

HELNWEIN

REALITY AND FICTION

Exhibition Facts

Duration	25 October 2023 – 11 February 2024
Venue	Bastion Hall / ALBERTINA
Curator	Elsy Lahner
Works	43
Catalogue	Available in English and German onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at (EUR 29,90)
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Gottfried Helnwein

Reality and Fiction

25.10. 2023 – 11.2. 2024

To mark the seventy-fifth birthday of the artist Gottfried Helnwein, who was born in Vienna in 1948, the ALBERTINA presents a comprehensive exhibition of his output of the past three decades. Every single work of his is an accusation of cruelty and ruthlessness, of the horrors of fascism.

Helnwein's work stands out for its uncompromising realism, which denounces social ills and focuses on the innocent, defenseless child. Children embody psychological and social fears, as well as the pain inflicted upon them by abuse, power, and violence.

The artist's hyperrealist images, which are always based on photographic models, are "bigger than life" while impressing us with their technical perfection. Although the works are perceived as real, their oversized dimensions and the use of monochromy contradict reality; Helnwein moves away from the original impression of reality his pictures pretend to convey, seeking to create a symbolic image. In his pictorial cosmos, the artist combines motifs from diametrically opposed worlds: manga characters and war photography, Donald Duck and Adolf Hitler, the Virgin Mary and Nazi henchmen.

In the series "The Disasters of War," which Gottfried Helnwein has worked on since 2007, he integrates manga-inspired figures of girls into disaster scenarios. Through this bizarre fusion of manga elements with real catastrophes, the artist highlights the absurdity of these incidents. Although the manga style is omnipresent in today's popular culture, Helnwein initially found it alien and disturbing. For him, this style symbolizes an artificial childishness that does not seem human, but cold and synthetic.

Occasionally, girls in military uniforms or carrying weapons in their hands appear in Helnwein's pictures, sometimes with bandages or bloody wounds. The scenes recall child soldiers or teenage shooters running amok in the United States. The artist thus addresses the susceptibility of children to all forms of manipulation and how they are abused ideologically. The cartoon characters in his pictures seem like perfidiously imagined "whisperers" and at the same time emphasize the madness of these delusions that have become images. Mickey Mouse, monstrous and with bared teeth, reveals a latent dark side and unmasks the evil that hides behind its otherwise friendly façade. Approaching a child's

bed, the eerie yellow birdman with his long pointed beak likewise seems to have emerged from a nightmare.

Helnwein ties in with the world of children, where imaginary things and fantasy constructs have the same right to exist as real things: the monster under the bed becomes a real danger, the teddy bear feels authentic emotions, and the closet door becomes the entrance to an alien realm. But here in the picture, nothing springs from a child's blossoming imagination; on the contrary, Helnwein blurs the line between reality and nightmare to illustrate that monsters do exist.

Helnwein has translated his themes into a wide variety of techniques and media: from his early watercolors and drawings, his actions and their photographic documentation, to paintings, stage sets for theater productions, and installations in public spaces. Oftentimes the genres merge, or elements that were originally created in one context are used in another. Helnwein thus sees himself primarily as a conceptual artist. In the 1980s, at the time of his move to Germany, the artist realized that format had come to play a role in his art. He concluded that his works would have to become larger if they were to compete for attention with the flood of images, advertisements, posters, and billboards. With this caesura in his oeuvre, his portraits of children became monumental, sometimes covering entire façades of buildings. Helnwein lends children an extraordinary presence that conveys the importance and urgency of his themes. In their larger-than-life size and hyperrealist mode of representation, and with the artist reproducing every detail with incredible accuracy, the figures come up to an exaggeration of reality that disturbs and simply overwhelms us.

Helnwein's work seems to impress us just because of this very tension between realism and the transcendence of the artistic object. The symbolic figures and motifs of violence take over in our minds, for what we see may well be a face smeared with blood, but this face is neither bleeding nor contorted with pain.

Exhibition Texts

“I want to touch on the things that society is so happy to pass over. I want to make things visible that people would rather suppress and leave invisible. I want to seduce them into looking at these things.”

“The heroes of my stories are the children as a metaphor for a potential innocence and an invulnerability and invincibility that exists at the core of every human being.”

“Empathy is the most important prerequisite for art, and therefore indispensable.”

Introduction

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

Reality and Fiction

The work of Gottfried Helnwein (b. 1948 in Vienna) is characterized by its engagement with the controversial themes and taboos of our time. His motifs are wounded or vulnerable children, girls taking up arms, a boy surrounded by Nazi henchmen. He shows deformed fetuses floating in glass jars or exposes sleeping girls to our gaze. He places figures from the world of manga into deadly scenarios of catastrophe, while Mickey Mouse encounters Adolf Hitler. Helnwein brings together what, according to our experience, does not belong together thus causing the horror that emanates from these images.

The hyperrealist way of painting, from each individual eyelash to drop of blood, suggests a breathtaking precision that can only spring from shocking reality. Helnwein imitates the incorruptibility of a camera with the means of painting. In fact, the artist draws on photographs as models and thus comes even closer to reality. Yet it is precisely painting that relegates all of these images to the realm of fiction. The monumental formats remove what is depicted from tangible reality. The composition is not a random snapshot, but the result of a deliberate *mise-en-scène*. Helnwein reduces his color palette to a few tones, which he develops further to the point of monochromy in some pictures in order to achieve the finest nuances with the most limited color spectrum. The exactitude and cleanness of his working method transform dirty reality into meditative, silent images, which, when we look at them, inevitably maneuver us into a dilemma between beauty and horror, admiration and revulsion, attraction and protest. Helnwein's works are thus timeless statements against instrumentalization, exploitation, destruction, and violence.

The exhibition, held to mark the artist's seventy-fifth birthday, focuses on his work of the past three decades. Since setting up a studio in Los Angeles in 2002, Helnwein has alternately lived in Ireland and the USA.

Room 2

Sleep

To counter and break with the overwhelming hyperrealism of his works, Helnwein conceived monochrome cycles composed only of blue, red, or gray tones. Through the withdrawal of color, the image becomes increasingly abstract. Especially in the blue Sleep portraits, the artist tests how far he can go until practically nothing can be seen. Depending on the angle of the light, the faces dissolve into or, conversely, emerge from the darkness. Like slowly fading memories, they verge on invisibility, forcing us to approach the work and decipher what is being depicted. Helnwein has conceived Sleep and Red Sleep as series in which the paintings are presented in groups of two or more, side by side: as multiple faces blurred to varying degrees, always the same child, with another expression and in a different pose.

Comic Figures and Fantastic Creatures

Fictional characters have always played an important role in Helnwein's work. In particular, Walt Disney's characters, which Helnwein became familiar with as a child through the German Mickey Mouse magazines, regularly appear as protagonists in his paintings. They pop up in his works like little gnomes, counteracting the horror depicted all around. In other contexts, the figures themselves become mischief-makers and creatures of terror. Mickey Mouse, monstrous and with bared teeth, reveals a dark side in Helnwein's art. The artist exposes the evil that lurks behind the otherwise friendly facade.

With his long, pointed beak, the eerie yellow birdman approaching the child's bed also seems to have emerged from a nightmare. Helnwein ties in with the world of children, where the imaginary and the fantastic have the same right to exist as the real: the monster under the bed becomes an actual danger, the teddy bear feels genuine emotions, and the closet door becomes the entrance to a strange realm. But here in this picture, nothing springs from a child's blossoming imagination; on the contrary: Helnwein blurs the line between reality and nightmare to show us that monsters really do exist.

Room 3

The Child

The child has been Helnwein's central theme from the very start and is of essential importance in his oeuvre. In its purity and innocence, the child is for him a symbol of an individual's integrity and authenticity. In his view, childhood corresponds to a kind of ideal, the apex of our existence, an important phase in the life of every human being, during which we possess almost unlimited imagination and an infinite wealth of ideas. In his works, Helnwein addresses the fragility of this ideal state, the defenselessness, vulnerability, and manipulability of children, as well as the violence, humiliation, and cruelty to which they are exposed. The child thus becomes a surrogate for the helpless and dependent human being at the mercy of others. The title *The Murmur of the Innocents* is a play on words referring to the biblical narrative of the Murder (or Massacre) of the Innocents, the infanticide in Bethlehem. Helnwein's reference to this story expresses not only the innocence of children, but also the exercise of power and despotism to which they are subjected.

The Child Dreams

In *The Child Dreams* is based on a stage set that Helnwein designed in 2010 for the production of Hanoeh Levin's play of the same name at the Israeli Opera in Tel Aviv. For the nightmarish final scene, in which a myriad of dead children wait, full of hope, for their redemption by the Messiah, the artist had several girls in bandages and white robes hang from the ceiling on ropes in various poses. To make the image denser, additional dummies were used in the back rows, and a mirror was installed in the background, extending across the entire stage. This made it almost impossible for the audience to distinguish between reality and reproduction, giving the impression of an infinite black space with an unfathomable number of children. Helnwein revisited the theme in his paintings. The children seem to be floating weightlessly in space—some clear and distinct, others fading into the darkness like ghostly beings.

Room 4

Fiction or Reality?

Since 2007 Helnwein has worked on a series in which he inserts figures of girls that might have sprung from manga or anime into disaster scenarios. Through the presence of these bizarre fictional elements, he introduces us to the absurdity of the catastrophe itself. Unlike the Disney characters, the manga style is basically alien to the artist as it is not rooted in his own experience. Manga and anime, which are omnipresent today, communicate something disturbing for Helnwein. He sees in them an artificial and sexualized childlikeness in a cold and synthetic world. Helnwein resorts to this artificiality in his works when he places his manga figures in a setting that likewise does not correspond to reality but is reminiscent of action films and computer games. A real war scenario, however, does not display the visual brilliance Hollywood seeks to make us believe, urging us to take pleasure in horrifying imagery. Helnwein makes it clear that our ideas of war and terror are strongly influenced by representations in the media and that, conversely, certain images of war are picked up in the media, deliberately staged and transported with propaganda effect. The artist's constructed setting of his works also addresses the absurdity of modern warfare, in which long-distance attacks are carried out via screen and joystick, thus resembling the simulated reality of computer games.

War and Violence

Helnwein repeatedly shows children in military uniforms and holding weapons, some with bandages and bloody wounds. In these works, the artist focuses on the ideological and physical abuse of children, examining the roles of perpetrator and victim. The girls bring to mind child soldiers. With his works, Helnwein also alludes to the numerous school shootings in the United States, where firearms is the leading cause of death for children and adolescents.

The title *The Disasters of War* refers to Francisco de Goya's well-known cycle of prints *Los desastres de la guerra*, in which the artist, following Napoleon's military campaign on the Iberian Peninsula (1808–1814), condemned the atrocities of the war. Helnwein points out: "I believe it is the artist's responsibility to be a witness of his time, to capture this madness, and prevent people from forgetting. In his work, Goya documented the horrors of war down to the last abominable detail, probably in the futile hope that this would prevent tragedy from constantly repeating itself." In Helnwein's art, we are not faced with murder, torture, and rape, we do not see faces distorted by pain. In his monumental pictures, the horrors are conveyed through silence and the children's compelling presence.

Room 5

The Scream

Helnwein's work must also be seen in the context of his biography. Growing up in Vienna in the 1950s and coming from a petit bourgeois background, he was raised according to strict Catholic moral values. As a child, Helnwein experienced his helplessness in the face of the adult world, where many things were taboo and little was explained. He was confronted with the adults' inability to speak of the most recent events, the atrocities of the Third Reich. This fed his suspicion that horrible things happened in clandestine and that appearances had to be kept up at all costs. Later, as a young man, he noticed that trivial incidents frequently sparked vehement outrage while other, much more relevant things were swept under the rug. Helnwein found this collective repression and hypocrisy profoundly disturbing. He describes the society of that time as harsh, aggressive, and authoritarian. In his search of means to fight against social regulations, constraints, and corrections, he found the only answer in art. In his self-portraits, showing him with a bandaged head, his eyes blinded, and his mouth wide open, Helnwein, a tormented Man of Sorrows, cries out desperately against established power structures. His scream expresses both a deeply felt powerlessness and a massive protest.

