

ARTFORUM

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TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK TALKS ABOUT "MIND OF THE MOUND: CRITICAL MASS"



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Mound # 1, The Color Crop Experience*, 2019, metal, custom rug, fiberglass. Installation view, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA. Photo: Kaelan Burkett.

TO GET ACQUAINTED with Trenton Doyle Hancock's work—or, better yet, his world—is to become versant in an origin story that the artist first conceived of when he was in the fourth grade. As a precocious ten-year-old, Hancock drew *Me Turning into Torpedoboy*, 1984, a prescient sketch of his morally indifferent alter ego/superhero. But what crisis would precipitate his superhero's journey? What crimes would he avenge? Growing up in an evangelical Baptist church, Hancock had assimilated sermons on Black-liberation theology that spoke of a spiritual war in which Manichaean precepts on race dictated the terms of a soul's oppression. With this battle on the horizon, the artist decided his groundbreaking archetype would wage war against anti-Black injustices.

Almost a decade later, Hancock expanded his cosmology, fabulating Torpedoboy to be the protector of the Mounds, hybrid human-plant mutants fathered by an ape-man who had ejaculated into a field of flowers. The Mounds populate the Moundverse, although the threat of premature death hangs over them because of a hate-mongering horde known as the Vegans, whose mission is to eat the Mounds' flesh. Save for occasional pinkish wounds that reveal their Moundmeat, the mild-mannered creatures are covered in black-and-white fur stripes—a far cry from the bone-white Vegans. Hancock not only conceives of a racial hierarchy in the Moundverse but imbues the Vegans' villainy with a myopic universalism: They cannot see color, which prevents them from seeing the violence—i.e., the lacerations—inflicted on their nemeses. Their disregard for the Mounds' existence signals that, here, race is constitutive of premature death. Hancock's storytelling traffics in subjects ranging from queer ecology to implicit bias, drawing on “afro-fabulation,” which scholar and critic Tavia Nyong'o defines in his book *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018) as a deconstructive strategy that addresses anti-Black racism by reworking hegemonic histories into performative new myths.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *The She Wolf Amongst Them Fed Udom's Conundrum*, 2016, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72 × 108".

Hancock has drawn comparisons to Philip Guston, Robert Crumb, and Henry Darger for obvious reasons, not least of which is his negotiation of racial and sexual violence through the language of comics. Yet if we consider Hancock's entire career, including his current exhibition, "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass," at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, what also emerges is his proclivity toward liveness, the animating of his paintings, comic books, and sculptures through carnivalesque installations in which collaborative performances, moving images, and animatronic figures come together. In *Mound Museum*, 2019, now on view at MASS MoCA, Hancock unveils part of his enormous toy collection in a nod to Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, 1965–77, though it also echoes the

more recent *Ccornuoorphanosscopiaee Aanorphansshhornoffplentyyy*, 2018, an installation of eighteen thousand stuffed toys by one-time Minimalist Charlemagne Palestine.

But Black-liberation theology behooves us to also situate Hancock's Mounds alongside the art of James Hampton and his mixed-media behemoth *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, 1950–64, as well as Reverend H. D. Dennis's Margaret's Grocery, a folk-art sanctuary he began in 1979 for his wife, Margaret Rogers Dennis. The reverend often preached from Margaret's Grocery, his practice leading many to view the environment as a theological theme park. In many respects, we might think of Hancock's sprawling environments at MASS MoCA in a similar vein, since he has invited musicians, singers, dancers, and preachers to come and create inside his complex Moundverse. Such congregations seem to prove that Hancock's art is in fact spiritual work, if of the political and aesthetic kind.

—Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Once a man twice a child: busy box*, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 72 × 108".

I WAS RAISED TO BELIEVE that spiritual war was a reality; my parents identified themselves as “prayer warriors.” For Black folks, Christianity developed as a way to find freedom and justice. If those two things aren’t available here on earth, then they must be a possibility on the other side of this life, right? Christianity offered a model for that. When Black people talk about Christianity, it’s most often a way to define Blackness. When white people talk about Christianity, it’s generally a way to define Americanness.



View of "Trenton Doyle Hancock: Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass," 2019, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA.
Background: *Halloween House*, 2019. Foreground: *Moundverse Halloween Costumes*, 2017. Photo: Kaelan Burkett.

