is "still a Catholic to this day".

Published on 13.02.2024 at 15:46 –

The painter Gottfried Helnwein (75) recognises the great importance of the Catholic Church for the art and culture of the West. Among other things, he was socialised as a Catholic as a Jesuit pupil and as he grew older, he felt more and more admiration for art commissioned by the church, he said on Tuesday in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. At the time of their creation, these works - such as the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel- were just as controversial as some of his own works, said the artist, who repeatedly worked with shock effects.

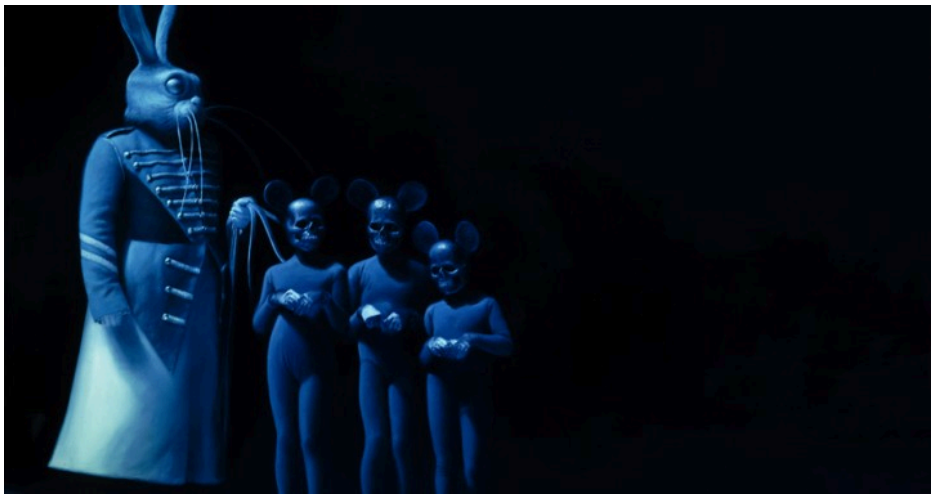
Helnwein said that he shared the human longing for a life beyond death and, as a baptised and confirmed Catholic, he is still a Catholic today. What he appreciates about the Christian faith is the conviction that God himself took suffering and death upon himself and thus showed "total empathy" towards the human beings he created.

Three-part work of art

The Viennese artist, who lives alternately in Ireland and Los Angeles, made his comments at the presentation of a three-part work of art he created, which is to be shown in the cathedral from Ash Wednesday to 7 June. The internationally renowned Helnwein had already made a statement against violence against women at St Stephen's Cathedral in Advent 2022. At that time, a large poster with an injured girl with bloodstains was hung on the south tower.

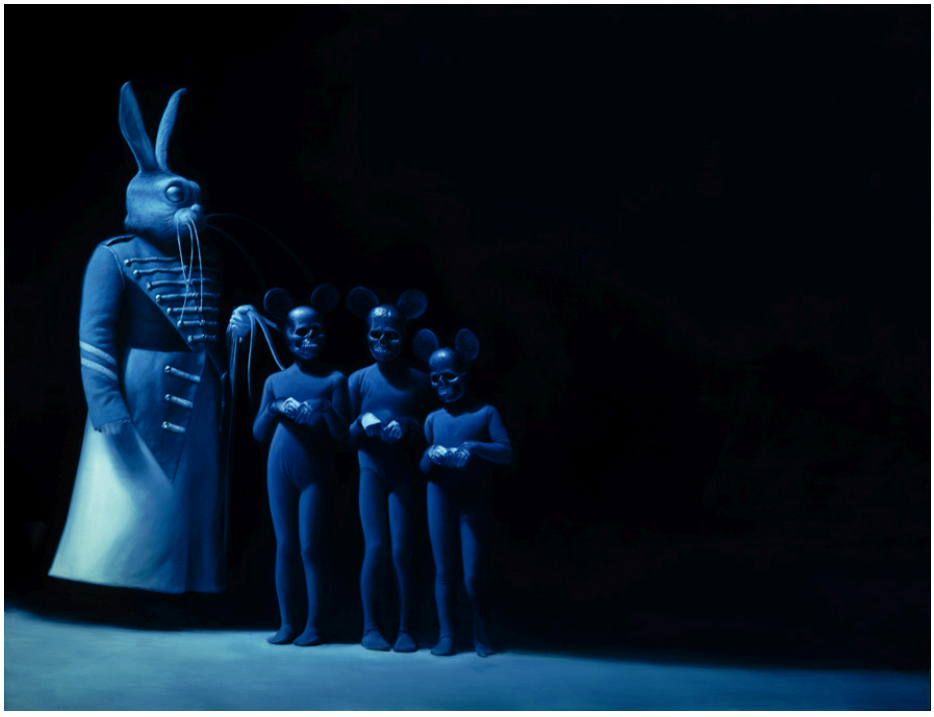
Helnwein went on to say that, unlike Calvinists or Puritans, the Catholic Church had courageously opened itself up to art; in the Baroque period, for example, with its "explosion of the senses", basic human sensitivities such as ecstasy, Eros and death were expressed in a convincing artistic manner. However, Helnwein emphasised that it would be a mistake to associate the church only with old art. The Viennese cathedral priest Toni Faber, for example, deserves credit for repeatedly encouraging collaborations with modern art. "Without visual representations, music and sensuality, faith would be too abstract and would not do justice to people," said Helnwein.

