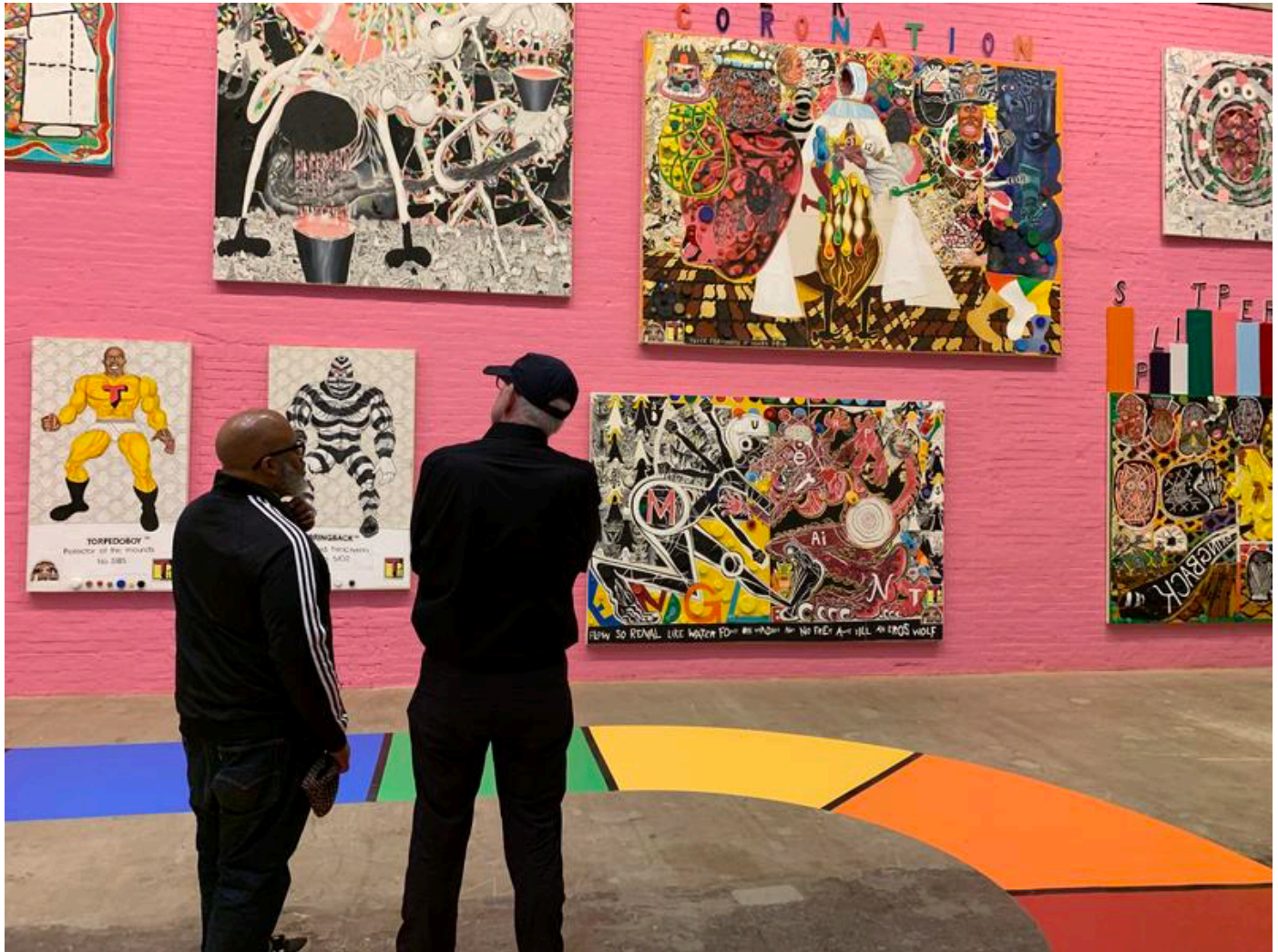


Trenton Doyle Hancock "Mind Of The Mound: Critical Mass" At MASS MoCA Through 11/3

By [Joe Donahue](#) • Oct 18, 2019



[View Slideshow 1 of 4](#)

It is the final two weeks to visit and inhabit artist [Trenton Doyle Hancock's](#) world of characters seen in drawings, paintings, and installations at [MASS MoCA](#) in North Adams, Massachusetts. Hancock has transformed his childhood love of comic books, toys, and superhero culture into his own

creation myth. That mythology and the multimedia iterations that it has sparked are on display in the exhibition "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass." The exhibition is curated at MASS MoCA by Denise Markonish.

