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Glimpse Inside the Mind of Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock at the Studio Museum in Harlem



Adam Lehrer Former Contributor 

Arts

I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure.

The surreally beautiful and cartoonish world of Houston-based painter and draftsman Trenton Doyle Hancock comes to life in the artist's new show, "Skin and Bones: 20 Years of Drawing" at the [Studio Museum](#) in Harlem. The show is one of those rare career retrospectives in which the artist has made use of every single piece of space in the gallery: huge paintings and drawings render the walls, glass tables encased with Doyle's sketches litter the floors, and all negative space on the walls is filled with messages and jokes and one-liners hand-drawn by the artist. The show serves as a looking glass into a profoundly unique mind.

The last 20 years of Hancock's career are given voice in the exhibition through five sections. Hancock's early work is displayed in a section entitled "Epidemic," showcasing drawings rendered as early as when Hancock was 10-years-old to when he was an undergraduate and working as a cartoonist at his school newspaper. At the time, Hancock was considering a professional career in cartoons and that influence is palpable in even his most recent works.

“If this painting didn’t work out, then I wanted to do cartoons,” says Hancock. “I had a whole portfolio ready to do newspapers and things, but painting took precedence. But eventually the cartoons came back.”

Another section entitled “Moundish” introduces 10 years of Hancock’s career and the character Torpedo Boy, a reoccurring presence in Hancock’s visual world. It also illuminates on the “mythology of the mound,” another important theme in the work. “The Liminal Room” introduces Hancock’s heavy experimentation in drawing, while “From the Mirror” gives the viewer insight into how Hancock views himself with a series of self-portraits. “The Studio Floor” displays art highlighting Hancock’s re-incorporation of comic themes back into his work

The exhibition serves as the first look into Hancock’s extensive body of drawings, collages and works on paper. The presentation is stimulating; as opposed to staring at a single piece for a long period of time, you will find your eyeballs sucked into a vortex of eye-popping visuals. Every piece bleeds into the next, allowing viewers to appreciate the entire collection as one gorgeously rendered work.

Hancock’s eye for detail is astounding. True to his cartoonist nature, he presents art as self-referential and never lacking in sense of humor. Take for example “Judgement #2” (2000), a piece in which Hancock rendered “Lloyd”—a character that he created when he was 18—in a nightmarish family portrait, featuring the character yelling at other creatures.

“He yelled at me first, but then I convinced him to yell at other people,” he says in his trademark deadpan tone.

Like most great artists, Hancock has created a world full of life and

stories. He readily admits to not always knowing what is going on in that world, almost as if his subconscious is guiding his hands as he brings the realm to life. The world is eerily similar to ours: there is no good or evil, there are shades of ugliness, shades of beauty, and a whole lot of laughs.

To inaugurate the opening of the exhibition on March 26, the museum sat down Hancock with his former professor at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, Stanley Whitney. The two artists discussed a plethora of topics: process, race, beauty and a lot more. Whitney spared no praise for his former student. "I think Trenton is a fantastic artist, and I'm always interested to see what the play is, or how much he'll take on or how he'll grow," he says. "In a way I'm a little jealous. His work is both playful and full of intellect."

The conversation illuminated much of the thought process behind the singular mind behind "Skin and Bones." Here are some select quotes from Hancock providing insight into his wacky world.

On Drawing

"For me, drawing is the foundation. No matter what I'm doing, whether it's painting or sculpture, it's where I start. Drawing is very skeletal to me. It's how I get a sense of space. Sometimes I hesitate to call myself a painter because I approach the canvas as a draftsman."

On Color

"Color is emotion. I've always had skepticism about its power, in believing that people are easily swayed by color. So the work at first was largely black and white, and that became a part of the conceptual practice. The

story then became about where that color appears. Now I'm starting with a color ground, and building color on top. Before, things would start out low-key and then I would build towards high-key, whereas now I start off high-key and then figure out ways to dampen things."

On Narrative

"What's written about my characters and the names that I've assigned to these creatures is just one layer of a seven-layer cake. I don't want the work to fall too far to the left or too far to the right; I want it to exist on a fine line. I want the work to be open where people can find their ways into the work and then find their ways out."

On Magic and the Influence of Stanley Whitney

"When I got to Tyler it was the first time I heard art being talked about in terms of magic. When we were invited to [Stanley]'s studio, we would see these paintings that look like they had fallen from the sky. It was like, "This guy standing right here next to me and talking made this?" I get along with Stanley so well because he's never changed, he's always been the same guy."

On Art's Relation to Mental Health

"If you go outside or on your computer, things are so fast. How do you slow things down and really ask those questions in the same way that they were asked 2,000 years ago? Painting requires you to slow down and de-fragment and figure things out."

On the essence of "Pop"

“I remember [Stanley] said (**Hancock does a perfect impression of Whitney*), “You have to figure out what is pop?” I had no idea what [he] was talking about, but I get it now. It’s in terms of popular culture: where fashion is in the work, where music is associated with the work. Pop was on the back burner back then, but now with projects like developing toys, it’s a totally different avenue. And to have that in the same room as the paintings is just another off-shoot.”

On Whether or not the Vegans and Torpedo Boy in his work are metaphor for good and evil

“Hopefully there’s a range of what the vegans are, and what Torpedo Boy is. You can choose to identify with that range or not. I came from a household where there were very strict ideas about what good and evil are. When I left home I realized that didn’t really work for me, that life was a huge grey area. That became more interesting.

On the influence of comic artists

“I don’t like him now, but [creator of comic series *Spawn*] Todd Mcfarland was the guy for me when I was younger. He was a celebrity in comics. After that I moved away from superhero stuff. I got into [creator of *Ghost World* comic series] Dan Clowes and [creator of *Acme Novelty Library* comic series] Chris Ware. Eventually I started to become more interested in comics that drew from life.”

On humor

“I sometimes get more inspired by listening to stand-up comedy than I do by other visual artists: Louis C.K., Richard Pryor, Bill Burr. I think that

there needs to be humor to explore the range. Just like crying needs to be in the work, there needs to be laughs as well.”

On Beauty

“I always loved this painting by Johannes Van Der Beek of Christ being taken down from the cross. I had wanted to see this painting for a long time, having seen it in all the art history catalogs. I had seen myself as having graduated from my Christian upbringing and into a place of being more understanding. But I get in this room to see this painting, and I was brought to tears. I thought, “What is happening right now?” Is this because I wanted to see it for so long? And at that moment, I got a sense of there being something embedded in this work. There was true crying in it. I could see why people would want to convert to Christianity, after looking at this painting. It was something in the paint. That to me is beauty. It was a kind of beauty that is sublime, beyond what we can define as human beauty. When looking at galleries, I’m always looking for crying in the work, to see if the artist has explored that range. A lot of artists don’t go there.”



Adam Lehrer

Adam Lehrer is an artist, writer and curator based in New York. Prior to moving to New York, Lehrer thought he'd be an investigative journalist working at local...

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