The three large triptych depictions in the chancel of the cathedral illustrate the themes of death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit as central statements of Christian faith. The presentation takes place in three stages: according to the church year at Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Helnwein emphasised that he was making his paintings available "for God's reward". (KNA)



INTERVIEW: Meet Gottfried Helnwein (2008)

Posted on June 21, 2014 by Editorial @ ASX



Untitled, 2005, mixed media (oil and acrylic on canvas),192 x 249 cm / 75″ x 98″

By Stefan Jermann, originally published in Truce Magazine, 2008

My stomach churns; I'm feeling excited – not exactly nervous, but psyched. I'm driving along narrow lanes, through a bleak and lonely area, looking for a grand castle. Suddenly, just like in a fairy tale, there it is, looming majestically in front of me. I go through my questions one more time and imagine how Gottfried Helnwein might react to them. What shall I make of this man, who is deemed to be a huge fan of Donald Duck and yet creates such sombre images? Has he made his own Duckburg here, Helnweinburg, his own unique world – I am somewhat curious. Will he throw me in a dungeon until my questions ripen, or will he set the castle ghost on me – the one that has already flirted with Dita von Teese? I try to concentrate on the moment at hand, breathe – breathe slowly in and out, somehow it will turn out all right.

It's a foggy, cloud-streaked afternoon in Waterford County, Ireland. I'm meeting a man who has spent a large part of his life on this island that is famously steeped in tradition. He's called this place home for some while. Ireland

has a long history of treating its artists, literary figures and musicians well. This Austrian, with his distinctive appearance, is an ambivalent character. Helnwein's main theme was, and mostly continues to be, violence and abuse. It wasn't simply a case of deciding one day to explore this dark realm – no – as they say: the theme chose him. Many of Gottfried Helnwein's works convey something disturbing. They often have something about them that won't leave you alone. At the same time his pictures radiate a sacrosanct beauty that at times is breathtaking.

His good friend and collector of his work, Sean Penn, once put it in a nutshell: "Well, the world is a haunted house and Helnwein, at times, is our tour guide through it." And yes, despite all my qualms: I wasn't locked in a dungeon and the castle's ghost had no interest in me. After a few hours visiting this mystical castle, Gottfried and Renate Helnwein said a friendly goodbye. For a moment I imagined what it would be like to be lord of a castle myself. I step on the gas pedal and realise that I'm in my little hire car, and not a Rolls Royce. Pulled back into reality I drive away from the estate, glancing back for a

moment and thinking to myself: what a world he lives in, what a man, what an inspiration!

Stefan Jermann: I've just come from Waterford, where the over-sized Helnwein billboards that are all over the city blew me away. The young girls all look similar – are these different faces or are they all one and the same girl?

Gottfried Helnwein: No, they are different children. The installation is called 'The Last Child', and it is spread over the whole of the city of Waterford. The biggest picture hangs on the Old Flour Mill. A white, 24 x 35 meter large, child's face, with her eyes stretched wide open.