Hancock tells the story of the Mounds protected by Torpedo Boy, and their enemies, the Vegans. These narratives explore good and evil, authority, race, moral relativism, and religion, all while creating a truly unique body of visual art.

Trenton Doyle Hancock grew up in Paris, Texas, to a family of evangelical Baptist ministers and missionaries. Supplementing his religious upbringing with comic books and Greek mythology, at the age of 10 he invented Torpedo Boy — an alter ego/superhero he still uses today.

Trenton Doyle Hancock: "He's a little bit of an antihero and he's quite flawed so he doesn't always show up on time and doesn't do the right thing but he's still a superhero so in some ways he's my critique on the idea of super heroism or something."

Joe Donahue: "Given the early years of how early you created him, how much is he an expression of you?"

TDH: "Well...he's been an expression of different aspects of me as I've grown with him so when I created him as a ten-year-old, my understanding of what a superhero was was quite limited. And it wasn't popular, even at the time, to have antiheroes. There weren't any antiheroes yet. Comic artists had to process Reagan era conservatism and translate it into the comics to create the dark version of Batman because by the time I created him it was still Adam West Batman and not this newer version. Now it's preferred you have this darker, brooding character or a character like Wolverine...had been invented but hadn't been developed and definitely wasn't publicly consumable. So now it's this idea of the rugged antihero that is the norm and if you have a goody two shoes hero, that's the alternative. When I created Torpedo Boy, I was still riding

off this idea that he was this giant boy scout and that is not who he actually ended up being."

As you enter MASS MoCA's building 5, you see Halloween House – a replica of Hancock's Grandmother's Home – complete with a demon-expelling cross, extending from the front door to ward off potential trick-or-treaters dressed in the costumes of Hancock's characters – the Bringback, Torpedoboy and Painter.

TDH: "You know, my folks thought Halloween was the devil's holiday and we couldn't go trick or treating and we weren't allowed to – y'know, this kind of ritual or rite of passage that a lot of...most kids kind of deal with boots on the ground and they experience it and then maybe they grow out of it. My brother and I really didn't have that opportunity. It was this kind of – we kind of passively viewed it from the outside. We didn't think it was a sacrilegious kind of an event we were very much excited by Halloween and horror films and everything that went with it. But my folks, they were viewing life through this filter of very conservative Christian values in the south. Everything was amped up just a bit. And I was a preacher's son as well, so, I was at church three times a week so this language was always being kind of pounded in to us and we were kind of taught to try to view the world at least through that lens. ... Which we sometimes did but most often times didn't because I'm a heathen [laughs] and I like worldly things. So with that said, I'm consuming all of this other media and a lot of it is being marketed to children in the mid-80s like through toys and I was the perfect guinea pig for "Masters of the Universe," "Thunder Cats," "GI Joe," and "Godzilla" and whatever else.

But there was this program that came on some of the Christian networks called "Deception of a Generation" and that is something that my mom and my grandmother saw and it just set them on fire in the sense that it was indicting. The programing was very propagandist in the sense that it indicted a

whole ... just pretty much every toy that was on the market. Barbie even...like, they found something unwholesome about every last toy that was in a toy store and talk about it on this show – and so my mother came home one day and was like ‘We gotta get all these toys out of the house because there’s demons in here now.’

So she grabbed up a box and started loading stuff in there and she marched it – actually, she made me march the box, at 10 or 11 years old, out to the burning barrel behind the house, praying the while time. I’d have to dump them in and she lit a match and that was it. I watched that black smoke from the plastic just kind of billow up and I pretty much inhaled all of it because I’m just looking over the barrel inside, you know, watching the action figures just shrivel into nothing.”

On the backside of Halloween House – just to the right of a television playing “Deception of a Generation,” a white box filled with the offending action figures stands by the front door with the words “Burn These” written in black Magic Marker on the cardboard. Through collecting, Hancock replaced the toys of his youth. In fact, the exhibition at MASS MoCA is the first time he has really brought his massive collection of the once-banned items of childhood – out into the open.

TDH: “I’ve always been a collector of things, especially toys, comics, and pretty much anything I can get my hands on that’s interesting and I’m a bit of a completist so if I see one thing, I want all of them. This show kind of expresses me dealing with that. I’ve always talked about it, in terms of my work, as a resource – but this is sort of one of the first times, if not THE first time, I’ve shown this much behind the scenes and now this stuff is in front of the camera and it’s not so much, like, hidden. It’s very much fused with the characters I’ve created at this point.”

One of those fusions – comes in the shape of a mound. There are three present in the MASS MoCA show. Mounds are peaceful creatures, and they help us see the world in a more colorful way. They clean the environment, leaching toxins from the earth with their deep root systems.

TDH: "The Mound is this, what I've been saying, is a receptacle for all human development and information. It's this ergonomic form that we're fitted right to – and therefore, that's why you see it in so many different cultures. It's weatherproof, it's an extension of the earth, it's an extension of us. But the way I'm using it is sort of a stand-in for the mechanism of memory and the fact that we hold and house information not only from our lifetimes but from all the lives before us and after us that's you know part of this eternal continuum."

In his creation myth, Hancock says all is good with the mounds until their enemies, the vegans – mutants who consume tofu and spill mound blood every chance they get – try to kill them.

TDH: "The Vegans became, at some point, my critique on my childhood with the Christianity – but I didn't want to say that so I kind of used these peace-loving animal-loving characters as the kind of goblins in my world. So I got to kind of make fun of them and distort them and do all kinds of things to them, you know, in the spirit of absurdity. But, you know, there was a kind of a real critique underneath it as well and a cathartic just kind of getting something out of my system. But the more I drew them, the more it wasn't so much about being angry at anything it was: I really love drawing these guys, they're a lot of fun to create and they're lots of fun shapes and they get into wacky situations in the underworld. So they became these kind of buffoonish kind of creatures that were just fun to make."

Upon entering the Museum Mound, you encounter shelves full of hundreds of toys from Hancock's collection – including the board game Operation, a

Superman action figure standing upon a Superman lunch box and a Superman sippy cup with a large Darth Vader figurine – all in front of bright pink walls.

When we visited the exhibition, in addition to all of the toys and memories, we were greeted by legendary Muppeteer Frank Oz – known for creating such iconic characters as Fozzie Bear, Grover, Cookie Monster, Yoda, Bert, Animal and Sam the Eagle. In the mound, there is a Miss Piggy Puppet, a Dark Crystal book and several Sesame Street toys. Hancock says Oz and Muppet creator Jim Henson, were huge influences on his art and its backstory...

TDH: "What Frank [Oz] and Jim Henson and that whole crew of amazing inventors and performers were doing – I got on board in the 70s. I'm a child of the 70s and 80s so I definitely was consuming so much of Bert and you got Grover and Yoda and, of course, all the amazing characters he came up with and all of the other great ones that Jim and the rest of the crew came up with. So, there was a kind of humor that was – it was kind of punk in a way, you know? A little bit anti-establishment and very meta.

It was like, you're going behind the scenes of 'The Muppet Show' and you're seeing all the hustle and bustle --" Frank Oz: "That was really important – that's a very good insight. If it's just a literal storyline, that's just not interesting. When they break out of it, and they know they're breaking out of it, and they know they're interrupting the story. It's much more interesting." TDH: "Yeah – it's incredible. I think about what Garry Shandling was doing sort of in the late 80s and up into the 90s it was really a thing. You know, I think it was the way to market to a new generation: you gotta show the nuts and bolts and the behind the scenes stuff. But I think 'The Muppet Show,' perhaps under the radar, was able to kind of deconstruct what happens with media, with entertainment, and be entertaining and disarming in a way that people didn't know that they were getting this kind of deconstructed, very intellectual sort of a thing. It was like, well, I think a lot of people [thought] 'Oh, it's kids' stuff. It's puppets.—'"

FO: "Yeah we never, we never thought of kids for a second. On 'Sesame Street' or here on 'The Muppet Show.' 'Sesame Street' was – we had to think of the curriculum. Like we were selling 'W.' Other than that? And 'The Muppet Show' – never thought of the kids, just enjoyed ourselves."

JD: "When it comes to that deconstructing and even the meta part you were talking about, how conscious and how much discussion went in at the beginning of the show to say 'We're going to go behind the scenes so we have that latitude?'"

FO: "Well we all had to – and Jim led us and we were creating a show. The Muppets are contrarian, The Muppets are rebellious, The Muppets are anarchic – or controlled anarchy. If we had just done a regular show, there's no anarchy in that. So we just happen to have an opportunity and I think Jim created the show for the spirit of The Muppets which has that anarchy."

As you leave the Museum Mound – on the right hand side – there is a 1975 Sesame Street LP entitled: "The Sesame Street Monsters." Grover is right in the middle of the album cover. Hancock says Monsters were always a part of his life, his collection and his art...

