

## Trenton Doyle Hancock: Full Immersion

By Nancy Princenthal

*Wallpaper; paintings, murals, drawings and hand-lettered wall texts all enter into the mix of this Texas artist's exuberantly satiric gallery environments—shown recently in New York and now on view at MOCA in North Miami*



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *For a Floor of Flora*, 2003, Installation View

Behold a welter of words woven into imagery dense as kudzu. Enter into a personal mythology of mind-frying elaboration, featuring chain-gang-striped “mound people” with grotesque, creepy-cartoon heads. Drawings compete with wallpaper, paintings bloom with fake flowers and plush. There is a distinct preoccupation with masturbation. In short, the impression created by “For a Floor of Flora,” Trenton Doyle Hancock’s second solo exhibition in New York, was of an immensely talented, rather lonely adolescent with a lot of time on his hands. But half a beat before a viewer’s furious attention gave way to nervous laughter, it was tripped up by a turn of phrase, or of line, so smart, deft and funny that all assumptions pale.

Now a resident of Houston, Hancock was brought up in Paris, Tex. (a town Wim Wenders believe so irresistibly dark-side-American that he named a movie after it). In 2000, when he was 25, Hancock was one of the youngest artists ever to be included in a Whitney Biennial; his paintings were in the next Biennial there too, and also in the Studio Museum in Harlem’s 2001 “Freestyle” exhibition [see A.i.A, Sept.’01]. But his work still seems powerfully out of place. Not that he is altogether sui generis; Lynn Herbert, who organized a 2001 exhibition of his work at Houston’s Contemporary Arts Museum, compares him, credibly, with William Blake; the fire-and-brimstone rhythms and references in Hancock’s work may also be attributed in part to his stepfather, a minister. Other influences include the lately ubiquitous Philip Guston and closer to home, the cartoonist Gary Panter, like Hancock’s graduate of Texas A&M University. By his recklessness with racial stereotypes (such as the super-sexed ape-man protagonist of his current work), Hancock, who is African-American, links himself with (among others) Ellen Gallagher and Gary Simmons. Viewing an

especially dense and tidy black-and-white drawing at James Cohan Gallery, where striped mound people swarm like ants at a picnic, it was very hard to avoid a comparison to Martin Handford's microscopically detailed where's Waldo Illustrations, with their legions of tiny men in striped shirts.

Still, Hancock's work is vigorously independent. As a kind of preamble to the three-chambered "For a Floor of Flora" he filled the small window-facing front room at Cohan with a longish text painted on the wall, wrapping it around failry slapdash wall-painted renderings of the featured characters. Here we were introduced to Homerbuctas, paterfamilias to "an average prehistoric ape family", but fatally alienated from them by "a knack for turning impulsions into compulsion". The story unfolded in the larger main room with Homerbuctas overtaken by the sight of verdant field and compelled to spill his seed. Lo, hundreds of baby mound men sprout from this spectacular act of onanism. The story ends with Homerbuctas' unhappy wife condemning his infidelity. Below the text, a big unstretched painting repeated the phrase "we love you" in a nearly infinite profusion of flower-powery white-on-black letters, the words weaving in and out of multitudinous rippling, colling, springing, blooming details. Alone on an adjacent wall was a kind of pictorial key to the tale, in the form of a meticulous two-part pencil drawing of its deeply ambivalent protagonist. On one side, half of Homerbuctas embraces his sloe-eyed ape wife and their two children. On the other, he is assailed by the Technicolor charms of rampant flowers, which he regards with wide-eyed, grinning alarm. A very big erect penis just makes it into the lower margin of the image.

Two walls in the main room were covered with Hancock's flowered wallpaper, which seemed perfectly polite until you noticed a scattering of bloodshot eyes and reaching hands. Hung on top of it were more than 30 small framed drawings, each featuring a single mound person, no two of them alike. Also hung on the wallpaper was an unframed painting dense with collaged bits of black-and-white plush and fake flowers. Shown in the gallery's third room was another big, unstretched canvas so thick with imagery and words it's nearly blinding. Called Bye and Bye, it features a widely various kingdom of animals – denizens include an armadillo, an octopus, an elephant and a bear, but also bugs, butterflies, field mice and bunnies – each so deeply tangled in the branches of a dense forest that many were at first hard to make out. The extra effort also reveals that while the painting is mainly black and white, the animals' eyes are all a manic red. As close to time-based art as painting gets, these big works are Hancock's most appealing, though they are given close competition by a suite of etchings, published by Flatbed Press in Houston, that was also on view.

Hancock's self-invented epic, with sources that span serial super-hero comics and the Bible, also ties him to artists as various as Matthew Barney and Matthew Ritchie, Oyvind Fahlstrom and Paul Noble. Mixing metaphors of Creation, procreation and mere creativity, Hancock's easily learned idiolect indulges an appetite for insider knowledge, with its comforting promise of instant power, and also the related pleasures of insider jokes. Above all, his work elicits absorption. "Reception in a state of distraction," the condition that has predominated in the art world since the razzle-dazzle 1980s (and that Walter Benjamin associated with the early responses to film) may not answer to current cultural needs. Full immersion, to the eyeballs and beyond, seems better suited to a more – how to put it? – unsettled time. Hancock, who in earlier installments of his narrative saw to it that dissipated vegans were vanquished by righteous carnivores (here it helps to be familiar with Texas cuisine), seems to understand why we might now reject a spa menu in favor of a full plate of meat-and-potatoes poetic-paranoid abundance. Without question, he knows how to satisfy that hunger.