

The Wild World of Trenton Doyle Hancock

Hancock's is a world with its own creation myths and conflicts — colorful and fun, but with serious undertones.

by [Christopher Marcisz](#) April 25, 2019

Installation view, *Trenton Doyle Hancock, Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass* (photo by Tony Luong, all images courtesy of MASS MoCA)

NORTH ADAMS, Mass — For nearly 20 years Trenton Doyle Hancock has been exploring “Mounds” as an organizational and a metaphysical system. Through paintings, comics, sculptures, and gathered objects like board games and collectible toys, he has built an elaborate mythology around his sentient Mounds and their “Moundverse.” The Mounds have followed Hancock since he was a kid, emerging in his imagination at a young age. In an interview with Hyperallergic for the opening of [Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass](#) at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art he noted his urge to “hunt and gather” material that can “orbit around me all the time.” “There’s something comforting in that — I can plot my existence in space through the breadcrumbs of materials.”

With *Mind of the Mound* at MASS MoCA's football-field sized Building 5, Hancock has the opportunity to spin his world out to its most expansive iteration yet. Hancock's is a world with its own creation myths and conflicts — colorful and fun, but with serious undertones. It allows Hancock and viewers to consider big ideas of memory, self-identity and ownership, how identity is built, and how we satisfy or deny ourselves.

Panels from an upcoming graphic novel by Trenton Doyle Hancock (photo by Kaelan Burkett)



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "Coloration Coronation" (2016), acrylic, mixed media on canvas, 90 x 132 in. (courtesy of the Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, OH)

At the center of this world are the Mounds, a species of plant-animal cryptids that live in the forest, absorb negative energy, communicate through dreams, and protect themselves with vibrations and force fields of color. Long

relegated to the canvas or cartoon cells, at MASS MoCA they are realized as large furry heaps covered in black and white stripes with pink splotches. They are structures that can house a museum within a museum, or video installations of Moundverse legends. They are installed like specimens in a natural history museum, and, for anyone familiar with Hancock's paintings and drawings, these specimens are surprisingly large in scale. The exhibition's curator, Denise Markonish, said some visitors described feeling small as they looked up at towering figures around them.

In addition to the Mounds, the exhibition features other recurring characters in the Moundverse — for instance, the Mounds' natural antagonists, "the Vegans," who love tofu, order, and emptiness, and can't see color. They appear around the space as skeletal cartoon cut-outs, climbing, sulking, and spouting negative catchphrases (e.g., "You deserve less"). Other characters include Udom Endgle, a protective mother figure who cares for the souls of departed Mounds, and Torpedoboy, Hancock's alter ego who always wears his yellow tights and tighty-whiteys, and who strives with mixed results to protect Mound-dom.

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Mind of the Mound fills in the backstory of the Moundverse with wall-sized cartoon panels that explain the "science" of Mounds in a style that evokes R. Crumb and other underground comix artists. There are also many of Hancock's remarkable collage-paintings, which are largely abstractions based on

elements like the Mounds' black and white stripes, textured with such objects as bottle caps, which create rhythmic waves of form and color through visual fragments.

The space of MASS MoCA allows Hancock to showcase what he calls his "iceberg of information" — source materials such as toys and board games that he has gathered since childhood. Most will inspire nostalgia for some Generation X visitors (Hancock was born in 1974), their cultural significations transcending their original functions. He describes how "these things tend to pile up in our heads and become the total of what makes us us." This process considerably structures the exhibition and Hancock's practice. "When it comes to identity, especially Black identity, the issue of ownership becomes central," he said, referring to the experience of "being owned, owning a language or a culture that is stripped from you, [and] cobbling together something to call yourself."

Trenton Doyle Hancock, *What the Bringback Brought*, still (2015), video; 6 minutes 51 seconds (courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York)

Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Skum Surprise and The Underworld* (2019), mannequin, fabric, Bringback costume, Mound #1 The Legend dolls published by Graphic studio, University of South Florida, Tampa, shelves, metal, plaster, paint, 15.5 x 20 x 11 ft (courtesy of the artist, photo by Kaelan Burkett)

And this process acknowledges there is a multiverse of systems (he jokes that his next project will deal with the worldview of the Vegans), perhaps most poignantly examined in the exhibit's first installation. Upon entering the exhibition viewers encounter a small house with three trick-or-treaters wearing cheap plastic Halloween costumes of Moundverse characters. They are walking away, repelled by a giant crucifix bursting from the front door. Inside is a middle-class African-American sitting room circa the 1980s, an amalgam of

the different houses Hancock lived in growing up in Texas. Copies of *Jet* are lying around, along with a Mahalia Jackson record, several simple doll-like porcelain figurines, and a TV set blaring a Christian channel on which two pastors rant about the occult meanings hidden in the cartoons *He-Man* and *Voltron*.

Hancock said his family took piety seriously, that it was like making sure the gas stove was off or the smoke detectors worked. "They talked about spiritual protection in a way that is very real — angels and demons," he explained.

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An invented mythology can become self-indulgent in less generous hands. Done well, however, it can direct us toward new and unconventional ways of thinking. Hancock combines a commitment to his mythology with technical skill and a dedication to inclusiveness — his characters and multimedia works communicate to a range of viewers. At the exhibition's opening, he spent most of the night beside one his large cut-out cartoon self-portraits, greeting everyone who passed by. Above his head, a cartoon bubble text offered a reminder. "It's up to each individual to make learning fun."

[Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass](#) continues at MASS MoCA (1040 MASS MoCA Way, North Adams, Massachusetts) through March 2020. The exhibition was curated by Denise Markonish.

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