TDH: "I've always been born to the grotesqueries of life – much to the dismay of my mom who's like 'I wished you wouldn't be so interested in guts and sharp teeth and scary things' but – it's all I care about. Even on some level where, I've always been interested in the myth of the werewolf. The idea that perhaps our animal side is always latent within us and it comes out in ways that we can't control. So, this kind of living with the potential of becoming 'The Beast' or something beast-like and being, kind of, in awe of your own body and how strange it is be encased in this meat. That comes out in my work and in some ways it is definitely what the work is about. Monsters and things, I've always loved them and I love them as much now as I did when I was a little kid."

JD: "I guess I never thought of Grover as a monster but – I guess that's what he was."

FO: "Well, yeah. As you hear me talk you'll realize I'm not as smart and intellectual as [Hancock]. I had essentially --"

TDH: "Whatever."

FO: "The monsters were a whole different thing from Jim – again, from Jim. Because he essentially – everything he did, it wasn't just entertainment. He wanted to change the world. And so, it's just another example of Jim saying 'Hey, we can all get along. Even monsters, they're not really scary. They have the same feelings as we do.' It was almost like a tool to show that we're universally the same. Regardless of monsters or white, or black, or whatever it is. That's what happened in 'The Muppet Show,' too."

JD: "We saw that especially – I mean, the real time where it went out beyond was 'The Dark Crystal' and through that project --"

FO: "Jim, with 'Dark Crystal,' Jim wanted to – it was a little different. Jim always felt – there's a lot of people who felt you can't scare kids, by the way, I was one of the kids who would run like hell from the fun house, that laughing lady scared the hell out of me. But, Jim felt differently. Jim felt that it was cathartic for kids to be scared. What he wanted to do was create a land of Grimms' Fairy Tales – the real down and dirty Grimms' Fairy Tales – the really scary sh*t. That's the impetus behind 'The Dark Crystal.'"

As you walk along a colorful board game-like path, it is as if you need to roll the dice before moving forward. Absent that – you continue and pass the "Underworld," Trenton's Toy Isle (spelled without the "a,") the color crop experience and then – Undom Endgle – a statue of the most powerful being in the Moundverse – a 3-4 foot black and white striped goddess with orbiting

rings carrying colorful orbs in various sizes. The backdrop is a wall of dolls from the 1990s.

TDH: "'Undom Endgle' is an anagram of 'Mound Legend.' So, her name bespeaks who she once was, in a way. She was the soul of a Mound. Normally the souls of Mounds look like these little white girls, these toddlers that are on the walls – and so when a Mound dies its soul goes up to what is called the Everyday Care Centers where they play for an eternity and they stay little toddlers forever. But for some reason, when Undom Endgle went up, she transformed from that to a little black girl. Not only did she transform color but she transformed in size, she became older.

When Lloyd, who was the overseer of the Everyday Care Center, saw this, he was like 'Oh, well since you're old enough, you can take care of all the other souls, and basically be their nanny and I'm going to go off to the Earth realm because I have business to take care of.' So, she was left there with the rest of the souls to be their guardian."

Hancock leaves no surface of the cavernous space untouched. You find paintings in which he explores self-portraits as a toy-maker, alongside others in which his characters run completely amok. If you believe the description on the wall, this whole world is created as a result of masturbation – you see – about 50,000 years ago, an ape man named Homerbuctas masturbated in a field of prehistoric flowers giving birth to "The" Legend.

TDH: "I've often been very aware of the masturbatory aspects of art and I've always been told to steer clear away from that. You know, not in terms of touching yourselves but in terms of being a little bit too involved on a subjective level. And then I jump in and go: there's a whole lot of stuff that I can't talk about – I'll bring up Mike Kelly for instance. He was a great punk artist from the 70s and then on up into the 90s he became a god. In some ways

there was a slacker aesthetic to what he was able to do. They were a way for me to find a familial language into the door, into the art world. Because, what I was doing was directly in some ways attached and a response to this generation of artists that were just before me.

It was like, ok, we understand this language but what I – and quite consciously – just in school and just out of grad school was like, well, I want to tweak the utility of this and change the perspective of it, just a bit, to incorporate somebody that looks like me, ya know? A black kid from the rural south and I was like, what does that mean and how do I get that language into the work in a way that is meaningful and robust and long-lasting and also attached to a great history."

Trenton Doyle Hancock's "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass" will be on display at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts through November 3rd. A coffee table book by Hancock and curator Denise Markonish catalogs the show and includes essays and interviews with influences – including Frank Oz is published by Prestel.