Righteous Men

For *Righteous Men* the artist draws upon photographs of wounded World War I veterans as his models. However, he now focuses on the individual, leaving us with mixed feelings. The artist skillfully steers us into a dilemma of moral judgment: Are we confronted with a monster or a victim? Do we respond to the depiction with sympathy or horror? Do we treat the "righteous men" with respect in the display of self-confidence suggested by the frontal and larger-than-life representation? Or do we take refuge in our admiration of the precise painting technique and the mastery of coloristic handling and paint application? In these works, Helnwein opens up different perspectives and allows for alternative interpretations.

Angels Sleeping

In the monumental paintings of his *Angel Sleeping* series, Helnwein reproduces stillborn babies preserved in formaldehyde at the pathological-anatomical collection of Vienna's Natural History Museum at the "Narrenturm" (literally "Fool's Tower," once an asylum for the mentally ill). From the early 18th century on, collections of research specimens were of

great didactic importance, as the spectrum of documented diseases could be studied directly. Today, historical research specimens presented in analog form are more likely to arouse shudders than anatomical or medical interest. In Helnwein's paintings, the emotion and dignity of these creatures is restored. They are "sleeping angels," in need of protection, peaceful and enchanting, and beautiful in their own way.

Room 6

One Image and Multiple Narratives

Helnwein's goal has always been to reach as many people as possible with his work and to use the power of the image as a means of communication. He sees art as a two-poled product, with the artist contributing one half and the viewer the other half: "If a work of art is to have a function, it must be able to serve as a projection surface. For the artist, but also for the others, because they continue to create it. Every painting changes immediately, depending on the viewer's interpretation. Everyone has a different history, a different background, different experiences. Therefore, everyone sees different things in it. If a painting can do that, leave room for personal experience, then it's a good painting." In other words, we continue the narrative of the image and create our own reality of it in our imagination.

Room 7

Role and Context

In a number of works, Helnwein refers to Christian iconography and biblical themes from the New Testament, such as the Presentation in the Temple or the Raising of Jairus's Daughter. The works arose from the consideration that over centuries artists had only a limited catalogue of historical and religious motifs to draw on, which they transferred to their own time and interpreted from their contemporary perspective. Helnwein wondered what these traditional subjects might look like for his own generation in his own time, based on their own experience. In Epiphany I (Adoration of the Magi 3), for example, he filled the roles of the Magi with dapper SS officers who now surround the Virgin Mary and Jesus—or is it perhaps the infant Hitler, after all? In fact, the group of uniformed figures is

taken from a photograph with Adolf Hitler at the center, whom the artist replaced in his painting with a woman and child. The adoration of the Christ Child thus becomes the veneration of the Führer or, just as conceivably, the appraisal of a child in the sense of Nazi racist mania. Helnwein creates an artificial scene that prompts the viewer to simultaneously question the authenticity and realism of images in general.

From Hitler to Mickey Mouse

Helnwein's work is characterized by the widely suppressed and tabooed confrontation with violence in society. His aim is to name facts and make them visible in his pictures. By interweaving the true and the invented, by combining contrasting content he presents to us as facts, he makes the horror even more drastic. He declares: "For me, the canvas is something like a stage where you can bring together the most diverse actors. From reality, from the past. There are no limits in time and space. The exciting thing is that you can actually create a new world. You can use anyone you want and give them a role to play in this two-dimensional framework. I can take people, including historical figures who actually existed, and bring in models or fantasy figures, comic book characters, and use them in whatever way I think is important for that story or situation. They all have equal value."

