

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

By Nicholas Haramis · December 2, 2014



Arts and Letters

## The Helnweins Will See You Now

They're creepy and they're kooky, mysterious and spooky. They're altogether ooky. Meet the real-life Addams Family.

BY NICHOLAS HARAMIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNETH O HALLORAN

FEBRUARY RAINS FLOODED the gravel road to Gurteen Castle, a 40-room fortress built in 1866 for Pope Pius IX's chamberlain. Throughout the Republic of Ireland, stories about power outages dominated the evening news, but the Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein and his wife, Renate, their four children and three of their grandchildren were oblivious to the storm. In the castle's dining room, under the flickering glow of candlelight, they were singing along to a spirited rendition of "Nell Flaherty's Drake," a bouncy 19th-century Irish folk song that had them merrily rhyming "astray" and "gray." Although most of the Helnweins were born in Germany or Austria, they've come to think of Kilsheelan, a town of roughly 500 people in County Tipperary, as home. Renate is a regular presence in town — as familiar as the local police officer, whose house doubles as the police station, and the weary gravedigger, who lives in a home without running water — while Gottfried, when he's not singing about ducks, tends to roughly 30 of them in his backyard.

**GOTHIC SPLENDOR** The artist Gottfried Helnwein with his wife, Renate, second from left, and their four children, from left, Cyril, Wolfgang Amadeus, Ali (sitting) and Mercedes in the library of the 19th-century Gurteen Castle. In the background, a painting from Gottfried's "The Disasters of War" series.

The animals are, for him, more than pets. As a young boy growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, one in particular gave him hope. "Donald Duck was a cultural atomic bomb for my generation," he said. "In America, this complete loser had to compete with superheroes, but us Nazi kids could identify much better with Donald. He was very important to me. He actually saved my life."

Gottfried, who was born in 1948, left Vienna nearly three decades ago, and yet the city's battle-scarred history is still as much a character as the otherworldly children, Nazi officers and burn victims depicted in his photographs and paintings. Raised by severe Roman Catholic parents, he has described his upbringing as "oppressive," "dark" and "colorless." At 18, he moved away from home and into a rented attic where he began his lifelong investigation into "the idea of purity interrupted, destroyed, harmed, raped." He studied at the city's Academy of Fine Arts — the same school that turned away a young Adolf Hitler —

where he once set off paint bombs on campus that he and his friends made by attaching paint shells to fireworks.



From left: the neo-Gothic facade of Gurteen Castle, originally built for Count Edmond de la Poer; in front of a French 18th-century tapestry, a marble statue of Dante Alighieri presides over Gottfried's collection of pharmaceutical and alchemical artifacts. Credit Kenneth O Halloran

In his 20s, Gottfried immersed himself in coffeehouse culture, experimented with drugs (a particularly bad LSD trip “took years of absolute, never-ending fear to get over”) and watched as the death of Nazism gave way to Maoism and the revival of Trotskyism and Spartacism. Like the Viennese Actionists of the 1960s, he'd slice his arms with surgical knives in the name of performance. One of his first exhibitions, at the city's Gallery of the House of the Press in 1972, caused such outrage among the journalists who worked in the building that the gallerist shut it down after just three days. His art has since been confiscated by police, labeled with “entartete Kunst” stickers (German for “degenerate art,” the term used by Nazis to describe most examples of modernism) and destroyed by protesters. “Everybody hated me, which I liked,” he said. “As an outcast, you have nothing to lose.”

Renate first became aware of her husband while working as a nurse at a German asylum in the 1970s. A local paper had written about a show of his and published a photo of one of his bandaged-child paintings. She was reminded of the treatments, what she described as the “horrors,” she'd seen conducted in the hospital — “really bad, really invasive stuff. Finally, I thought, someone gets it.” She hitchhiked to Vienna, found Gottfried, and they've been together ever since. In 1985, they moved to Germany, and then, about a decade later, decamped to Ireland.



