

Helnwein locates the latent menace in night visitors

By **Kenneth Baker** Published 4:00 am, Saturday, November 12, 2005

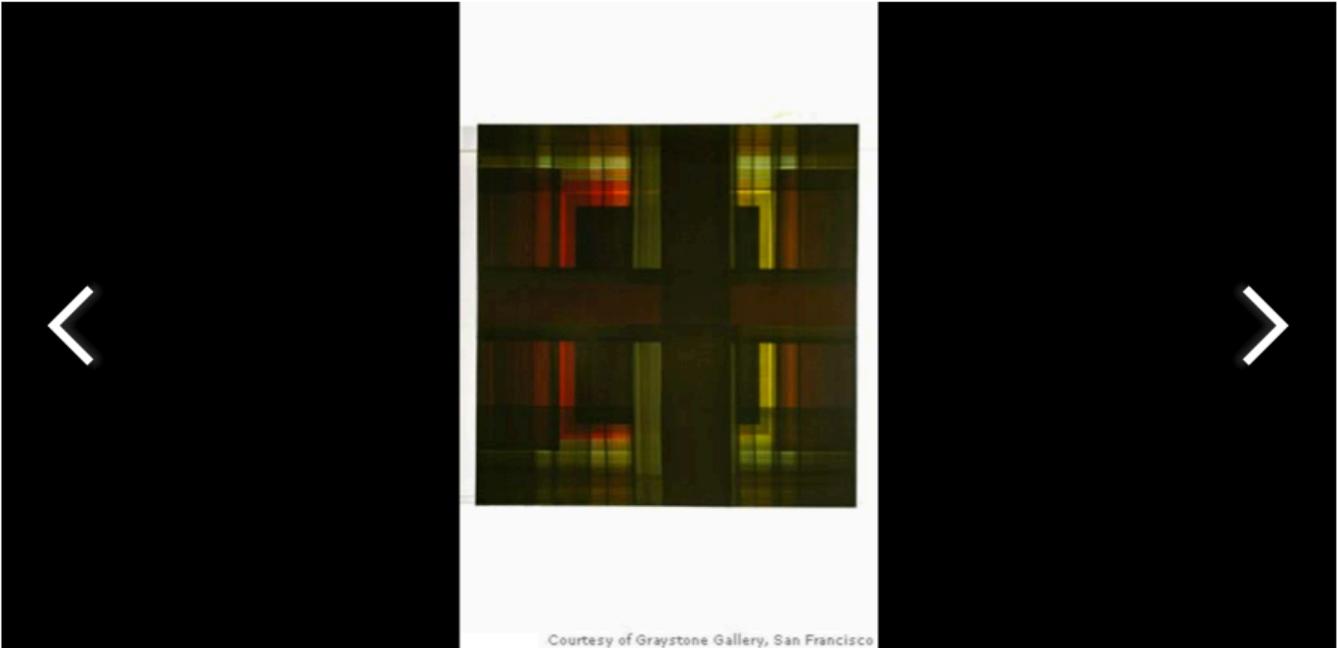


Photo: Courtesy Of Graystone Gallery, S



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"Grid #2" (2005) acrylic on canvas by Sara Carter. Photo: Courtesy of Graystone Gallery, San Francisco

Austrian-born, Los Angeles-based painter Gottfried Helnwein claims to care little for the shock effect of his work. But his recent pictures at Modernism have the same disconcerting power, though wielded more lightly, that the local art public felt in his 2004 exhibition at the Legion of Honor.

Here, as in the Legion shows, images of a young girl predominate. Helnwein paints her with photo-realist smoothness in close-up views so tight as to preclude psychological comfort at any viewing distance, despite the tenderness the pictures solicit. Several larger untitled

paintings bring us into the terrain of anachronism and irreality to which Helnwein believes an artist has special access.

In one large painting, a girl sits on the edge of a bed in a barren room, staring into space. A giant blue rabbit with sightless insect eyes stands before her, clad in some sort of military garb. Despite their proximity, the two figures seem to occupy different dimensions. The frightful effect of the rabbit figure appears to register more in us than in the child whose vision we may be spying on. The vaguely erotic menace of the rabbit figure flares in another untitled picture in which a sort of Mad Hatter figure, all in yellow and masked, leans in to touch a sleeping girl with a gloved hand.

For all the pictures' realism and their echoes of Lewis Carroll, they evoke psychological rather than literal monstrosity: the betrayal of innocence by imagination as well as reality.

Helnwein takes on a difficult problem and only people who live with his work may know whether he solves it. Through painting, he regains some of the power lost to images by our overexposure to them. But like anything else one sees all the time, paintings settle into familiarity after a while, regardless of their content. We have to wonder how long his pictures retain their capacity to amplify the shrill emotional background tones of our social reality.

Earlier this year, to starkly polarized public response, Helnwein did the stage and costume designs for Maximilian Schell's presentation of Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier." The works on view are said to continue the painter's thinking about that project.

Carter at Graystone: The work of San Francisco painter [Sara Carter](#) nicely illustrates the advantages and problems of a methodical style. Carter drags acrylic color across stretched canvases laid face up, slowly developing grid patterns that mark a spectrum from rudimentary imagery to intricate abstraction.

Her latest exhibition at Graystone shows that those extremes lie closer than we may think. It helps to consider her work in contrast to that of a freewheeling abstractionist such as [Ed](#)

Moses, who even at his wildest has the grid in mind, and that of, say, Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967), who for a decade played subtle black-on-black variations on a rigid cross. Some of Carter's bright vertical canvases can bring to mind Reinhardt's early multicolored abstractions.

The late Harvey Quaytman may be a readier association. In several of her pieces, Carter seems to shift the crux of the grid slightly toward one corner with a deceptive move that Quaytman perfected. Carter's art would pall quickly, did her way of working not yield unpredictable outcomes.

"Grid #2" (2005) marks a summit of Carter's recent work, though she may see it as a transitional piece, moving away from more architecturally suggestive paintings of years past and toward the brighter, flatter, less atmospheric canvases that predominate in the current show.

Though it permits us to dream a veiled, sleek interior -- like a late-night stroller's glimpse of a tony hotel lobby -- its paint strokes assert themselves boldly enough to declare the object's true reality at every point. We enter into it theatrically only to the extent that we ignore its reality.

Thus, "Grid #2" makes explicit our basic, usually unthought, transaction with pictures. By such means, Carter at her best makes a link, for painter and viewer alike, between formal rigor and honesty with oneself.

Anno at Sweetow: Just four pieces at Patricia Sweetow by Bay Area painter Kim Anno make a substantial exhibition.

Anno paints in oil on aluminum, a completely nonabsorbent surface that forces her to modulate color by thinning, wiping and scoring it. These operations in themselves give rise to a kind of abstract pictorial drama.

In "Aquilo" (2005) and "Archaeol" (2005), sinuous striations waver between ornamentation and the suggestion of rising or descending drapery.

Even as they call to mind stylizations seen in Japanese prints and screens, Anno's gestural marks also skirt the borders of nonsense.

She apparently perceives in abstract painting a tacit materialism that mirrors the pervasive unacknowledged materialism of the common culture. On that basis, she lets us glimpse sense emerging silently from nonsense as perhaps only painters can now.

Gottfried Helnwein: New Paintings. Through Jan. 14. Modernism, 685 Market St., San Francisco. (415) 541-0461,
www.modernisminc.com.

Kim Anno: Paintings. Through Nov. 26. Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 788-5126,
www.patriciasweetowgallery.com.

Sara Carter: Grid Series: paintings. Through Dec. 3. Graystone, 77 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 956-7693,
www.graystone.org.