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The Fantastic Voyage

By Sue Wilson

Born in 1974, the son of a Baptist minister, Trenton Doyle Hancock grew up in Paris, Texas, where his interests in comics and video games led to studies in illustration, drawing and painting. He went on to combine these elements into his singular artistic practice, on display here in his first European solo exhibition.

Hancock's work centres on the ongoing saga of the Mounds and the Vegans. The former are benign, peace-loving creatures, half-plant, half-animal, who live above ground in flower meadows, while the latter are subterranean part-human mutants who have lost the ability to see in colour over generations of inbreeding.

The Fruitmarket show combines narrative text, inscribed directly on to the gallery walls, with paintings, drawings, and etchings, recounting a particular chapter in Mound/Vegan history involving a dissident Vegan priest, St Sesom. While officially dedicated to the paternal Vegan deity Loid, who rules the realm of text and categorisation, Sesom (Moses reversed) is visited in a dream by the maternal spirit Painter, who charges him with reintroducing colour to Vegan life and establishing peace with the Mounds.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Miracle Machine #7*, 2005, ink and acrylic on paper, 10 X 9 inches

Hancock's text, writ large across the Fruitmarket's walls, without regard for corners and doorways, is a playful, clever, provocative delight, beginning with the immortal words: 'Vegans weren't always the little pricks we know them as today.'

While lively storytelling pulls the viewer swiftly into Hancock's imaginary world, his interweaving of colloquial and mythic idioms with Biblical language and allusions reveals the narrative's multi-level import. Knowing that Hancock is African-American, for instance, imbues his whole play on colour with fresh layers of significance, while the rise and fall of Sesom's 'Cult of Color' is a telling commentary on the dynamics of fundamentalism.

Whether the elaborate, intricately worked paintings and drawings, often incorporating elements of collage, add to your enjoyment will largely depend on your taste for sci-fi/fantasy-style comic illustration, of which these works are most immediately reminiscent, with distinct echoes too of Robert Crumb. Anyone less than enamoured or au fait with this genre may find these epic, imaginative works more than a little impenetrable.