



WELCOME TO MARWENCOL



Vince Keenan

The award-winning 2010 documentary *Marwencol* recounts an astonishing story shot through with noir elements, in which art plays a pivotal and healing role. In April 2000, Mark Hogancamp was brutally beaten by five men outside a bar in Kingston, New York. He awoke from a nine-day coma with amnesia, unable to recall details of his Navy service, his former marriage, his alcoholism. Only upon returning home and finding hundreds of pairs of women's shoes did he realize he was a cross-dresser; drunken revelation of this fact prompted the attack.



“Rescuing the Major” - the 2004 photo that won Mark first prize in an Ultimate Soldier photo contest. He used the money to buy his alter ego a love interest - Anna. The photo depicts his brother Mike carrying a wounded army major during a Waffen SS ambush. The photo is so realistic, it’s often mistaken for an actual WWII image online.
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“My brother Mike carrying a wounded army major away from a Waffen SS ambush”

Hogancamp’s assailants were convicted, although only three went to prison. Hogancamp set about relearning basic skills like eating and walking. Eventually funds for his therapy were cut off. Feeling cast out of the world, he responded by inventing one of his own.

Using found material, he constructed a 1/6-scale World War II-era town in Belgium he named Marwencol. He populated it with dolls and photographed them as they acted out tales of a downed fighter pilot named Hogie who found salvation in a community made up almost entirely of women. Many of these narratives involved the women saving Hogie from a quintet of savage Nazi soldiers, obvious stand-ins for Hogancamp’s attackers; he told journalist Jon Ronson, “I’ve killed them in ways Satan himself hasn’t even thought of.” The documentary movingly chronicles Hogancamp’s recovery and surprising emergence as an art world star.

Chris Shellen, who co-produced the film and is married to its director Jeff Malmberg, knew there was more to Hogancamp’s story. The new book she wrote with the artist, *Welcome to Marwencol* (Princeton Architectural Press, November 2015) dives deeper into Hogancamp’s process and the sprawling alternate universe it has created.

“While we were working on the film, we soon realized we had way too much material for an 82-minute movie,” Shellen said. “Mark and I started talking about the idea of doing a book. We kept

calling it *Encyclopedia Marwencolia*.” The resulting volume includes over four hundred of Hogancamp’s photographs, spanning ten years.

Shellen recalled her first visit to Marwencol. “In the photos, the town is bigger than life. There are all these characters running around and it seems really lush. Then you see it in the backyard and it takes up maybe half the length of Mark’s trailer. It’s very humble in appearance when you see it in person, which makes Mark’s work in it more remarkable to me.”

Asked how Hogancamp, who has no arts training, could produce such stirring images, Shellen suggested, “I think it’s one third imagination, one third innate talent and observation on Mark’s part, and one third magic. He has a truly amazing eye for body language. He’ll watch TV and instinctively understand how coverage is done. He knows how to get down to eye level with his characters and shoot over the shoulder to create a deep scene from a production design standpoint.” She stressed that Hogancamp doesn’t view his subjects as inanimate objects. “In his head, these are people who have backstories and baggage and

roles and responsibilities.” The attention to detail extends past their historically accurate uniforms and clothing. “If a character is a chain smoker,” Shellen said, “they will have five packs of cigarettes in their bag, which you will never see on film. But they’re there, because the characters are real to Mark. He wants them to have warm coats on if it’s cold outside.

Many of these narratives involved the women saving Hogie from a quintet of savage Nazi soldiers, obvious stand-ins for Hogancamp’s attackers.



Mark's alter ego Hogie is nearly beaten to death by five SS soldiers, who represent the five young men who attacked him. ©

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"Five SS soldiers beat me up and leave me for dead"

"But he also has some magic in him. It's the only way I can describe it. I could work for an hour trying to make a doll look natural. And it won't look natural. Mark would simply lay his hands on the doll, and it would melt at his touch. Two seconds later, it would look like a human being."

The book developed in stages over seven years. "Mark was a dream collaborator," Shellen said. "I told him what my idea for the book was, and he liked it. I started gathering the materials we would need and he would be incredibly forthcoming, even if he didn't want to do it. Mark would always say, 'For duty and humanity.' After the attack, he felt it was very important for him to be completely transparent and open and honest with people. He never wanted to be closed off again. He wanted people to understand what he went through, in case it might help them. Once I'd laid the entire book out, I sent him a draft to review. He was so sweet. He went through it line by line. Then he wrote me this big letter

telling me that he cried, that it meant so much to him and was exactly the way he would have laid out his story."

Welcome to Marwencol is structured in three sections. The first is Hogancamp's personal story, describing his influences and providing a thorough account of his attack. The second delves into his photography and design techniques. Lastly, several Marwencol narratives are laid out graphic novel-style. "If you read it from start to finish," Shellen said, "it gives you a full sense of Mark's process and an appreciation for what he's created."