SJ: You've been involved with the theme of abuse, pain and violence for a long time now – though at first sight these pictures are gentle, even dreamlike; the pain isn't always consciously perceived the first time you see them and it's very subtly conveyed – what exactly is the message that you want to put across to the viewer?

GH: Essentially, this is the central theme that has run through my work since 1970. I believe

that all the work an artist does, revolves around a single central concern or motif. Every work is like a new attempt, which may be more or less successful, to get closer to the central theme, to make it visible, to grasp it, to formulate it. In principle though, it is intangible, so it cannot be grasped and has no form. I became involved with the theme of violence very early on, especially violence towards children. In the course of my research I have seen forensic photographs of children who were beaten or tortured to death – mostly by close relatives. The number of children, who die every year in this way, is very high. You don't easily forget those pictures. In the 60s and 70s the media didn't generally take up this theme. Back then, my first pale watercolours of bandaged and wounded children caused an uproar in Austria, people put stickers on the pictures declaring them to be 'degenerate art', exhibitions were cancelled and once my work was confiscated from a gallery by the police under the Mayor's orders.

SJ: Why were these children killed by their own parents – was this a post-war phenomenon…?

GH: Violence against the weak and defenseless is as old as the human race. Worldwide, there are probably more slaves now than there were in the time that slavery was legal. Since Austria suddenly came to the world's attention again recently as a result of the Fritzl case, the foreign media have been speculating about Austria's 'dark side', and some have promptly been reminded that this aspect has long been a theme in Austrian art. In literature as well as in visual art. And it was my pictures, above all, that invaded people's consciousness. The sort of woodcut picture that the international media uses to illustrate Austria, when they notice it at all, is annoying sometimes. A few years ago when I was in America and my nationality was brought up, people would immediately say: 'Ah – Waldheim!', later: 'Ah, Haider!', then it was 'Fritzl!'. If it weren't for Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mozart, Austria would be fucked, PR-wise.

SJ: But how did you begin to be so intensively involved in this theme at a time when it was still taboo?

GH: Maybe I suffer from some kind of obsession with justice. I just can't comprehend

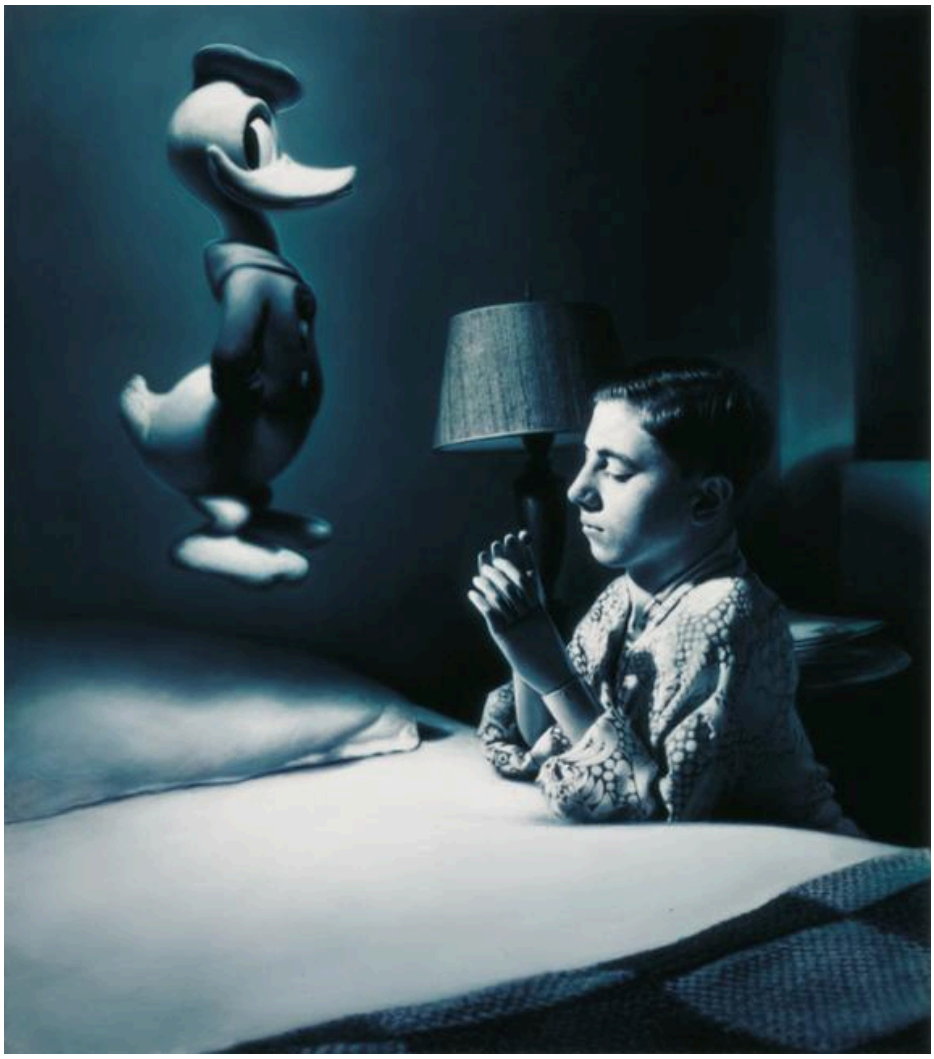
how anyone can enjoy being violent towards another person who is totally defenseless. The first revelations about the holocaust, although limited, were the trigger. I soaked up every detail that I could discover, and as I saw how sadistic concentration camp guards and murderers were being acquitted, time stopped for me right there. I suddenly became aware that all the worthy bourgeois around me had taken part in the biggest mass murder in history just a few years earlier. Instantly I didn't feel part of that society anymore. I don't think history has ever seen such a radical schism between two generations. In the 60s, young people all over the world rebelled against their parents' generation, as they no longer wanted to be identified with it. At about the same time I also began to get involved with the history of the Catholic Church.

