



CHAOS THEORY
MERCEDES HELNWEIN



For Mercedes Helnwein, it's all about the story—or the possibilities buried within a fragment of a story. She has been crafting her stories and searching for those possibilities via words and pictures for as long as she can remember.

Beyond Surface and Symbol

In her recent work, Helnwein focuses on suburban American adolescence and family life, sourcing her images from anonymous photographs or from characters posed in living room sets she creates in her studio. The original scenes are replicated in oil pastel (a medium the artist feels lends itself to “amplifying the disquiet of the seemingly innocuous moments”), laying bare the angst and tension with which family rituals and youthful endeavors are often fraught. From trick-or-treating and family gatherings to school dances and class pictures, she returns to the subjects of quotidian adolescent and familial routines over and over to capture the accidental emotions and inherent dramas that she believes these isolated moments betray.

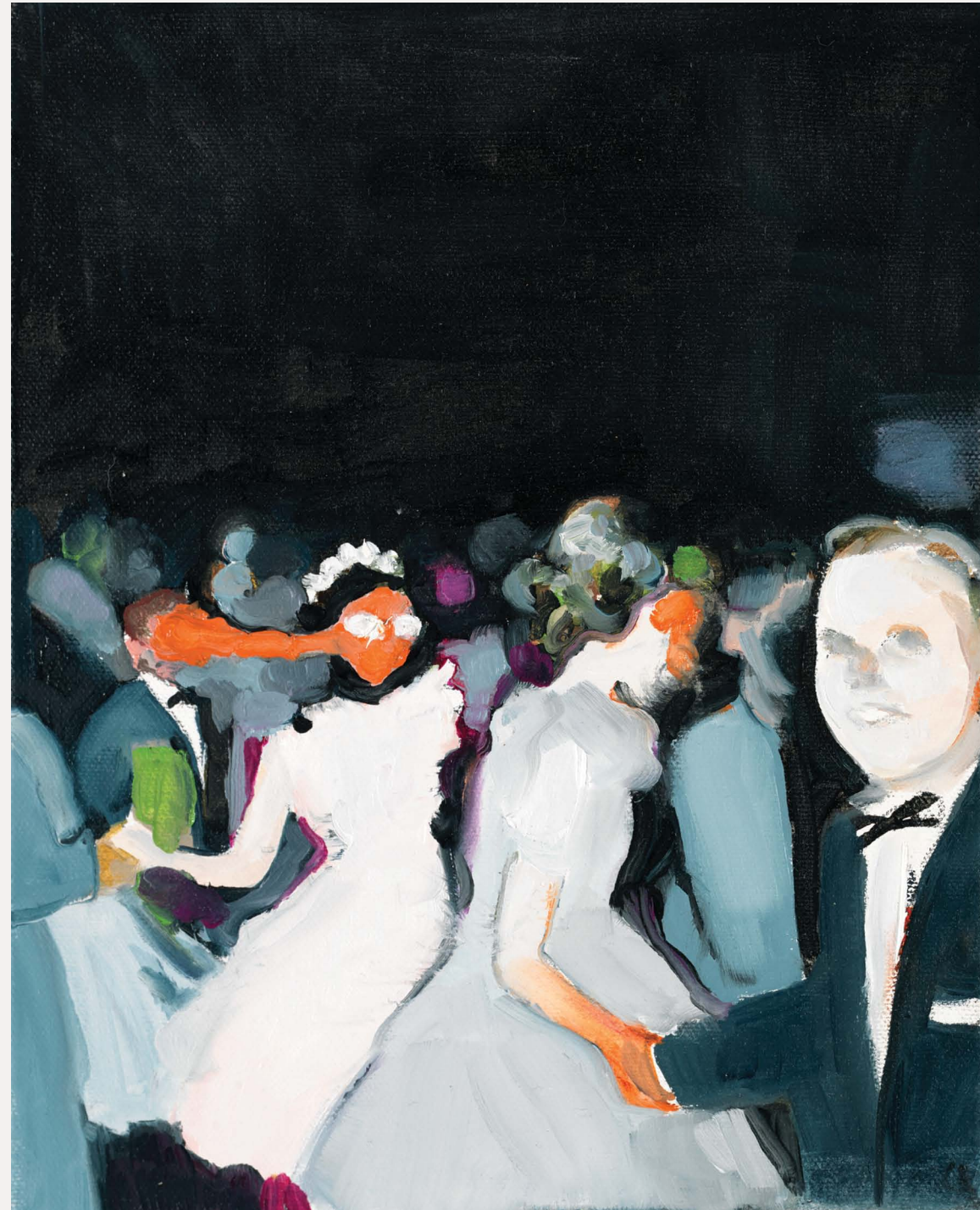
Helnwein's early years were spent far removed from the typically American lifestyle portrayed in her work. Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1979, she is the daughter of the renowned artist Gottfried Helnwein. They moved to Ireland when she was 14, and since 2000, she has been dividing her time between her family's castle in Ireland and her home in Los Angeles. Gottfried Helnwein didn't push his artistic influence on his daughter, but he did instill in her his notion that “Art is not an answer, it is a question.” So question every minute possibility she does.