I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church. I was a drummer, a vocalist, and a junior deacon. When I was behind the drum set, everything else melted away. I was one with the beat. As a geeky Black kid who sometimes got made fun of for thinking too white, I felt blacker when I made people move in church. Even so, the strict confines of Christianity angered me as I began to explore my own identity and craft a personal worldview. Now, I'm able to look back with a kind of objectivity and see some beauty in having been raised that way.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *When They Found Me I Wasn't There, Version #2*, 2016, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72 × 72".

George Clinton is like a god to me. When I was in graduate school at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, aside from being a student of the academy, I also had my “alternative” education, which consisted of the music I played in my studio—and a lot of it was by Parliament-Funkadelic. I really listened to what Clinton was doing and saying. The familiarity of his vernacular struck me; it seemed to me that his ideas were coming from the Black church. He spoke about funk as we used to speak of the Holy Spirit, which the church pounds into you with the beat of a drum, like a heartbeat. His music sounded exactly like church music to me, except it was more about our relationship to earth and an

acknowledgment of the body's rhythms. Clinton also expressed the Afrofuturist desire to locate and define the parameters of uncharted dimensions, since the one we're in now isn't quite working out. I understood that he was world-building, creating a safe space for ideas and growth. As a young Black student of the arts, this was all very freeing. From the Holy Spirit to the funk to the Mounds, I'm heavily indebted to Clinton and Sun Ra and similar thinkers. Joseph Campbell was a doorway to my understanding that universal stories are not just passed down orally or inscribed on some stone or wall somewhere but are also told in films, comics, music, fashion.

When I was a teenager, painting didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. I sometimes painted, but I didn't understand that it was a lifestyle. But I knew that being a comic-book artist was a lifestyle, and that's what I was grooming myself to be. The marriage of words and images was natural for me. Once I became more entrenched in the academy, I merged my ambitions to be a narrative comic-book artist with my ambitions as a painter. In a way, that's what my practice has been about from the beginning: taking "low" forms of making, which I never believed were low, and proving that they are equal to, and oftentimes greater than, the value of, say, a work of "high" art.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Trenton Doyle Hancock Presents the Moundverse*, 2018, vinyl banner enlargements of

graphic-novel pages. Installation view, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA. Photo: Kaelan Burkett.

I have also used sculpture, performance, and, more recently, animation and film to design my own cosmology, my own version of Jesus and the saints. I created the Mounds and Torpedoboy, who's a savior of sorts, and a variety of other gods and goddesses. The rambunctious demons that I call Vegans developed from my anger at Christianity. I met preachy vegans in graduate school, and in the spirit of absurdity, I used them as stand-ins for extremists—people for whom an ideology goes too far. On a visual level, the Vegans are fun to draw and paint. I've always loved medieval paintings of hell, so the Vegans gave me an excuse to develop a bumpy, bony, Bosch-like landscape. The Vegans hate the Mounds, who are my central characters. They work in opposition to the sedentary and contented nature of the Mounds, and therefore seek to destroy them and, when possible, exploit their riches, converting useless Moundmeat into usable tofu. The character Torpedoboy is a spirit that was sent to earth to protect the Mounds from Vegan attacks. Even though these stories start as simple parables of good and evil, they usually devolve into a confused space where seemingly good characters become corrupt and bad ones find redemption.



Toy collection in process for Trenton Doyle Hancock's "Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass," MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, 2019. Photo: Kaelan Burkett.

I collect toys, which are an express train to another time in my life. My toy collecting kicked into high gear when I was in graduate school. I would go to flea markets around Philadelphia every weekend. I would see objects for sale and think, *I remember that, but what is it? When was it made? Why is it so beautiful to me?* I would have so many questions about these action figures and little plastic whatnots. I became obsessed with the mechanisms of memories, and I used them as subject matter for my paintings. The toys affected my color palette and my use of plastic and felt. I was translating toy collecting—essentially the harvesting of memories—into line, weight, and shapes. That's when I really started to form, on a foundational level, the

material and visual lexicon that is now the Moundverse. Twenty years of deepening that process of hunting and gathering and studying have turned me into quite the toy scholar. Toys are important talismans. People come into my studio, curators especially, ready to talk high-minded curator talk or whatever. When they see the vast variety of toys I have, they drop their guard and turn into little kids—and that amazes me. I love letting people into my world, creating a space for reversion and purity.

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