SJ: Did you have a strict Catholic upbringing?

GH: I spent a large part of my childhood in a fog of incense in the naves of cold churches, surrounded by martyrs writhing in ecstasy and covered in blood, flaming hearts wreathed in thorns, crosses, instruments of torture, mystical stigmata and dying virgins gazing in rapture

towards heaven. The ‘bible picture book-comic’ the ghostly flickering red lamp, the Latin murmurings of the priest and the monotonous whispering of litanies and rosaries, the mummified corpse in faded brocade behind semi-opaque windows, the High Mass and processions accompanied by the ringing of bells – all this dug its way deep into my childhood soul!

Christianity is the first religion to have put pain, bleeding and death at the centre of its spirituality. For the first time, God is not only associated with triumph and cosmic power, but with human wretchedness, agony, fear, indignity, suffering, failure, succumb and death. Christianity has influenced the history, art and culture of the last 2000 years like no other ideology. But very early on I encountered a totally different, huge, new culture, which resulted in a culture shock to me: I met the man, that changed the course of my life: Donald Duck.



American Prayer, 2000, mixed media (oil and acrylic on canvas),213 x 187 cm / 83″ x 73″

SJ: How old were you when Donald rescued you, as it were, from this sombre view of the world?

GH: I was about five years old when I first stepped on Duckburg soil.

SJ: What was your relationship with your parents like when you were a child?

GH: I always had the feeling I had landed in the wrong place. I was like an extraterrestrial being who had been abandoned on a foreign planet. Post-war Vienna was a dark and tragic place. The grown-ups seemed to me to be ugly, ponderous and bad-tempered. My parents were actually lovely people, but were shy and timid, and trapped in their lower middle class world.

SJ: You couldn't develop, because you wanted to escape from this world?

GH: It was a world that had experienced Armageddon twice: the collapse of the monarchy, the rise and fall of Nazi rule, two World wars lost. From the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Habsburgs, all that remained was the capital city with a bit of land around it, largely cut off from the world by the iron curtain. Although we were officially a free democratic country, the ghosts of the past weren't easy to shake off. Of course, the government, the justice system and the bureaucracy were full of ex-Nazis. And you could feel it.

SJ: Could we talk some more about your current installation in Waterford: I've been

asking myself why the children you portray are all girls – why don't you include boys as your subject?

