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Weak become heroes: Trenton Doyle Hancock

By Francesca Gavin

The Oklahoma-born abstract expressionist, collage novelist and sometime superhero is discovering and exploring new worlds on the borders of fine art and comic books.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Vegan Arms Part 2*, 2006, Mixed media on paper, 10 x 6 ¼ inches

The epic story behind Trenton Doyle Hancock's art is so long and complicated that it could easily fill a book. Which is exactly what he did this year with *Me a Mound*, a giant storybook-cum-monograph for the cult publishing house Picturebox Inc. Hancock's giant pop paintings, drawings, installations and multimedia chaos flows around his stories of half-animal and half-vegetable creatures called Mounds, an evil vegan turned good priest names St Sesom and Hancock's superhero alter ego Torpedoboy. Hancock's paintings of these Garbage Pail Kid-like characters resemble a young psychedelic Philip Guston. The young artists's vibrant, primitive work is quickly making him the toast of the US art scene, and his first European solo show in Edinburgh is bound to garner exactly the same kind of attentions. Hancock's work is funny, fascinating and fucked up.

Dazed & Confused: How important is narrative to you?

Trenton Doyle Hancock: I use narration as a way to maintain directorial control. Since I use so many different textures within the work, I feel that I need a working format that allows me to objectify. The gird of the narrative keeps things from getting out of hand.

D&C: How do you fuse your interest in comics and cartoons with fine art?

TDH: Comics, cartoons and fine art all evolved from the pictograph, cave paintings, and our basic need to create a visual language, so they are already historically fused; I aim to locate the intersections of these modes of expression and exploit them.

D&C: A lot of your work comes across as both visceral and bodily. What is it about distorted physical imagery that attracts you?

TDH: I am intrigued by our bodies' limitations, but also by our desire to exceed and conquer those limits. I suppose that's why I created the nigh-invulnerable superhero, Torpedoboy, who is my alter ego. When I'm Torpedoboy, I'm immortal and invincible, but when I revert, I'm subject to natural deterioration.

D&C: Do the wider issues about being young and black inform what you do?

TDH: The influence of blackness on my paintings doesn't go far past the simple acknowledgement that I am a black person. I've been black for almost 33 years and still don't know what it means to be black or how to define blackness. Because this isn't a burning question for me, I have opted to pursue more universal issues. If I were to have come of age

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

in the 50s or 60s, the politics of blackness would undoubtedly be more an issue for me. Growing up post-civil rights affords me the option to be distanced from certain political issues.

D&C: There's always been something very overwhelming about your work, the walls and gallery space are filled to the brim with paintings and other works. Are you intentionally providing those who come to your shows with an all-consuming onslaught?

TDH: There is a conscious attempt to initially overwhelm the viewer with paintings directly on the wall. I create these all-encompassing installations as a method to draw the viewer in closer, like a vortex. Closer investigation of these canvases reveals more about the material and its narrative.