

Texas artist Trenton Doyle Hancock builds a world in massive exhibition space

With 'Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass,' he has taken complete control of the largest space in any contemporary art museum, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

Trenton Doyle Hancock, a Texas artist who works in Houston, is riding a wave. Not only are his works in major museums and private collections throughout the country, but he has taken complete control of the largest space in *any* contemporary art museum, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's vast Machine Room, in North Adams, Mass.

The space dwarfs the indomitable Barrel Vault in the Dallas Museum of Art as well as the big central gallery in The Warehouse. Indeed, one could fit several of each of these into this colossus of space.

Starting with Tim Hawkinson's extraordinary "Überorgan," there have been 20 single-artist exhibitions in the MASS MoCA space since the museum's opening two decades ago. Most often, the space defeats the artist. Not so for Hancock, who manages to match his exhibition to its scale as well as to divert us as we walk through it with myriad aesthetic and sociopolitical distractions.



Texas artist Trenton Doyle Hancock has built a whole world for his "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. These are panels from his upcoming graphic novel. (Kaelan Burkett / Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art)

I had known Hancock's work from an exhibition of paintings years ago at Dallas' Angstrom Gallery and again through an important — and closely related — vinyl mural commissioned for AT&T Stadium in Arlington. But nothing prepared me for the obsessive brilliance of his exhibition titled ["Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass."](#)

This is because, to take control of the space, Hancock had to move away from the wall and to become a sculptor/architect in addition to a painter. To accomplish this, he took forms from his painted world and created them on a large scale. He created immense mounds — some with their own interiors, others without — and connected them with pathways of colored squares similar to those in board games.

He has created a gigantic 3-D comic book whose main characters are mounds

that look like beehives, anthills or igloos — or some mythic combination of all three. These are fuzzy and firm, covered with pictures or patterns, headed or headless, opened to the interior or closed. Among the mounds — and sometimes *in* them — are toy stores, stuffed with original toys from the artist's enormous collection.

Sadly, for the consumers among us, not a cash register or credit card reader is in sight! This, in spite of the fact that many have their crazy-low price tags still attached.

On my visit, several families were at the exhibition with children who ran around in the bright colors and suggestive forms of the comic-book world having a wonderful time — as if at an amusement park. An image of a man wearing jeans, a T-shirt and glasses at the onset of the exhibition shouts words from his mouth onto the walls: “It’s up to each individual to make learning fun.”

And that's an order! So, fun we have. Yet, the world we enter places us in familiar roles of consumer and game-player, but also introduces us to a sequence of characters and narratives that result from their encounters that become increasingly complex and perplexing as we continue what is at first simply *fun*. It is a comic-book world with two forces — the Mounds and the



Trenton Doyle Hancock created his Torpedo Boy superhero alter-ego when he was a child. (Tony Luong / Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art)

Vegans — and heroic figures like Torpedo Boy (an alter-ego for Hancock conceived when he was a child) and many others.

The exhibition truly engages a patient viewer with its many levels of detail. The visual and narrative complexity made me think of the Hairy Who and other Chicago Imagist artists from the 1960s and '70s as well as the worlds of Peter Saul, the late Philip Guston or the fetishized comics of Robert Crumb, each of whom have their roots in popular visual culture rather than in the "higher" worlds of painting and sculpture, and their histories and theories. Visual and narrative complexity is a way of keeping the uninitiated out and also a way to diverge dramatically from the tendency in much of modernism toward reductive art-making with radically simple forms.



"Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" occupies the largest exhibition space at any contemporary art museum. (Tony

Luong / Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

I went through with a leading scholar of Ellsworth Kelly, and we each chuckled at what the late maker of monochrome paintings and sculpture would think in this busy and buoyant environment. The final gallery with lower ceilings has the beginning of an entire narrative cycle of what is to be a 400-page graphic novel. These are printed in large scale, like the AT&T Stadium murals, on vinyl.

For me, the success of this endeavor is, in some ways, more literary than visual, the sensibility of an illustrated print culture rather than a satisfying visual experience. This is particularly true when we get to the end and realize that we are only at the very beginning of the graphic novel and are already visually and mentally exhausted. "Enough already!" we scream. This is *not fun*, it is obsession. Did anyone say William Blake?

Yet, in all the years that I have been to this room in MASS MoCA, I never remember taking it quite so seriously, and the mere fact that its artist, though born in Oklahoma, grew up in Paris, Texas, and lives and works in Houston made me proud that an African-American Texan could command one of the greatest spaces in the contemporary art world so completely.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, who lives in Houston, built a re-creation of his grandmother's house for his "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" exhibition. (Tony Luong / <p>Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art</p>)

Details

"Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" is on display through at least October at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass. For more information, visit massmoca.org.

Rick Brettell is a contributing writer and the former art critic of The Dallas Morning News. He is the founding director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas.