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Trenton Doyle Hancock On 20 Years of His Fantastical Cartoon Drawings



Image courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design

There's something about drawing that keeps artists returning to the form no matter what direction their art practice takes. Maybe it's the primacy of putting a pencil to paper, the way in which the sketchbook can serve as a breeding ground for ideas, or the simple fact

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that drawing is where so many artists get their start. Whatever it is, if drawing presents a certain window into the artist's brain, then the exhibition "Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing," which opens at the Studio Museum in Harlem on Thursday, will serve as a trip inside the mind's eye of an artist whose practice has included everything from multimedia paintings comprised of acrylic and collaged felt to site-specific installations and even a ballet—one that explodes off the page and directly onto the gallery walls.



Trenton Doyle Hancock
...And Then It All Came Back to Me, 2011
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)



Trenton Doyle Hancock
The Bear Den, 2012
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)

"I do lots of different things, but I think they're all traceable back to drawing—that's kind of the common denominator of everything," Trenton Doyle Hancock tells me when I meet him at the Studio Museum just as the show install is getting started. "If I'm sculpting, or painting, or directing, it all starts off with a kind of storyboard or something that's skeletal. That's the first kind of art-making that I made as a kid, those drawings. I always identified myself as a draftsman, and that's the biggest output I have—it's the most irreducible thing in my project."

The drawings in the exhibition, which was organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and runs through the end of June at the Studio Museum, date back to as early as 1984, when the artist was just 10 years old, and will culminate with new additions made especially for the show. On the day we meet, Hancock is beginning to plan out the wall

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drawings and texts he will create in the coming days, a process that involves getting to know the space intimately. “I’m trying to craft the experience for people,” Hancock explains.



Trenton Doyle Hancock

Goober's Intrusion, 2006

"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)

Many of the works on display feature narratives that recur throughout the two decades, like the stories of the mythical opponents the Mounds and the Vegans, and the superhero Torpedo Boy (invented when Hancock was a fourth-grader). The artist often seeks inspiration through writing, using a character based on himself as a tool to work out ideas. Rendered in pencil or Micron pen, these ideas serve as storyboards, exercises, or become the foundation on which he drapes the fabric and paint that become his multimedia paintings. “I’ve never considered myself a painter in the classical sense, someone that uses shape and color to define space,” Hancock says, however. “The line always takes over and becomes a crucial way to read the work.”

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Trenton Doyle Hancock
Mom Said to Share, 1998
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)



Trenton Doyle Hancock
Moundmeat Shower Unit, 2007
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)

Through the show, visitors can trace the artist's evolution. Familiar faces, like those of the Mounds and Vegans pop up again and again. His own image is there as well, in self-deprecating self-portrait caricatures that Hancock returns to often between larger bodies of work. Techniques, like the "furry line," a certain type of stroke he favored in the '90s, appear and then disappear. Amid the contorted cartoon bodies, imaginative plot twists, provocative snippets of text, and exuberant grotesquerie, it's easy for viewers to spot the hand of an artist equally influenced by comic books and images in his family's bible, as well as by artists like Philip Guston and R. Crumb.



Trenton Doyle Hancock

Cave Scape #3, 2010

"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)

For Hancock, revisiting earlier works and editing them down to a representative cross-section was a bit of an education. "It's always interesting going back and remembering where you were, or what kinds of head spaces you were in when you were making certain things, the epiphanies that you were having at that time, and being able to retrace the logic of whole bodies of work and figure out how they're relevant now—and also the things you've forgotten, things that can be reincorporated," says Hancock. "It's a way to reconnect with older versions of yourself."

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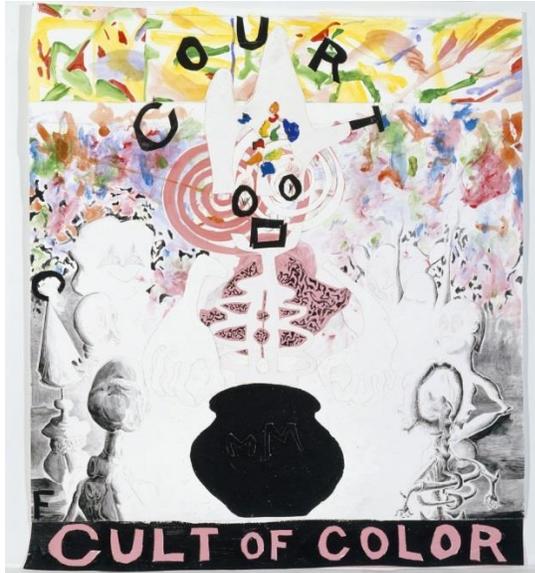
Trenton Doyle Hancock
Sometimes We Can't Have the Things We Want,
2009
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20
Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in
Harlem, New York (2015)



Trenton Doyle Hancock
Wow That's Mean I, 2008
"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and
Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
(2015)

Through this process of self-discovery, Hancock has found a new sense of freedom in his work. He's bringing to life a line of toys he first drew a decade ago, exploring animation and film, and approaching the very tools of color and line from a brand new perspective. Though his vivid canvases make it hard to believe, color was once something he felt wary of, a dangerously association-laden embellishment used to fill the spaces created by line. Now, it's often the starting point for new works.

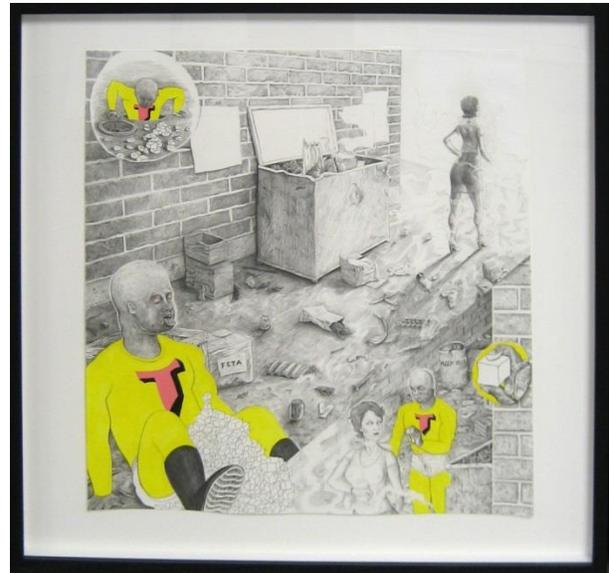
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Trenton Doyle Hancock

Cult of Color, 2004

"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)



Trenton Doyle Hancock

Studio Floor, Encounter with Prostitute #1, 2002

"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015)

"I always knew that I wanted to build a certain kind of building. I think if I had started with the color, building that building in the year 2000, it would be like building the 17th floor without building the first 16," Hancock says. "So I knew I would get here, I just had to be patient."

—Heather Corcoran

"Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" is on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, Mar. 26–Jun. 28, 2015.