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Son of a preacher man

By Susan Mansfield



THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL AT Edinburgh's Fruitmarket gallery. There are also paintings, drawings and some works in three dimensions which are much harder to classify. The vibrant, madcap imagination of Trenton Doyle Hancock has possessed the gallery in a way that could hardly be more different from the quiet, considered presence of the last incumbent, Christine Borland.

This is the first show in Europe for Hancock, 32, an African American based in Houston. At 25, he became the youngest artist ever to be invited to take part in the prestigious Whitney Biennial in New York, and became well known in the US when he featured in a PBS television series called Art in the 21st Century. His distinctive style emerged nearly ten years ago, a personal epic mythology which owes something to comic books, toy designs and the cinema, and something to Christianity (he is the son of a Baptist minister). In his work, stories evolve into complete environments, tied together by a written narrative which loops and leaps around the paintings.

Hancock: 'To me it's exciting to paint war.'
Picture: Jon Savage

The Hancock world - which has been compared to that of Hieronymous Bosch and William Blake - revolves around the

Mounds, peaceful black-and-white furry creatures anchored to the earth and oozing pink mound-meat; and their enemies the Vegans, skinny humanoid goblins who persecute the Mounds and turn mound-meat into tofu. Both spring from the same prehistoric progenitor, Homerbuctas, but are locked in a cosmic struggle. The allegory has been variously interpreted as intellect against intuition, nature against nurture, the human race against the planet, black against white.

"I think at first I fooled myself into thinking that it was about race," says Hancock. "There was a bit of exoticism happening, because I was black in a predominantly white art world. People saw that first, that was the thing that was always mentioned in the press. I would take racial stereotypes and treat them like a cartoonist, make fun of them, make them my own. But the conversation about race is so confined, I decided to leave these things by the wayside and focus on storytelling. The icons I use now are more universal. The Mounds represent to me a kind of stability, being at peace, growing, acceptance. The Vegans are the complete opposite. They are about pushing out everything that's good from themselves because they don't trust it. In essence they get smaller and smaller as beings, become this pale imitation of humanity, like skeletons."

Clearly, militant vegetarians are one of the targets. "The ideology of veganism preaches humanity, but some of the vegans I've encountered take it to such an extreme that it becomes preachy, dogmatic, hard to hear. I think I wanted to take this and make it the most absurd thing it could possibly be, little monsters running around eating tofu."

Hancock says he's "not the most politically minded of artists", preferring to observe trends which have recurred throughout history: clashes of ideology, failures of government, "wayward thinkers" seeking to make changes. "I invent these armies of characters who try to live together, but there is going to be some kind of rift. To me it's exciting to paint war."

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Hancock grew up a son of the church in Paris, Texas, and says Christian mythology, the conflict between good and evil, plays a key part in the world he has created. "There are a lot of ministers in my family and the women are even more intense about spirituality than the men. I hung out with my aunts and my mother, they were a big influence on me. Often I don't have a biblical story in mind and then I realise I've just re-written the story of Noah or something." The work at the Fruitmarket was created over two years, and tells of St Sesom ("Moses" backwards), a Vegan drawn to make friends with the Mounds, to lead his people to a kind of redemption.

Hancock has sketched and doodled constantly all his life. At college, faced with the potential difficulty of making a living as an artist, he studied cartooning and illustration. "Little did I know I was taking roads which would eventually cross and become this hybrid thing. I started to look for a way to combine cartooning with painting, performing and these other things in an art discipline."

He says he is increasingly drawn to watching stand-up comedy, and considers his role in the art world as something of a court jester. "If you can get people laughing, there's something cleansing about that. The best comedy is the most intelligent criticism you can have."