

Lula.

Girl Of My Dreams



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PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

Dark Star

FROM HER STORYBOOK CHILDHOOD
TO THE ENIGMATIC GIRLS IN HER BEAUTIFUL
DRAWINGS, MERCEDES HELNWEIN IS
FASCINATING & FANTASTICAL



Photography by Glynis Selina Arban
Styling by Aya T Kanai

Interview by
Erin Wylie



Top JASMIN SHOKRIAN.

“My sanity always has and probably always will, depend on drawing. Things calm down for me when I draw. It’s like my nervous system regenerates,”

says artist Mercedes Helnwein. For Helnwein, to cease creating is to stop living. She didn’t attend art school, but was always drawing as a child and became equally immersed in writing, becoming one of those rare creatures who are breathtakingly gifted, both visually and verbally. “I never went anywhere without paper and pens when I was little,” she admits. “And later, in my teens, I never went anywhere without books. I was obsessive about literature at that time.” At just 29, she’s already published one novel, ‘The Potential Hazards of Hester Day’, and is currently working on a second. “I don’t know very much about it yet, since I’m still more or less at the beginning, but apparently it’s a love story,” she says.

Really, it’s no wonder Helnwein is artistically inclined, just take a look at her lineage: Her father is world-renowned, multimedia artist Gottfried Helnwein, her mother acts as her father’s manager and her three brothers (Cyril, Ali and Amadeus) are all artists of different stripes. “We grew up with a lot of freedom and support from our parents. For both of them life revolved around art, and so our upbringing was always embedded in art as well.” And she seems to have had a magical childhood living in a castle, moving between Vienna, Germany, the U.K., Ireland and the U.S., traipsing around with her father when he went on trips. Never once has her father’s status in the art world seemed something that she needed to escape. “I think him being who he is has always been a great advantage to me. I’m really lucky to be able to have an artist like him as my father and at my disposal all the time.”



A Young Mercedes

And yet, Helnwein describes her foray into the art world as something of a happy accident. “When I moved to L.A. there was a point when people started buying work off my living room table. That’s probably when I thought I might as well try exhibiting my drawings.” Even if she hasn’t tried very hard, she’s gathered quite a following; Helnwein was hand-picked to appear in this issue by guest editor Karen Elson and championed very early on by L.A.’s hipster collector set (actors Jason Lee and Danny Masterson are both patrons). And it’s easy to see the appeal. Her work, done in black and sometimes red pencil, is as mesmerising and sultry as a neon sign flickering in the dark. In fact, there’s something similarly strobe-like about her portraits of gorgeous girls who are caught, with near photo-realism, in various poses - arms raised, opening doors, holding up objects like tiny animal figurines and blocks, and pouting while wearing Lone Ranger masks. The positions are fixed and unassuming in a way that recalls film stills; we’ve caught these girls in the middle of some unknowable act. These beauties, seemingly dressed as extras from a 1960s Nouvelle Vague film - with their knee socks, mary janes, backcombed hair and minidresses they seem a hybrid of Brigitte Bardot and Kim Gordon - seem alternately bored, scornful, threatening and bemused. They’re stylish, for sure, but they also capture what Helnwein exudes - a teen-angsty verve and spunk, a hint of defiance and a glimmer of Terry Zwigoff’s film ‘Ghost World’. There’s always a sense of youth coupled with a feeling of foreboding, which is, in essence, being a teenager. But like all compelling art, the true meaning remains unknowable: “I never over-think the drawings and therefore am not really that good at talking about them,” says Helnwein.



Dress & Shoes MOSCHINO.

What was your childhood like? I think my dad was born in the wrong century. When we lived in Vienna, Austria, I remember him complaining every day about needing to live in a castle. So when I was five years old we moved to Germany into a country castle. It had been built in the 1400s and had stone walls that were over a yard thick and ivy growing all over it. To me it was a letdown, because when my dad told me we were moving into a castle I had imagined a palace like the Vienna opera house.

What is it like living in a castle? Having grown up in the bland American suburbs I can't imagine living in a vast historic building. Do you think that's had an effect on your view of romance? There's a lot of space and freedom, and since we have only antique furniture it reminds you of how things used to be. It's time-travelling to an age I sometimes feel more comfortable in. And, yes, a more romantic age, where life was lived at a different speed with completely different ideals. Our castle in Ireland is kind of a way to counteract all the aesthetic atrocities of the modern world.



Office Ink

Your father is an influential artist. Tell us a little bit about your parents and the effect they had on you? My parents started working together in the late 70s. My mum, who was originally from Germany, had read in a newspaper about an artist in Vienna and there was an image of his work in the article. That image fascinated her so much that she went to Vienna to meet him. My mum is my dad's manager, she handles the business side of the art, and they are still working together now. For us kids that was great, because our parents were always around. When my dad had to travel anywhere, he would always take one or two of us along so that he wouldn't get bored. We ended up being able to experience opera productions from backstage, printing houses, galleries, magazine editing offices, museums, artist studios... it was an incredible way to grow up. We're still very close as a family. We all live part-time in L.A. and in Ireland. Both of my parents are still the most important people for me to go to if I need advice on anything. And my dad is the person I can talk to best about art.

I know that you both have very different styles but do you ever see similarities in your work and his? I was definitely inspired by his works. I did a lot of ink drawings when I started exhibiting first, and my dad's etchings and early ink drawings were a big inspiration for that. I learned a lot about technique just by studying them. I've also always been fascinated by his colour pencil drawings. They are so vibrant and there is so much movement in the chaos of his lines. His drawings always look like they're alive and vibrating. They are breathtaking, and most definitely some of my favourite works of art I have ever seen in any genre or medium. In the end, I'm sure traces of his style may have trickled down to me, but even if I tried I couldn't draw just like he does. We're too different for that. We probably even hold a pencil differently.



Self Portrait with Ribbon



Coat PAUL AND JOE SISTER, Beret COACH, Shoes COACH POPPY, Suitcase VINTAGE.

Can you remember your first ever painting? Do you still have it? I am not sure what my first ever painting would have been – I was too young. But in my professional life, the first painting I did I gave to my parents. It's a watercolour self-portrait. I do still have my first short story somewhere though. It was called 'The Celery Stick Who Became President'. The title was always the most important part of a story for me, back then. I would spend hours trying to come up with a cool title. In fact, if the title wasn't good enough, I wouldn't even bother with the story.

What are your artistic tastes now? What art do you consume? I love Mark Twain. Also Steinbeck, Victor Hugo, Bukowski, Dumas... I love the Blues. Everything started to make sense when I first heard Blind Willie McTell. I had always felt awkward and "off" in my teenage years because I didn't really fit into the culture that was proper for sixteen-year-olds. I was reading Dickens books. I tried to get into music on the radio, and get tanned at the beach and all that, but it wasn't really natural. When I was sixteen and heard Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson and those guys for the first time, it was such a relief. I didn't get what was happening on the local rock station, but *that* stuff I understood instantly - it hit me very hard, and it made me feel like I found my way home. I had never heard anybody be that honest to me before in a song. Of course, in a way, that made me even more of a weirdo - there was no other sixteen-year-old around that understood what I was into. But it didn't matter to me anymore at that point, because I knew for a fact that this was right for me. I love banjo music. I love slide guitar. I have a very high respect for humour. I'd probably always choose comedy over tragedy. I love the British TV show from the 70s 'Fawlty Towers', with John Cleese. 'Monty Python', too. I have a good endurance for even the really weird skits that make no sense no matter how hard you try. I love French films and literature. And I love when someone can handle language well and put sentences together that are works of art. It makes me weak in the knees. I think the art of actually writing is being lost. Not storytelling, but writing – how to put that story into amazing sentences.

