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Gottfried Helnwein's Tipperary castle a great backdrop for his art

The painter's life and art is a hybrid of trad and neo-Gothic with a touch of Hollywood

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By Gemma Tipton



Artist Gottfried Helnwein with his wife Renate and grandchildren Solas, Croí and Éala in the library in Gurteen Castle, Kilsheelin, Co. Tipperary. Photograph: John D. Kelly.

Nineteen years ago [Gottfried Helnwein](#) asked his wife Renate to find him a castle. They were living on Parliament Street in Dublin's Temple Bar, searching for an Irish base. "She's found two. She's very good at finding things," he says. "One was in Connemara, then this."

Helnwein is one of the world's famous and also controversial artists. His international reputation is strong (he's currently working towards an exhibition at San Francisco's Modernism Gallery in September). Gifted with an extraordinary ability, his subjects are frequently children, although his themes hover uncomfortably around their absolute innocence and the omnipresent awfulness of the worst aspects of the adult world.

The resulting paintings are ethereally beautiful and subtly disturbing. They are also timeless.



Two of artist Gottfried Helnwein's pieces in his home at Gurteen Castle, Kilsheelin, Co. Tipperary. Photograph: John D. Kelly.

Despite the pleasantness of the day, we're sitting by a fire in the castle's library, a rich, red book-lined room, its walls hung with portraits of the castle's previous occupants and ancestors. There is very good coffee in a pretty floral cup, and millet muffins.

"There's no sugar, they're like medicine. You can eat them without sinning," he laughs. Helnwein has an infectious laugh and a surprisingly attractive smile – surprising because, dressed in his trademark black, with bandana, sunglasses and silver skull jewelry, one might expect some sense of aggression.

The opposite is true; he is possibly shy, definitely fiercely intelligent and utterly passionate about art, architecture, politics, family and the restoration of Gurteen Castle. "We had to do a lot, but 90 percent you don't see," he says, his native Austrian accent inflecting his words lending them a misleadingly categorical nature.

The family chose Gurteen over Co Galway for what, I discover, are typically counter-intuitive reasons. In Connemara, "there is something special that's impossible to describe. When I was walking there I felt a happiness that was completely unexplainable."

So how come Tipperary? "I wanted to be happy, but too happy? Anyway, the ceilings here are higher, there's more space and it was unrestored, so I could develop it to my taste."

The restoration has actually been incredibly sensitive and in the library it's difficult to imagine that much has changed. Its current incarnation – there were two previous castles on



Artist Gottfried Helnwein in the gardens of Gurteen Castle with his grandson Solas. Photograph: John D Kelly

the site – was built in 1866 for Count Edmund de la Poer, private chamberlain to Pope Pius X.

Elsewhere, it is unexpectedly bright, the arched hallway opening up to a doubleheight staircase, lit from above by skylights. A pair of reception rooms have been painted in light shades with sanded floorboards and are empty of furniture.

Renate is also fond of inviting local musicians back for sessions and I can imagine the house rocking into the night in a brilliant hybrid of trad, neo-Gothic and a sprinkling of Hollywood.

There are Helnwein touches everywhere. Alongside his huge and disconcertingly lifelike photorealistic paintings, he has also regilded the fireplace in the library and turned his hand to distressing the timbers that form the canopy above the range, in the classically cosy country kitchen. He likes this work because, unlike painting, you know when it's finished. And he clearly loves the house.

Outside, the Hollywood impression is strengthened by tall palm trees on the lawns, which run down to an artificial lake, along with a suitably spooky and beguilingly beautiful arboretum, complete with fern fringed stone steps to nowhere.



“I need to line it with clay,” he says of the lake. “I research all the time. I know how to make a lake now, with the old techniques.”

“I’m often thinking, why was every building up to the 20th century beautiful? Little cottages, a farmhouse, they all look beautiful. Today, most of the contemporary, modern architecture I find horrible.”

Does that, I wonder, tie into the timeless aesthetic of his own work which, despite contemporary references, could sit comfortably alongside master works from art history?

He admires German Romantic painter [Caspar David Friedrich](#), Spanish genius [Francisco Goya](#), [Francis Bacon](#) and [Gerhard Richter](#), among others.

“I think it’s an objective thing. Modern architecture can’t age. After 10 years you can’t look at it. It wears out so easily. There’s a big crisis when it comes to aesthetics. Each building is completely different, so if you make a city, you think you’re in Crazytown.”

Does that reflect a fracturing in how we live, how we think these days? “Yes, art always does that, but architecture is a mirror of the soul, of the condition people are in.”

Walking back, plastic toys are clustered under a tree beside the vegetable garden. Three of the Helnwein’s four children live at the castle, plus three grandchildren: Croí (10), Éala (5) and Solas (2).

They are, as Helnwein says, “the joy of my life” and regular models for his work, although, he tells me, Éala doesn’t like to sit still: “She’s a hurricane.”

He adds: “What I like about these country houses, from these times, is each has a personality. Even when they’re located in a certain style, each one is completely different. For me this has an odd, funny personality. It’s a little stubborn, a little weird, but in a nice way.”

The house is the perfect backdrop for his work. It is hung like an incredible site-specific exhibition. There is the haunting *Epiphany*, a beautiful nativity scene, of the serene Madonna presenting her child to the Wise Men, except these men are dressed in Nazi uniforms and the baby has a passing resemblance to Hitler.

Many of Helnwein’s themes come from his experiences growing up in post-war [Austria](#). He was born in 1948, a time that he describes as horrible, dark, carrying “the smell of death”.

“The first pictures I saw depicted pain,” he has said, while also remarking, in answer to a question about the controversies that surround his own work, that it seems okay to watch TV and movies where children are killed, or kill, but that art seems to evoke far more powerful reactions.

In 1979, on reading an article in which Dr Heinrich Gross, then Austria’s top court psychiatrist, admitted to killing children “humanely” during the war by poisoning their food, Helnwein painted *Life Not Worth Living*, an image of a little girl collapsed, either asleep or dead, into a bowl of soup.

He published it in an Austrian magazine, sparking a debate that led to Gross appearing in court, ultimately being judged mentally unfit to be tried.

Landscape paintings Ireland’s influence is also there, in a series of extraordinary landscape paintings, epic canvases steeped in green and so invitingly real you could almost step into them. He is working on another, but he’s not ready to show it yet.

Painting, he says “starts with an emotional feeling, all intuition, not so much thinking or planning. Then I look for it and suddenly there’s an image. When I look at my work, usually I feel, I don’t know, it’s not enough. So you have to try again. You have a vision and you can never get there. You can only try to approach it.”

Back in the library, I ask him about some skulls on a bookcase. They came from a castle he used to own in Germany. Does he think about death? “It’s important to be aware of it, because you live your life a little bit different. You have a certain time, a few years. I always have the idea there’s so much more to do and time is running out.”

Renate, who is extremely beautiful, with long auburn hair and a smile that seems to invite you to be complicit in the next adventure, walks me out to the car, just as Solas appears in a Superman suit.

It is the perfect image to leave with: fantasy and reality in one place and a family who have made their own world, so that Helnwein can have the space to make his art, which just might change the way we see ours.

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