In the dining room, “Gray Mouse,” 1995, looms over the table set for lunch. Credit Kenneth O Halloran

White Calvin, a family friend with a ponytail and a stutter, passed around plates of pasta and garlic bread, Kenate snared stories about the castle's many hauntings. Gottfried, in a skull-print bandanna and black sunglasses, spoke about the spirit of a jealous woman who tormented the burlesque dancer Dita Von Teese on her wedding day (she married Gottfried's friend Marilyn Manson there in 2005 in a ceremony officiated by the surrealist filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky). Von Teese was nearly ready to walk down the aisle when the ceiling above her vanity came crashing down, narrowly missing her and her maid of honor. "That should have been a sign," Gottfried scoffed. Others gleefully recalled doors unexpectedly swinging open and phantom arms grasping at their legs.

The Helnweins know how similar they are to the fictional Addams Family, and they seem happy to indulge the comparison. "Weird" is the best way to describe things that I like," said Gottfried's daughter, Mercedes. "Weird and desolate." Her father, meanwhile, often smiled while saying things like, "The dark side of humanity is so dark that nobody can really confront it. That's why Dante came up with nine circles of hell." The walls of their home are covered with Gottfried's photographs of Manson, watercolors he painted of his children with metal clamps in their mouths and "Epiphany I (Adoration of the Magi)," an oil painting that reimagines the nativity scene with Adolf Hitler and SS agents. Errant skulls, decapitated dolls and snakes in jars of formaldehyde occupy dark corners.

Photo



From left: Gottfried in his studio; his "Epiphany I (Adoration of the Magi)," 1996, reinterprets the nativity scene with Waffen-SS officers admiring Adolf Hitler as a baby. Credit Kenneth O Halloran

All four Helnwein children share their parents' gothic spirit. The eldest, 37-year-old [Cyril](#), lives in the castle with his model-musician wife and their three children. He assists Gottfried six days a week and is also a photographer in his own right (he met his wife when she posed for his "Ethereal" series). His latest body of work includes crass visual puns such as "Feelin' Horny," which features a nude model with antlers mounted on the wall behind her head. [Mercedes](#), a 35-year-old writer, painter and filmmaker with red hair and the palest skin, now lives in Los Angeles, where she makes darkly sexy oil pastels from photographs she buys online. [Ali](#), 32, is a violinist and Grammy- and Emmy-winning composer who also lives in L.A., where he has founded a chamber orchestra and scores independent films. The youngest, 27-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus (who goes by his middle name), writes sparse prose inspired by Elizabeth Bishop, Raymond Chandler and Sylvia Plath.

"We're not the Kardashians or the Hiltons," said Cyril, who recalls being bandaged, his face smeared with fake blood, while modeling for his father. "But for me, it was an everyday thing. Kids play dress-up. This was just a different kind." Mercedes added drily, "We've never been particularly cheerful." Despite having spent time in the company of Gottfried's famous friends and collaborators — including Muhammad Ali, Keith Haring, Michael Jackson, Sean Penn, Lou Reed, Andy Warhol, William S. Burroughs and Charles Bukowski (who, after meeting the Helnwein clan, gave them one of his books signed with the words "Thanks for the strange evening") — they said their lives have felt rather normal. "We just didn't know any different," Cyril said. "I think children have this innate artistic ability that's kind of hammered out of them over time. We never had it hammered out of us." Today, a new generation of Helnweins are posing for Gottfried and making their own paintings in his light-filled home studio.



The grand entry hall, which boasts a piano from the 1800s. Credit Kenneth O Halloran

Gottfried's grandchildren aren't the only ones who seem increasingly comfortable with his work. Last year, he opened his largest retrospective to date at Vienna's Albertina Museum — a place normally “reserved for Rembrandts,” he said — and, to his surprise, it was among the most successful shows of a living artist ever staged there. He's now thinking about renting a studio to make art in the city he vowed never to return to. It would be a big move for Gottfried, who has grown quite fond of pastoral Ireland. “It's my home,” he said. “It's where I belong.”

After the dinner table had been cleared, Renate suggested we go for a quick drink at Nagles, a roadside bed-and-breakfast about a mile down the road. But Gottfried was tired. “Maybe another night,” he said, before retiring to his room with Renate. Cyril, too, excused himself to put his kids to bed. But Ali, Amadeus and Mercedes had other plans. While Ali and Mercedes finished the song they'd been slowly playing at the piano, Amadeus pulled out three elaborate masks, handmade from cardboard and painted to look like nightmarish creatures with sharp teeth and beady eyes. It was time for a stroll.



A young Wolfgang Amadeus helping Gottfried in the studio. Courtesy of the Helnweins