Her palette, mainly limited to grays, greens, and pinks, obscures certain details in some pictures. In others, she spreads thick swaths of medium across the surface with an expressive gesture and leaves us to decode the significance. She often creates numerous versions of a single scene, seeking to escape its claustrophobic effect and obsessively analyzing the many possible interpretations depending on subtle—or not-so-subtle—variations. Helnwein has a long history of orchestrating these ambiguous scenes. As a teen, she would dress her brothers and friends in period clothing and costumes she found in her house, and photograph them transformed into parochial school kids, Depression-era farmers, Ellis Island immigrants, and so on. Then, as now, the picture that emerged would draw the viewer into that time and place, but the specific circumstances remained unknowable.

Thematically related to these oil pastels are two films Helnwein made in 2014, entitled *Cops* and *Nurses*. The films—meant to be shown concurrently and with the same haunting, suspenseful soundtrack, composed by her brother, Ali—present enigmatic, disquieting scenes of mundane workplace interactions, or the lack thereof. Each comprised of a scene depicting 20 cops and 20 nurses, respectively, the films challenge gender stereotypes and the associated symbolisms. There is a certain incongruity in the nurses stealing glances at one another as they silently smoke in a hospital room, or the utter passivity of the cops as they drift through a precinct while the music swells to suggest imminent doom or climax. With an anticipatory eye, we watch and wait to see a more developed narrative play out—a glimmer of humanity, an interaction, or a telling shift in position. But that result is unpredictable, as the story resides in the viewer’s imagination.

In mathematics, chaos theory posits that we cannot predict what will happen in a complex system, that even a minute change in the initial conditions can have dramatic effects on that system over time. Likewise, in Helnwein’s *Chaos Theory*, complex emotional and relational systems reign. Helnwein isolates these moments, capturing slices of life that are imbued with a sense of latent drama about to unfold. The viewer’s interpretation of the scene alters the outcome with each new experience. Somewhat as a result of her upbringing in an artistic household, Helnwein has a particular sensitivity for materials. It is through that ingrained sensitivity and understanding of the multiple layers her father poured into his work that Helnwein came to understand the complex systems inherent in any one image or situation, and the multitude of possible outcomes that may arise from such a chaotic system.

Helnwein chose not to study art formally, preferring instead to find her own voice. As she says, “I didn’t want any interference, other than inspiration from other works of art that I admire.” Having been surrounded by art and creativity from the beginning, she would have been hard pressed to escape the artistic influence of



others. One artist Helnwein gives a nod to—consciously or not—is Edward Hopper. From the ambiguous dynamics of the relationships to their slice-of-life drama, her films and oil pastels recall many of Hopper’s iconic masterworks. The subject matter and moods for which he is renowned and their connection to film noir are well established. Helnwein has also acknowledged the influence of film noir, particularly its lighting and the “ludicrous tension that exists in some of those scenes... I especially like it if I have no idea of the context.”

This series celebrates the veiled complexities of daily life, connecting with universal truths to which we can all relate and drawing the viewer in as a participant. As Edward Hopper once said, “The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm, and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form and design.” Helnwein picks up the challenge of depicting that vast and varied realm, and her explorations will, no doubt, elicit countless new possibilities.

Carole Perry
Artistic Director and Curator
Edward Hopper House Art Center

