

Enter the Moundverse

[Trenton Doyle Hancock and Maurice Carlos Ruffin](#)



Trenton Doyle Hancock's Ecstatic Devotion to Resistance

When I was old enough to get jumped by kids from another school, but not yet old enough to drive, Mama and me had a weekday routine. She'd snatch me up from McDonogh No. 35, and we'd speed across town. Sometimes we'd hit a drive-thru for nuggets, fries, and shakes. Once we hit another car and drove away until someone tracked us down.

But most days weren't so dramatic. On Wednesdays, we wound up at a strip mall on Read Boulevard within sniffing distance of the seafood shack that peddled live lobsters and dead but tasty crawfish. After parking, Mama ducked left into the beauty supply store where she purchased her magic. (People often compared her to Diana Ross. They were wrong. She looked better than Diana Ross.) I skipped right—my sweaty hand wrapped around a ten-dollar bill—and into the comic book shop. Today, everyone knows comics. You'd have a hard time finding an American who can't tell their Iron Man from their Spider-Man. But back in the day of trickle-down economics and parachute pants, comics were niche. The jocks drove Trans Ams with phoenix decals on the hood. But nerds like me caught rides with their mamas to score the latest issue of *Captain America*.

Spending all my dimes on comics, graphic novels, and posters did not increase my popularity. But I didn't want popularity. I had something better. To paraphrase Willy Wonka, comics allowed me to gaze into a world of pure imagination, a world I still access every time I put pen to paper. In comics, friends become enemies. Enemies turn out to be long-lost family. And the stakes are never less than the fate of the world. The best comics mirror real world history. One example: the leader of the X-Men, Professor X, and their chief villain, Magneto, were tidy stand-ins for the nonviolent protest versus fight-to-the-death approaches of David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin; William Franklin and his father, the rebel, Ben Franklin; and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. But Malcolm X never tried to nuke North America.

This knowledge, this view of a world seen through the looking glass, is shared by all lovers of the fantastic. It's what I love most about the work of Trenton Doyle Hancock. Hancock's art, which includes paintings, fabricated toys, a theatrical performance, and a graphic novel, defies categorization and pulses with an almost religious intensity. Much of his work has followed the denizens of his alternate reality called "The Moundverse," where beastly,

beautiful Mounds are often attacked by skeletal, sadistic Vegans. There's a goddess figure named Udom Endgle, who represents the power of Black women as "bringers of color and light," and TorpedoBoy, a heroic figure in razor-covered cleats. Hancock employs a constantly shifting aesthetic that suggests he can create literally anything. Depending on the piece, Hancock's work recalls the original Afro-Cubists who inspired Picasso as well as the visual styles of John T. Scott, Kerry James Marshall, Jack Kirby, R. Crumb, Harvey Pekar, John Kricfalusi, Hanna-Barbera, Garbage Pail Kids, Hieronymus Bosch, and many, many others. However, more than anything, Hancock's art reminds me of itself. The work is ecstatic, dense, and self-referential; much of the artist's oeuvre incorporates bottle caps and other ephemera from his childhood.

But the uniqueness of Hancock's work belies the social commentary, which is hidden in plain sight. Hancock has recounted growing up in a part of Texas that was once a stronghold for small men in white bedsheets. Many of Hancock's paintings depict the Vegans as nightmare versions of those men. "TorpedoBoy Steps and Screws Wearing some Cutty Black Shoes" depicts the artist's alter ego as an alternate reality football player (the ball composed of floor tiling from his grandmother's home) breaking the tackles of countless bone-white Vegans. Another piece shows TorpedoBoy eluding a hood-wearing Vegan who wields a blood-red noose.

"The Legend Generates a Spit Storm Just for You" is the latest in a series of pieces that represent a central paternal figure in the Moundverse known as "Mound No. 1." Mound No. 1 repels his attackers with sheer willpower, depicted variously as light, bubbles, and, yes, spit. In "The Sound of Ocello Opo as the Sun Rises in Her Hands," Udom Endgle, her speed represented by a multiplicity of limbs, battles a demonic wolf. In "Trenton Doyle Hancock Presents The Moundverse, Chapter 1: What is a Mound?" the artist becomes writer, penciler, and letterer, providing occasionally cheeky context for his own

work.

The art of Trenton Doyle Hancock suggests a personal mythology filtered through the consciousness of America's eternal resistance movement, Black folks.

—*Maurice Carlos Ruffin*

See more of Trenton Doyle Hancock's work in our web feature, ["What Is a Mound?"](#)

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Trenton Doyle Hancock is a Houston-based artist known for creating his own fantastical narrative known as The Moundverse. Hancock's drawings, paintings, sculptures, and installations have been the subject of numerous solo museum exhibitions. His work is currently featured in *Contemporary Focus: Trenton Doyle Hancock* at The Menil Collection (through May 19) and will be the subject of *Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass* at MASS MoCA (opening March 9).

Maurice Carlos Ruffin has been a recipient of an Iowa Review Award in fiction and a winner of the William Faulkner–William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition for Novel-in-Progress. A native of New Orleans, Ruffin is a

graduate of the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop and a member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance. He is the author of *We Cast a Shadow* from One World Random House.