What Hogancamp's created has expanded far beyond its initial conception. Marwencol "started very simply," Shellen said. "Mark set it during World War II because he's always had a fascination for that time period. He thinks it's a really romantic era, back when there was real drama. There was honor, good and evil were more black and white, men were men and women were women. They wore hose and dresses but they were strong." Over time, the



Mark Hogancamp working with writer/producer Chris Shellen on *Welcome to Marwencol*, the book about his life and work

Photo by Jeff Malmberg



Hogie is repeatedly captured and tortured by the SS and rescued by women like his long-time love, Anna



The third person in Hogie and Anna's love triangle is Deja Thoris, the Belgian witch of Marwencol, who uses her time machine to make Hogie forget Anna



One soldier lies dead in a puddle while another is killed by Anna's bodyguard Jacqueline — just another day in Marwencol



“Anna, Chris and Jacqueline rescue me - just like precision surgeons, they eliminate the SS”

©Mark Hogancamp/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

mythology of Hogancamp’s kingdom grew to include witches and time travel. “There’s a whole Civil War segment, and one on Vietnam. Mark created a dome over Marwencol, which keeps the town preserved in World War II Belgium. Anyone can come in from the present or the past, but only the open-minded can leave. Mark’s also influenced by pop culture and current events. When Barack Obama was elected President, he came into the world, too.”

No matter how elaborate the narratives of Marwencol, Hogancamp approaches them with the same spirit. “He’s got this amazing adult talent, with the imagination of a child,” Shellen said. “There’s no judgment, there’s no cynicism. Mark has this fantastic openness so many artists try to cultivate. But it’s difficult, because you build up that adult veneer.”

Hogancamp has been able to adjust to his newfound fame. “After the documentary,” Shellen said, “he

became kind of a local celebrity, which was mostly a positive thing. In the past when he would walk down the street dragging his dolls in a toy jeep, people would hurl insults, stare at him, call him a freak. But the last time we were there, five people came up to him in succession. ‘Mark Hogancamp! I’m your biggest fan! I own one of your pieces. Your story changed my life!’ I still don’t think he

sees himself as an artist, but I think he feels more validated in terms of what he’s doing. And, to an extent, his work has at least sedated some of the anger he was dealing with. The book and the film also uncovered some information about the attack that he hadn’t known about, so I think that was cathartic for him. He’s definitely opened up more.” While Hogie’s had many amorous adventures in Marwencol, Shellen noted that Hogancamp “had a girlfriend for a while, a 1:1 scale, real-world girlfriend.”

And his work continues to



Mark and a friend before the attack that stole his memory



Mademoiselle leaving Tonjes' Furniture shop on Marwencol's main street. Tonjes is named after a friend of Mark's from the Ultimate Soldier forum

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evolve. “He just bought one of those Realdolls,” Shellen said, referring to the life-size mannequin line. “Presumably they’re used for sex, but Mark was excited about her because she looks real. He said, ‘It’s a doll and I can pose her and put her into my adventures! She’s like a giant coming into Marwencol!’”

Hogancamp’s photographs are being exhibited in prestige galleries and sought after by high-profile collectors. Additional attention is forthcoming; director Robert Zemeckis is preparing a feature film on Hogancamp, with Academy Award nominee Steve Carell slated to portray the artist. But Shellen is holding out for another form of recognition. “I’ll raise a little cheer when the first museum buys one of his pieces. We haven’t had that yet. I know it takes a while, but we’ll feel like we’ve done it then.”

In the meantime, Shellen and Malmberg are at work on their next documentary, about an Italian town that for decades has been addressing its issues by turning them into a play the entire population writes and performs. And there’s her parallel existence to keep track of; as with many people in Mark Hogancamp’s orbit, Shellen has a doll in Marwencol. “I have a much more exciting life there than I do here,” she said. “Unfortunately, my character got lost in a box at some point, which is one of the hazards of having an alter ego in Marwencol. But Mark was very sweet about it. He said, ‘I have to level with you. I can’t find your character. She’s in a box somewhere, and I don’t know where she is. But if you send me a new doll, I will put you back in the world.’” The question is: which doll? “I’ve been

wrestling with that. My first doll was gorgeous. Do I pick another one who looks like that, so I can be forever preserved in Marwencol that way? Or do I pick one who looks more like me, so I can have more fun following my face in the town?”

Has she considered asking the man behind the curtain? “Oh, I know what Mark would do,” Shellen said, laughing. “Mark would pick the sexy figure. Absolutely.” ■



“Sgt. Howard watching a can-can dancer on stage”

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