GH: Actually I always just refer to children. Man as an androgynous being. I'm interested in the short phase of childhood when one is not yet 'broken' by the process of being brought up. When the gender issue doesn't yet play much of a role, when creation and imagination appear to be endless and the world of one's own fantasy is more real than alleged reality. I'm preoccupied with vulnerability and presumed innocence. I'm always looking for the ideal model, though appearance as such doesn't play such a large role. It's this hard to define, intangible quality that used to be called ethereal, a radiance or aura that you only see in very few children. And mostly it is girls of a particular age who have this quality, like apparitions from another world rather than flesh and blood.

SJ: What do you think passers-by in Waterford make of the portraits, some of which are bathed in blood: what do you think goes through their heads?

GH: I think it’s caused quite a stir in this small city. There have been lots of calls made to the town hall or the radio station. Some are enthralled by the installation and others get worked-up about it. But I’m amazed how respectful and fair the remarks have been. But this is the Ireland I’ve come to know ever since I’ve lived here. It’s the most tolerant country there is.

SJ: But the Irish also have quite a sense of patriotism, or has this more to do with the preservation of culture?

GH: The Irish have never started a war of aggression in their entire history, though invaders have marched in time and again. The English occupied Ireland for 700 years and they treated the people like slaves. They were not allowed to own any land, were forbidden to use their own language and in the 19th century the population was halved as a result of the great famine. Despite all this, no one has succeeded in breaking the Irish. The Irish identity has been maintained through the years by their music and literature. These large-format billboards all over the city with my images of children might

be like another invasion: representing something of a challenge to the people here.

SJ: Maybe you expected a little bit of scandal – also because here's this foreigner, an Austrian, who wants to show the Irish how the world works?

GH: Ireland is the only country I know where there's no xenophobia. A lot of foreigners have moved here in the last few years, looking for work – from Asia and Africa and about 150,000 people from Poland alone. Until now I haven't heard that anyone has a problem with that. When we arrived, 12 years ago, I had the feeling of being at home for the first time in my life.

SJ: Your billboards are all over the city and they have almost the same aesthetic as advertising – but we don't really know what they mean because there's no text to go with them. Now, advertisers want to sell – but what is your agenda? Are you aiming to provide food for thought?

GH: That's exactly the point. At first people have no idea what these pictures are about. No

explanation or solution is offered, like we're used to with advertising. People have to find their own answers to these pictures. For me art is a dialogue. And as Marcel Duchamp said when he defined art, these two poles, artist and observer are necessary, in order to make something like electricity. This is exactly what's happening here in Waterford. The people are affected emotionally, they talk about it, they are enthralled or they are outraged and protest. Isn't that exactly what art should do?

SJ: How would you describe yourself. You don't make a sombre impression on me, in fact the opposite. Does it actually take a good dose of humour to even be able to deal with such dark themes?

GH: I had absolutely no choice. I didn't go looking for my theme; I was in the middle of it right from the beginning. It was ordained by my environment and art was simply my way of trying to break free. It's necessary for my survival. In general people are very sensitive to themes such as pain, injury and death in art, but when it comes to entertainment, like film or video games, they can't get enough of it.

SJ: Let’s come back to the subject of your models. How does it actually work when you conduct a ‘session’? Do you have an exact vision in mind of how the picture should look before you start and does it stretch out over a long period of time?

GH: It’s usually a process that’s spread out over a longer time. As a rule I work in cycles. For me, working with children is very inspiring. I give them as much freedom as possible and don’t explain a lot. I leave it up to the intuition of the individual child. A photo session usually runs like a game, and the child and I develop what takes place together. Sometimes I’ve had the good luck to find models that have an enormous radiance and purity and I’ve worked together with them over several years. I found just such a child here in Waterford. Her name is Molly – she’s the 34-metre high “Waterford Child” on the Mill. I dedicated “The Last Child” project to her.

SJ: Do you go out on the streets yourself to ask people, or the children if they would like to model for you?

GH: I look around, among the people I know, or on the streets and then the parents come to my atelier with their children. I do a test session to find out whether it works or not.

