

August 31, 2017 - Trenton Doyle Hancock is an American artist. He was born in 1974 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and grew up in Paris, Texas. He makes prints, videos, drawings, sculptures, individual performances, and collaged felt paintings. Hancock is known for his visual work that focuses on the Mounds and the Vegans, two forces that are constantly dueling with one another and serve as a representation of the eternal battle between good and evil. When asked about the variety of inspiration fueling his work, Hancock says, "I wanted to see how many different ways I could extend my personality or my identity into my work-whether it be painting, printmaking, drawing comics, sculpture, or ballet-just a myriad of different things. I find that to be more truthful than not."



As told to Katy Henriksen, 2308 words.

Tags: Art, Inspiration, Process, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Identity.

Trenton Doyle Hancock on organizing your ideas and taking risks

You work with different ideas and structures, rolling them together in order to make them your own. How did you figure out how to put disparate influences together and create a whole that's all you?

At some point I realized the fractured self is the true self, and that to go by the script society gives, telling you that you only have this one road that you can go down, is actually the antithesis of the American dream. To acknowledge all of the pieces that go into making you a complete person is the route to go. So my work started to really take on this quality of ravenous consumption, and I wanted to see how many different ways I could extend my personality or my identity into my work-whether it be painting, printmaking, drawing comics, sculpture, or ballet-just a myriad different things. I find that to be more truthful than not.

So much of your work is dealing with mythology, whether it's biblical or within pop culture. I'm curious how the two came together in your mind.

I grew up in a conservative Christian household, the son of a minister and missionaries, and those people were always around me. Understanding the order of services of religion was second nature to me. I started to question things I felt comfortable with, and the tropes feel more expressive to me. It's not like I opted towards one and out of the other. It was more like a comparison and contrast. Once I got to college and learned about Jung and Joseph Campbell and these other Humanist thinkers trying to find ways to connect all of culture, it was freeing for me to understand that these myths that grow out of society and these stories or these institutional structures have been there forever.

As long as there's been two or more people around, we've wanted to branch off into groups and form these organizations as a way to understand some sort of a collective truth. It definitely informed how I wanted to make my work, because I thought that if I could have some sort of stable center or a truth, then things can branch out from there, and I can create my own world or, perhaps, my own religion. In a way that's what all artists do. I'm just being completely honest about it.



Coloration Coronation, 2016, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 90 x 132 in., © Trenton Doyle Hancock. Courtesy of James Cohan, New York

The use of what you call “Mounds” are very integral to your art. Tell me more about them.

The Mounds exist for me on several different levels. The one that people key in on is that they’re these fantastical creatures, hybrids between humans and plants, that live in the forest. Typical fairytale stuff. The creatures in the forest love them and they act as this magical force that keeps things equal in the forest.

Then there’s this other aspect of moundness, where I see each kind of individual being on earth as a mound, or as the keeper of their own individual universe. We’re just a series of different universes that get to correspond with one another or co-exist with one another. That’s how I see the mounds—as these units of information—kind of like brains really. That acts on both, in a way, to describe your biology but also kind of a spiritual being. Your belief systems and how you view the world are wrapped up in your Mound, and it creates this architecture. It’s a way of thinking about things, really.

Another way to think about moundness for me is, on a personal level, I’ve noticed with my intuition that things tend to pile up around me, so I make mounds. It’s just the way I move through life. Something I’ve come to understand about myself is that I like to collect things and then gather those things in units and shelve them together. Then I deal with them that way. It made perfect sense that the central character within my universe would be this pile of information.

Can you recall when this whole way of organizing came to you? Was there a moment, like, “A-ha! Mounds! Yes, this is perfect.”

I think it was a rapid-fire series of A-ha moments. This would’ve been in the mid to late ’90s when I was an undergraduate. I was doing experiments off the clock, where I was recording my dreams and recording people’s conversations, sometimes quite literally with a tape recorder and taking in all the sensory information and analyzing it in the form of tapes, sketchbooks, and also in painting.

That’s right around the time I was figuring out what I wanted painting to be for me. It became a thing where I’m not only dealing with paint on a surface or support, but I was actually manipulating the support itself, by carving into it and making these things more sculptural. I was seeing this sort of mirror of the complexity of real life and trying to mirror that in this experience of making an image, or what I was calling a map.

Any of the things that started forming in front of me were those shapes. And it was the act of bringing things together and compiling as much stuff as I could and organizing it on these surfaces that started to tell me what this mound concept was. I didn’t have the name “mound” at the time. That actually came after graduate school, so it was some years later. But the concept of gathering and then manipulating and analyzing as a way to understand the self better and understand your surroundings came around that time.



If You're Too Fat, You Should Buy Clothes That Fit 2012, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 14 x 11 x 3/4 in., © Trenton Doyle Hancock. Courtesy of James Cohan, New York

You and I both came of age before the digital era, before you were able to find all these things at your fingertips on your smartphone. We also grew up in similar environments, in a Southern college town away from a big city. How did you find the things that were you drawn to?

