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ARTnews

Trenton Doyle Hancock, the youngest artist in the Whitney Biennial, likes to play with food

By Edith Newhall

Trenton Doyle Hancock's studio looks as if a tornado has passed through it. Outside the door, a large plastic doll's leg and torso protrude from a trashcan. Inside, messy piles of felt, paper and other odds and ends rise from the floor like unlit bonfires. Hancock himself is quiet and polite – and clearly capable of orderliness. When asked about his drawings, the stocky, round-faced artist produces a tidy folder. It contains a delicate graphite image of a monster devouring a “salad” of vegans – vegetarians who don't eat dairy products. Another, rougher image depicts a bowl of chili, pork chops, meat loaf, and a hamburger, all with legs.

Meat is a recent theme for the Texas native, currently a second year graduate student in painting at the Tyler School of Art in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. It is a symbol of home, but also a playful swipe at political correctness. “When I moved here, I met a lot of people who didn't eat meat, so my feelings for it became internalized,” he says with a mischievous grin. “Now they're resurfacing in a pro-meat campaign.”

Locating any one of his paintings in the studio takes some time. After scrutinizing two piles, Hancock reaches into one and drags out a large piece of irregularly cut orange felt covered with paint and found materials. He casually tacks it to a wall so that one side dangles awkwardly. This is not necessarily how he would exhibit the piece, though, “I'd probably make it tauter,” he says nonchalantly.

It's been a good year for Hancock. Not only does he occupy two studio spaces – another student dropped out, and Hancock got the extra room – but he is also exhibiting his drawings in the current Whitney Biennial up through the fourth of June. At 25, Hancock is the youngest artist in the show's history. His first solo show was at Dallas's Gerald Peters Gallery in 1998, and this July, he will have another solo exhibition at Dunn and Brown Contemporary, a new gallery, also in Dallas. Hancock's work takes its cues from such diverse sources as illustrator Gary Panter, folk-artist Bill Traylor, and installation artist David Hammons. It includes surreal figurative drawings that recall Salvador Dali, paintings of lumpy squeezed-pigment shapes, and collages on bright felt that “fit in your hand or fill up a room,” he says.

If there were artists in Texas when Hancock was growing up, he didn't know them. He began drawing at an early age, but the main influence at home was music – the gospel music played by his mother, a fifth-grade teacher who also gave piano lessons, and the pop songs of Cyndi Lauper and Michael Jackson. As an undergraduate at East Texas State University, Hancock studied drawing under Lee Baxter Davis, a leader of the cartoon-illustration movement. His painting teacher, Texas artist Michael Miller, “helped me think about subject matter literally and abstractly and everything in between,” Hancock says. At that time, he familiarized himself with the work of graduates Panter and Georganne Deen, a painter, and eventually decided, after feeling torn between illustration and painting that he could do both.

During college, Hancock became involved in performance as well. For his thesis, he built a large, lump-like structure by draping felt, bed sheets, and fake fur over a chicken-wire armature. (The lump is also a recurring image in his drawings.) He put a chair inside and climbed in, so that his head stuck out of the top, and then dozed off. “I looked like a giant sleeping creature,” he says. Since then, Hancock has avoided establishing a signature style. “I do feel that I'm developing a body of work,” he allows, “but I try not to focus on what kind is my own. Once I start thinking about making art on those terms, I'm limiting myself.”