SJ: With particular regard to your series “The Last Child”, the girls all have something androgynous about them. To some extent it is impossible to say whether it’s a girl or a boy…

Helnwein: It’s actually completely irrelevant. When my own children were still small I often used them as models, as long as they wanted to do it. My son Ali was the ideal model. He had an unbelievable beauty and because of his long hair was often mistaken for a girl. He looked like an angel made of alabaster. He also had endless patience. My youngest son Amadeus refused to be photographed, but my daughter Mercedes was a very good and interesting model, with a huge talent for drama and pathos. H.C. Artmann once said that she looked like a little Rococo figurine. She had something about her – she was born a noble lady. One day she demanded “I want to live on a planet where only fine ladies live!” When she was asked what should happen to the men she retorted “They should all stay on the dirt-planet and I

want a plane to circle round and round the planet throwing more dirt on them all the time!”

SJ: All four of your children are artists themselves now. To what extent did you encourage them?

GH: In a way I’ve made them my campaign of revenge. I wanted to avenge my own childhood, which was so undignified, uninteresting and wretched – and above all plagued by idiotic rules, taboos and feelings of guilt. When I was a child I swore that I would give my own children complete freedom to make their own decisions. Including whether they wanted to go to school or not.

SJ: So did you bring your children up in a completely anti-authoritarian way?

GH: No – free. The term ‘anti-authoritarian’ comes form the neo-Marxist scene and the hippie movement of the 60s. I never saw myself as authority but as an ally. To raise children you don’t need any ideology or psychology, just love and respect. Simply give a child his dignity and strike up a partnership. It’s really very simple. I always imagined roaming

through the country with my children in a lawless, sort of band. That's about what happened. We've lived in different parts of the world, all my children have become artists, have different nationalities and although they have children of their own now, we all still live together, like a Sicilian extended family.

SJ: But I assume your children did have to go to school…?

GH: I left the decision up to them. To my amazement they all enjoyed going to school.

SJ:Numerous famous people are intensive collectors of your work. One very enthusiastic collector is Sean Penn, who has also made a film about you. To what extent are good relationships with 'celebrities' an advantage in this field?

GH: Mostly my friends are other artists – particularly artists whose work interests me. Strangely, it's mostly with writers, people in the theatre or musicians that I sense this particular closeness and trust and have developed friendships. I don't know many painters.

SJ: How long is the wait for a Helnwein?

GH: Actually it’s always longer than planned. I have a long list of people, who, thank goodness, are blessed with the virtue of patience.

http://www.helnwein.com/

Original Interview in German

EX_POSURE
By Eleni Zymaraki Tzortzi

Interviews

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN, INTERVIEW

Gottfried Helnwein, Interview

Gottfried Helnwein was born in 1948 Vienna.

He is an artist well known by his critique of the political situation, the crimes perpetrated during the WWII, Nazism and Holocaust.

The experience from the childhood spent in the post-Nazi Vienna, where nobody ever spoke about these issues irritated Helnwein, and so throughout his artistic career he expressed his critique and revolt against war atrocities and the politics of National Socialism.

“My art is not the answer, it is rather a question”

His installation “Ninth November Night” in 1988, in Cologne, irritated German audience and provoked protests and aggressiveness. The large-scale photomurals were vandalized. After a few days, numerous pictures had been slashed – one even stolen. Gottfried Helnwein however saw the exhibition as a process, which would continue and be reflected in later presentations. The pictures were

not renewed, but patched up, so that this reminder of the persecution of Jewish people would bear the traces of a lack of insight and understanding in the present day.

The motif of the child, which prevails his work, is presented in an unsettling way, but also in unrivalled beauty and is his main metaphor of the innocent and helpless people upon whom the cruelty and the violence are being practiced by those in power.

As it has been accurately pointed out the child in Helnwein's work is the symbol of innocence but also of innocence betrayed by today's world malevolent forces of war, poverty, and sexual exploitation and the misguiding influence of modern media.

Beside the child images occupying the central place in his painting and the critical-historical subjects, the artist also did series of photos—self-portraits in which, showing himself in the act of self-torture, referring to the vulnerable and oppressed existence of contemporary individual.

The selection of subjects and the modes of representation make his works disquieting inviting and are perfectly synchronized with his deep inner intention not to console through his art but to provoke.

Gottfried Helnwein talked to Eleni Zymaraki Tzortzi.