I'd say my rate of curiosity about culture really accelerated toward the end of high school. That was when I really started thinking of what was outside of my hometown of Paris, Texas. That is when I started opening up my worldview. I started this process of writing, and making notes, and those were both in books and on VHS tapes. So around the late '80s I would get blank tapes and just tape stuff off the television. TV commercials, or if I thought the weather lady was really cute I would tape her, just crazy stuff. I ended up having these patchwork quilts of information of music videos, cartoons, dramas, and all kinds of stuff. I wasn't thinking of it as a collage, I was thinking of it as this was a natural thing to do for me. That's how I gathered information; I got it as it came to me.

I was utilizing the TV to its full extent, in the same way I would use a computer now, but I think it was better back then somehow because I was paying even closer attention to the information I was getting. Now you have so much stuff at your fingertips. I don't pay as much attention, unfortunately, to the media that's coming through.

The fact that there is just this dearth of so much readily available information now, and it makes us take in things differently, for sure. I have to do exercises in order to slow myself down, and I think my artistic practice actually helps to slow myself down a bit, but still it's nowhere near what it was. I think my senses were just a lot more heightened when I was a kid.



The She Wolf Amongst Them Fed Undom's Conundrum, 2016, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72 x 108 x 4 1/2 in., © Trenton Doyle Hancock.
 Courtesy of James Cohan, New York

What are some examples?

Well, just things such as laying out information, and when I say information this could be something like gathering up all the green action figures I have and asking, "How are these the same? Why are some of them different?" It's something I used to do as a kid; I'd look at all the different types of green. It's like well, this sea creature, and this little He-Man action figure and this G.I. Joe all have different greens. I didn't know the term color temperature back then, but those were my first color theory lessons.

I'm still doing things like that. With all the collections and things that I have: making lists and going through and analyzing them. These are the games I play with myself. Like asking, who were the coolest pop stars from the years 1987 to 1989? And then I'll go through and see if I can remember who I thought were the coolest people and why, and why that would've been important to me at the time. I do the same thing now.

You're interested in taking risks and have said you're most interested in doing something daring. Can you elaborate?

It's been a concept I've held dear to me for a long time. I just found one of my sketchbooks from 1998, and it's profusely written, so all of my thoughts about where I was as an artist and what I wanted to be are laid out in this thing. I came across a quote that was exactly what you just asked me. It was about risk and about when things stagnate, how do you shake that up. Then it talked about comfort being the enemy of the artist. My views on these things have changed a little bit over time, because there are these comfortable things you can do that you can't get away from, but as an artist I think it's futile to run from yourself. You will always go back home, and home is comfort—a way setting of things back to zero. That's a given. To work against that is to work against your nature.

At any given point in the studio you reach a fork in the road—I could go this way, this way, or this way. It's in those choices that you can see this is the easier path, this will be the harder path, and this is sort of the medium. To always pick that harder one keeps you on edge. Sometimes that means throwing a monkey wrench into your own path, and creating your own obstacles that you have to get around in order to keep your muscles from atrophying. Risk and setting up challenges for yourself are paramount to growth.



When They Found Me I Wasn't There, Version #2 2016, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72 x 72 in., © Trenton Doyle Hancock. Courtesy of James Cohan, New York

Absolutely. How do you overcome moments of creative block?

I think once an artist or musician reaches a certain level of mastery, you can just do it on autopilot. My hand can keep moving and I can be making things, and on the outside I can be like, "This looks really cool" but I'm really just bored with it. I can draw this face or an eyeball or whatever in my sleep, and it's not interesting to me. A creative block to me just means getting bored with myself. Those are those moments where you have to shake it up or do some introspection, or simply take a break. Sometimes I read a book or go to the movies, have my favorite meal, or go on a trip.

Your mind gets to this place of autopilot. The subconscious does it's magical thing behind the scenes and eventually it reveals to you, "Hey! This is the path that you needed to be on!" or "Here's the object that's really interesting" or you finally see something from a different angle. Sometimes that creative block just means that you need to slow down for a second and let your subconscious do more work than your conscious mind.

Trenton Doyle Hancock recommends:

Marvin Glass and Associates. This toy design firm created some of the most memorable and beloved objects of recent memory. They are responsible for Mouse Trap, Simon, Operation, Rock'Em Sock'Em Robots, and dozens of other brightly colored games and toys. Their sensibility was characterized by bold simple shapes and punchy concentrated colors. Sometimes I pretend that I was hired by Marvin Glass and Associates and that my paintings came from their workshop.

Looking back through old sketchbooks and notes. I've kept sketchbooks/notebooks since I was a teenager, and revisiting these written and drawn documents helps me to gauge my growth.

"Making of" sci-fi and horror film documentaries. When it comes to my favorite horror and science-fi films, I appreciate learning as much as I can about how those films were constructed. It's not enough for me to witness the ingenuity of the special effects teams, I also want to hear from the writers, actors, marketing team, funders, and even the janitors that were tasked with cleaning the sound lot.

Lamenting my favorite Houston, Texas restaurants that have gone out of business. Otilia's Mexican Restaurant, Spring Branch Jarro Cafe, and Roznovsky's Hamburgers may you rest in peace.

I live in Houston, Texas, so air conditioning...

Name

Trenton Doyle Hancock

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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