Epiphany III

The scene recalls Rembrandt's famous group portrait *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* from 1632. Yet Helnwein's title references chapter 2 from the Gospel of Luke, "The Presentation of Jesus." The chapter describes how Jesus is brought to the temple by his parents to be presented to God and to make an offering. But neither the title nor the allusion to the compositional model reveal what the picture is actually about. What horrific event are we witnessing here? A sacrificial offering? A scientific examination? The imminent abuse of a child? For his work, Helnwein resorted to a historical photograph from World War I depicting English veterans—all of them wounded and permanently disfigured by shrapnel, wearing epitheses that were manufactured for them in the Masks for Facial Disfigurement Department at the Third London General Hospital, which became known as the "Tin Noses Shop." Helnwein shows the war invalids in black suits and with their artificially altered faces; in their middle, a girl dressed in white lies on a bare table. The narrative surrounding the image unfolds in our minds.

The Materialization of the Immaterial

Helnwein has visualized his themes in a wide variety of techniques and media: while still in Austria, he worked with watercolors, drawings, and prints and staged actions, some of which involved children and which he documented photographically. Later on, he turned to painting on canvas, but photography continued to be an essential aspect of his work, that also includes designs for theater productions and installations in public spaces. In most cases, the artistic genres overlap, or elements originally created in one context, such as for a stage set, are then used in a different setting. Helnwein therefore sees himself primarily as a conceptual artist: “Working methods and techniques, aspects of style, are rather secondary. It’s always about an amorphous feeling or a certain idea that is very concrete to me, which I first have to materialize. You feel that something is being communicated. But in order for it to be valid, not only for you, but also to exist for others, you have to translate it from your mental universe into the material universe.”

Press images

You have the possibility to download the following pictures from www.albertina.at in the Press section. Legal notice: The images may only be used in connection with reporting on the exhibition.



Gottfried Helnwein
The Disasters of War 76, 2020
Oil on acrylic in canvas
150 × 220 cm
Private Collection
© Gottfried Helnwein / Bildrecht Vienna, 2023



Gottfried Helnwein
Pink Mouse 2, 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas
220 × 320 cm
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna
© Gottfried Helnwein / Bildrecht Vienna, 2023



Gottfried Helnwein
The Visit 4
2021-2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
210 × 290 cm
Private Collection



Gottfried Helnwein
The Disasters of War 49, 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas
180 × 285 cm
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna. Permanent loan from Gottfried and Renate Helnwein
© Gottfried Helnwein / Bildrecht Vienna, 2023



Gottfried Helnwein
The Murmur of the Innocents 22, 2011
Oil and acrylic on canvas
200 × 300 cm
Collection Renate Helnwein, Ireland
© Gottfried Helnwein / Bildrecht Vienna, 2023



Gottfried Helnwein

Epiphany 1 (The Adoration of the Magi 3), 2013

Oil and acrylic on canvas

245 × 350 cm

ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna. Permanent loan from Gottfried and Renate Helnwein

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Gottfried Helnwein

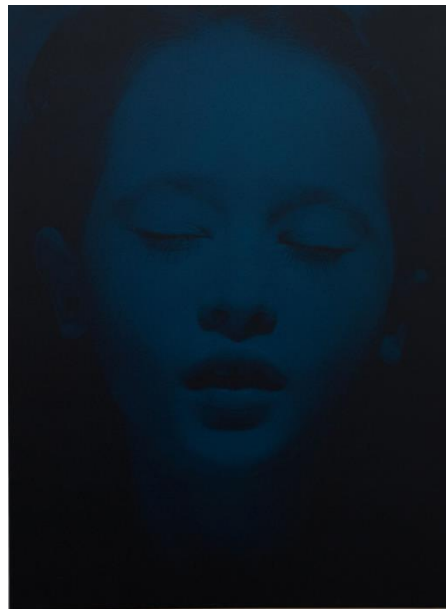
Righteous Man II, 1999

Oil and acrylic on canvas

190 × 150 cm

Christian Baha

© Gottfried Helnwein / Bildrecht Vienna, 2023



Gottfried Helnwein

Sleep 16, 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas

150 × 110 cm

ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna

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