Art in numerous instances has been used by both societies and individuals as the means of atonement and perhaps of justification for the unethical, the injustice, the atrocious, the corrupted, the perverted etc.

What is your opinion about art, especially contemporary art, as a means of atonement and absolution for societies and individuals?

The idea, that killing and bloodshed can atone for preceding killing and bloodshed, is the fundamental error of mankind. Another misapprehension is the idea that somebody else can release you of your guilt by sacrificing himself or somebody else. These misconceptions are responsible for the never-ending cycle of violence, pain and death.

Art has nothing to do with that. On the contrary – Art is the antipodal force, it can enable us to approach, confront, permeate and transcend the horrendous, the unbearable, the unexplainable, the pain and the agony and our own dark side. It is the force that eventually defeats death.

Aesthetics is the universal solvent.

Jean Gene said: "Beauty has no other origin than the wound (unique, different in each person, hidden or visible) that we carry within us…"

And only beauty or art can heal that wound.

I think art and aesthetics are the fundamental necessities for human existence, and I agree with Nietzsche's assertion that "Authenticity of the creative artist can supply meaning to the despair and absurdity of existence."

The effect your work has on people's consciences could be compared with the one that the Greek female mythological deities, Erinyes, had on criminals. They forever followed the person who did a crime and they even could make the person go mad. Similarly your work confronts us with the ugliest sides of our self, the ones we mask, we tend to forget, to cover…

Do you fight through your work against oblivion?

No blood is coming out of my eyes, but I do like to follow people stubbornly with my images, and I try to force them to look. It is a fight against collective amnesia.

You have often talked about the environment you were born, Vienna a few years after the second World War, as a dreary place; How different and in what ways is the situation for an artist starting his career in Vienna today?

When I was born right after the big war, Vienna was a black hole. After two World Wars and the Holocaust you could still feel the breath of death. I saw only old people, miserable, grouchy, broken.

My generation was in a constant state of rebellion, we didn't want to have anything to do with the past, the tradition and values of our parents, and the mess they left us.

Since the early nineties with the end of the Soviet Union, and the fall of the Iron Curtain, everything changed instantly. It was as like getting out of an Iron Lung and being able to breath freely again.

Now Vienna is a totally different place, modern, open, vibrant and internationally connected,

but I also realized that the city is loosing more and more its unique character and cultural tradition. Great architecture in the characteristic Viennese Baroque or Ringstrasse-style gets torn down and is replaced by faceless post-modern boxes, that could as well be found in Bucharest, East Germany or Shanghai.

And like everywhere, young artists follow now the trends of the international art scene and markets and their work is often not distinguishable anymore from that of American or Chinese artists.

How can children and also the child within us be protected and unburdened from their/our 'fathers' sins'?

I think there is nothing easier than raising children. I always gave my kids total freedom, I told them to decide for themselves if they wanted to go to school or not.

The only things our children need from us are: freedom and respect.

Everything else they bring with them: spontaneity, creativity, intuition, imagination and vision.

Children still have a connection to the magic of their own spiritual world, that grown-ups have lost long ago. We should not disturbed their dreams and poison their minds with our imbecile television, genetically modified junk food, drugs, psychologists, corrupt politics, internet- violence and pornography and oppressive schools.

Maybe we should just leave them alone and let them make their own decisions because they are anyway closer to the truth then we are. I think we can learn more from children, than the can learn from us.

I agree with Captain Beafheart who said; 'I needed to purge myself of all the attention my parents had given me – I wasn't neglected enough as a child. '

As an artist, where do you find beauty? What is beauty for you?

Beauty and ugliness are very subjective concepts. At different times and at different places, people have very different agreements on what these are. These terms change. I couldn't care less about what a mediocre, middle-class society considers to be beautiful or ugly. As an artist you have to make your own decisions. There is an independent system of values that is deeply seated within you – and when you betray that you loose everything. You know when that happens. That's the fundamental difference between aesthetics and beauty. Aesthetics remain constant. The idea of beauty changes and is subject to fashion. Like the difference between morals and ethics; morals change from society to society, from time to time, but there is a basic concept of ethics that has universal validity for all human beings, and that doesn't change.

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