Which artists or writers do you admire? Robert Crumb was a big influence on me. I also really love the American painter, John Register. My stomach always drops when I see one of his paintings. They are usually of empty American landscapes or interiors. I don't know why his work has that affect on me. I'm usually not particularly drawn to landscapes, but his paintings really make my heart skip a beat. I love Edvard Munch, and Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and the Austrian artist, Alfred Kubin. And my dad's work is always inspiring to me. His studio is around the corner from mine here in L.A., so that helps. Boy, I would love to meet Tom Waits some day. He has been one of the biggest inspirations of my life. I have a framed piece of paper at home that says: "To Mercedes. Keep writing. You have a nice mum" and it's signed by Tom Waits. He also drew a little mountain with a setting sun and a pen. My mum ran into him at a wedding one time and brought that back to me.

Where do you find inspiration? There aren't any restrictions to that. It can be a news story, a song, a sentence, a person, a picture or even a bumper sticker. But I've always been drawn to old-time America. There is something about the Bible Belt and the South that I'm very attracted to. I love all its mysteries and drama and humidity...

How do you feel about fashion? Does it play a part in your work or life? Oh yeah.

I didn't plan it that way, and although I've always loved beautiful dresses (I don't wear trousers and I tend to have dramatic and romantic ideas about dressing), I was quite ignorant about the actual fashion world. In fact, up until a few years ago I thought Marc Jacobs was a department store. But in the last four years I've become less ignorant on the subject and I have seen a lot of my money vanish due to it. Shoes especially can be a problem. Fashion has become increasingly important in my work too. The clothes the women in my drawings wear add another layer to the feel and emotion of the image. I began to realise that I can add more to the stories just by the way that characters are dressed.

You're also a writer: How does it differ for you to create words as opposed to images?

Creating imagery is easier. I can draw without thinking about it all. In fact, I listen to audio books most of the time when I draw to get me through tedious background work or patterns on clothes. There isn't much intellectual calculating involved. It's too visual. Writing, on the other hand, is like surgery. I can't be slacking off while I'm doing that.

How often do you write? Whenever I have ideas or feel like I need to scratch that itch. If I'm working towards an art show, the writing can often be pushed aside a little. So there can be weeks where I write a lot every day, and other weeks where I mainly draw. When I was seventeen I would literally sit at the dining-room table from morning until night and write. I wrote an entire Victorian novel with pencil into a series of composition books. It was called 'Oakwood Manor' and had the most intricate, Dickensian plot you can imagine. I have no idea how I did that. It was almost mechanical.

I'm a horribly undisciplined writer. What's your writing style? I said this once about writing, and I think it's still true for me: I can tell you, sometimes it seems easier to take a spoon and dig out the heart of a live moose than confront an empty page and have to fill it up with words. But then again, I guess sometimes it's a whole lot easier filling up an empty page than digging out the heart of a live moose with a spoon.

You're one of the lucky few who have red hair. Is it natural? Yes, I do have natural red, but I'll lighten or darken my hair and play around with brighter reds.

What do you love most about being a redhead? There are some interesting myths and facts floating around, like redheads are harder to sedate than other people, requiring 20% more anesthesia. Also, my skin colour is very pale and I think red is the only hair colour that can handle that.

How do you feel about being chosen by Karen Elson to appear in this issue of Lula? Very flattered!

What do you think makes her special? I have met her once at one of her performances, so her amazing voice comes to mind right away.



THE GIRL - MADE BY ART CLARK. FASHION DESIGNER: JESSIE A. FORD.
LARGE: MISS BETH WOODRUFF. SMALL: MISS



*Jumper WREN, Skirt KATY RODRIGUEZ, Shoes COACH.
Hair SIRENE, Make-up AMY CHANCE, Fashion Assistant JESSICA FOGEL.*



THE FIRST...
JAMES...
THE...



Wanda Helman 2009

Irregular Heartbeat