

Helmut Koller, The Master of “Kollerism”

By Ava Rosevelt

KOLLERISM could be defined by realistic representation of the form and an abstraction of colors.

"I am the creator, leader and only follower of my own art movement. Disciples need not apply! Don't let the aesthetics fool you! These paintings are powerful symbols."

Helmut Koller is an Austrian-born photographer turned artist, known and acclaimed world-wide for bold, “super-realistic colorful pop” animal paintings. Helmut’s unique method mixes photorealism and surrealism. The psychedelic result is characterized by extravagant colors and shades which he applies to the canvas, transforming them into the bodies or furs of his subjects. The monochrome backgrounds become alive with vibrant colors which are equally mesmerizing.

Helmut’s rise is meteoric. Seldom, in the span of a couple of decades, has an artist’s work been collected and exhibited on multiple continents: in the United States, Europe, Russia and Asia. Avid collectors of Helmut’s art, including this writer, cannot resist the burst of color gracing the faces of often-times deadly, four-legged predators. It creates a pure Wow-Moment each time you catch a glimpse of them.

Ava:

After training, you became the official photographer for the Vienna State Opera, capturing legends such as Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Leonard Bernstein and Rudolf Nureyev. You’ve also published several books of your work, including “Opera Live.”

Helmut:

It was the most important time of my life. It profoundly shaped me. I look back in awe, how this young photographer, me, daily was allowed and had the opportunity to deal with the greatest artists, the greatest legends in the opera & ballet world. I so loved it, and I am so fond of these memories. My affinity for creative people, painters, dancers, singers, musicians, actors, and such, is endless.

Ava:

Who inspired you the most to transition from photography and writing to painting?

Helmut:

Well, I blame Egon Schiele for it!

I didn’t grow up with art. Looking back, I think I became a photographer because it was the most creative job I could see myself doing. But once I got to Vienna, I soon had friends who were artists. I looked up to them. I didn’t consider photography to be art. Only after I started painting, I came to understand that. It’s so ironic that decades later, I found everything within myself, what I admired in my early artist friends.

Ava:

Do you remember your first brush stroke? How old were you then?

Helmut:

Not the first brushstroke, but when I was about ten, my father had just repainted our house in a beautiful pure white. So I took a fresh, green bunch of grass and started to write on that pristine white wall. I see it now as my first creative endeavor. Not that I was always getting in trouble. To the contrary, I was an awfully well-behaved little boy. It was certainly the very first time that I was in the “zone,” creating. My father and I obviously had different viewpoints about it. He spanked me pretty hard!

Ava:

Your art is a kind of ultra-photo realism, and at times it takes you up to three months to create a single large piece of art. Please tell us more about how you create and apply this process to such a diverse body of your art.



Helmut:

Technically, it is not considered “ultra-photo realism.” But yes, the details are stunning, and I always wonder, once I have finished a large canvas, where this patience comes from. Though I am self-taught, I actually paint in a quite a traditional manner, with under painting and layers upon layers of hair, in a fur, for example.

Ava:

Which one of your impressive exhibitions was the most challenging and still lives in your heart?

Helmut:

That’s impossible to answer. The first shows in Paris, London, and Shanghai, felt like enormous leaps in my career. But looking back, they just turned out to be a single brick in the building of an artist’s journey to success.

Ava:

You are one of the most technically perfect artists on the market. Forgive the analogy, your ‘haute couture’ paintings sell for hundreds of thousands. How do you achieve the balance between your ‘pret-a-porter’ collection of lithographs without devaluing your brand?

Helmut:

My French dealer and galleries always compared my work to Yves Saint Laurent. So, my large works on canvas most definitely fit the label of “Haute Couture.” As esoteric as my profession is, I find myself standing, cemented, with both feet in the law of commerce. When one considers that the highest selling contemporary artworks of today might not even have been touched by the “artists” they are attributed to, then further consider that today’s collectors are buying the most expensive works, “by ear,” and not what they see and like. Take the most famous and financially successful living artist, Damien Hirst. He sold a 12 million dollar stuffed shark; he has two studios with hundreds of “assistants,” producing his works, like the dot paintings. So, the argument of the danger of devaluing one’s work since Andy Warhol is a completely moot point.



Everydays: The First 5000 Days, above, is a digital work of art or NFT, created by Mike Winkelmann, known professionally as Beeple. It sold for \$69.3 million at an auction at Christie’s.

Ava:

NFTs are fueling a digital art boom. Do you think the NFTs are a fad? Is it really art, or a pure digital accident?

Helmut:

To understand NFTs, it's important to look at their origins. They emerged as a new form of digital art collectibles in 2017, allowing artists to sell unique, one-of-a-kind digital creations as valuable assets. Artists will always embrace new technologies, so artists have started to use their computers to create art. The challenge was, how do you sell that? It is indeed quite extraordinary that an NFT sold for nearly seventy million dollars. All it really is, is a link to a digital file, that you can only see on your laptop or computer screen. Even though crypto and NFTs crashed lately, there is still very healthy trading going on. I do think NFTs are here to stay.

Ava:

How do you relate? Are you afraid that so-called digitization of art could put a great artist like yourself out of business? In the digital age, is the dread of a commercial distinction of 'real art' a probability?

Helmut:

NFTs for me were love at second sight. I have meanwhile fully embraced it, but only after understanding that it can give my paintings totally different dimension. I am extremely inspired by it. The process of creating NFTs has spilled over into my other creations, by opening my viewpoints of what I can do. I have been working for over a year, getting ready for it. I have created numerous, future NFTs based on my work.

I had a similar discussion a few years back with a photographer friend of mine. His opinion was, that the more "art" that can be created with an app on your phone, the more people will appreciate things that require technical expertise, a superior technical ability, or are just simply "hand made." Now, I do see that all of the time! Most of the art buyers appreciate and react to a well-crafted artwork, with a unique point of view. So no, I think this digital revolution plays into the hand of artists like me.



Ava:

Are the prices of similar NFTs sustainable and being purely created by demand, or is there an artistic merit to computer-generated art fueling these prices?

Helmut:

With NFTs, it's exactly like the prices of analog art. It will always be about the perceived value. Also, it is never about how good the art is because nobody can really tell. Remember Joshua Bell, who played on a 3.5 million dollar violin, some of the most beautiful and complex pieces, in a Washington DC subway station, I think, and no one stopped to listen. Today it's all about branding, marketing and PR.

Ava:

Where do you see NFTs in a hundred years? At the Louvre or in the digital trash bin?

Helmut:

I think NFTs will still be here in a hundred years. I worry if we will still have an inhabitable planet by then.

Ava:

As an artist, what's most important in your life? Where do you envision yourself, artistically speaking, in a decade?

Helmut:

There is this photograph of a bedridden Matisse, that has always touched me. It proved artists can be creative until they draw their last breath. Most of my contemporaries are retired. That's a horrible thought for me!

