

Trenton Doyle Hancock Designs Dolls for a New Era

An exhibition of historic and futuristic dolls that points to the power of creating new mythologies.

by [Olivia Jia](#) June 25, 2018





Installation view of *Moundverse Infants* by Trenton Doyle Hancock (all images courtesy Temple Contemporary).

PHILADELPHIA — In the absence of robust modern American mythologies beyond *The Avengers* or the founding fathers, Trenton Doyle Hancock is devoted to creating his own. His myths are made of sprawling narratives and universal ideas of good and evil. Influenced by visual sources ranging from comic books to Bosch, but without direct references, Hancock's pantheon is both familiar and strange. His work commits wholeheartedly to the power of imagination unencumbered by irony. He rarely gives us these narratives in a consumable package; his collages and paintings are not illustrations, but artifacts of that imagined culture — a history painting, a cult statue — and in [Moundverse Infants](#) at the [Temple Contemporary](#), a mass-produced doll.

Here, Hancock's work is increasingly self-referential. Shelves and vitrines are full of dolls and drawings of his characters, and there's a life-size sculpture of Udom Endgle, a central goddess in his mythos. The exhibition is named for the artist's custom-designed line of dolls, arranged to mimic a toy store display. Together, these "infant" incarnations of Torpedo Boy, Udom Endgle, Bring Back, and Soul riff on tropes of toy design. Large logos and candy colored packaging proclaim the agency of the child at play: "While inside the

Mind of the Mound, anything is possible! It's up to you to plan new adventures to add to the ever evolving story of the Moundverse Infants." The installation asks the viewer to consider the myriad ways dolls can formulate self-image; they are proxies for our bodies, vehicles for the imagination.



Hancock's dolls are all made of a gray plastic. Several are painted as examples of what is possible, but as they are, the packages feel like something out of science fiction. I am reminded of the brief moment in *Metropolis* (1927) before the film's iconic "Machine-Man" takes on the skin of his love interest, the human Maria. Briefly, the robot is an anonymous form that holds within itself infinite identities, moldable to the desires of the puppeteer. Hancock's dolls exist in a similar, indefinite space of becoming. Their bodies, variations on a generic mold, can represent anyone with a quick application of paint. What a world it would be, if all painting had such egalitarian ends.

Moundverse Infants is an explicit, political departure for the artist, whose past work is so often held together by deeply private logic. The exhibition includes a segregated display of 144 dolls from both Hancock's personal collection and the [Philadelphia Doll Museum](#) — the only known institution to preserve black dolls as crucial historical artifacts. On a screen, viewers can scroll through the various dolls to read about their histories. The arrangement references the [Mamie and Kenneth Clark "Doll Test"](#) of the 1940's, in which researchers presented children with two dolls, identical except for skin color. By asking questions of value (i.e. "which is the smarter doll?"), they were able to

quantify the psychological effects of racial bias and segregation on black children.

By showing historical dolls alongside his characters, Hancock reminds us that beliefs are incubated during early childhood through visual and tactile means. Just as the historical dolls give the *Moundverse Infants* context, the reverse is true; after thinking about the invented Undom Endgle and Bring Back as fiction, I was shocked by the many absurd names of "real" dolls like Ideal Giggles and Galoob Punky Brewster. Hancock smartly reminds me that common objects are not normal, only normalized. Racist beliefs, too, are culturally-specific mythologies — made of intangible stuff, but enforced through real violence. While I perpetually struggle to view American culture with the objectivity of distance I don't have, this exhibition has given me the

opportunity to view my own childhood experiences anthropologically.

In an America that hasn't [solved the problem](#) of representation for people of color by a long shot, *Moundverse Infants* advocates for a DIY approach. Central to Hancock's work is the idea that individuals have the power to craft their own cultural context, especially when mass culture responds insufficiently. His work has never been about proselytizing. Rather, he encourages changing culture through individual action. If we want better myths, we ought to make them.

[Moundverse Infants](#) is on view at the [Temple Contemporary](#) (2001 N 13th St, Philadelphia) through July 27.

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