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The writing's on the wall. Just don't ask what it's saying

By Jack Mottram

The work of the American artist Trenton Doyle Hancock is underpinned by a vast and complex mythology which is Homeric in scope and biblical in tone. The Mounds are good. The Vegans, deformed through inbreeding, are evil.



MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR: Trenton Doyle Hancock with two of his works from *The Wayward Thinker* exhibition, a complex but highly rewarding multi-layered display

Except for St Sesom, that is. This visionary mystic, inspired by dreams in technicolour, and his followers - a gang that includes the conjoined twins Baby Curt and Shy Jerry, Bow-Headed Lou and Betto Watchhow - have long been waging a campaign to convert their fellow Vegans into loving the Mounds. This is instead of murdering them, and eating the pink moundmeat that oozes from them raw, instead of converting it into tofu, as is their current practice. This change in diet will, St Sesom says, allow the Vegans to find "spectral happiness", correcting a mutation in their make-up that makes them see in black and white.

But - wait! - all is not well in Sesom's camp. His merry band are riven with factional infighting, caused in part by the saint's inflated ego, and a terrorist group, Black Brain, are causing trouble. It is also worth noting that, at some point in the distant past, the Mounds came into being when an ape-man, Homerbactus, ejaculated into a field of flowers. The Vegans are descendants of Homerbactus too, the fruits of an incestuous relationship between Brouthescam and Cromalya, his children.

At least, I think that's what's going on. Hancock's tales are spun out in text daubed on the walls of the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, as well as in paintings, drawings and sculpture. The narrative flows between the different media, and the canonical version of the story is impossible to glean without being fully immersed inside the installation.

"The narrative exists as a grid," Hancock explains. "I had been creating characters for several years, making portraits of them - really self-portraits of different aspects of myself - and I had no real intention of turning it into a mythology. But after graduate school, I was looking for a voice.

I had made all these characters that existed on their own and I needed a way to tie them all together, so I invented the narrative to develop a dialogue between these paintings, the characters and modes of operation including performance, sculpture, painting and drawing."

This last point is key. For, though the tales of St Sesom and co may appear to be a wee bit silly, they are the glue that binds together a sophisticated, densely layered practice. At its heart is an alchemical mingling of languages, textual and visual. Hancock's writing does not describe his images, nor do his images illustrate his texts - instead there is a fluid interplay between the two.

"It goes in both directions," he says, "with everything meeting up in the middle somewhere. I never know when I'm going to have to amend the story to fit something in from a painting, or whether there's going to be some sort of organic offshoot that is out of my directorial control. Sometimes I just have to follow."

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This admixture of the linguistic and visual is matched by a jackdaw approach to influences. A typical Hancock painting, if there is such a thing, draws on comic and fantasy art, borrows from surrealism, cubism, modernism - pretty much every "ism" you can think of, in fact - and matches scatological humour with high theory. "I'm definitely very conscious of the filter", Hancock says, "of how I bring in low art or comics when I'm constantly thinking about the history of painting. I try make sense of it all, to make it all coexist."

Looking at Hancock's installation, which fills both floors of the Fruitmarket to bursting point, it does not make sense according to the usual meaning of "painting". The heavily worked canvases clash obsessive, meticulous detailing against broad brush strokes and clumsily applied felt and bottle tops, depicting tangles of bony arms, or hideous great globs peppered with gaping orifices, all shot through with queasy Pepto-Bismol pink, the colour of moundmeat.

The allusions are dizzying, too: here Dali struggles against Robert Crumb, there a patch of cubist abstraction snuggles up against a childlike doodle.

But hidden in this all-engulfing flood of images and ideas are hints of order. Hands point and pinch, fists are raised and daggers are clasped, suggesting an underlying code. Words and phrases are repeated in the text scrawled across the gallery walls, swimming into sharp focus. Works play off each other, with shapes recurring and shifting across the paintings and drawings, underscoring the surface narrative with a sort of formally expressed unconscious.

Slowly but surely, it is possible to enter Hancock's world, to find darker subtleties in his apparently obvious allegory of tolerance and to unearth the deep links between text and image.

So, is Hancock worried that his first solo show in Europe might overwhelm his audience? "Well," he says, deadpan, "they will have to make several trips."

