

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Trenton Doyle Hancock: Coloring Veganism

By Melissa Cruz



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Trenton Doyle Hancock is a creator of legends. Unlike many paintings that tend to exist in distinct series, the Ohio-born artist has become a narrator for a much larger scale of work. His art seems befitting of a mythological tale, tucked away in the dusted books of ancient pasts, only to be resurrected again by the stroke of his paint brush. Each piece, created with paints, dyed felt, drawings, and a charming sense of color and whimsy, is part of a broad narrative and separate world that he has been constructing for years.

In order to understand this world, one must first understand "The Legend." Hancock's paintings are inhabited by figures called "Mounds," plant-human hybrids that were originally birthed from the ground some fifty thousand years ago. These creatures are a stand in for earth, a docile representation of its inhabitants who simply wish to expand in progressive directions. Hancock originally coined these creatures to describe how he artistically organized his information. The Mounds are in constant turmoil with another set of creatures called "Vegans," sinister beings that have made it their personal mission to destroy all mounds and most specifically "The Legend." Also known as "Number 1," The Legend is the original Mound and consequently most loathed amongst the Vegans. The Vegans themselves are meant to symbolize an extreme in dogmatic principles, a forcing of beliefs onto another (and yes, are derived from those who staunchly avoid animal products today, at least in namesake). Therefore instead of framing his story directly in the strict religious context in which he grew up, Hancock pits the Mounds against the Vegans in an allegorical sense.



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Much of Hancock's work is inspired by the religious background he received in his youth. Growing up under the wing of the Baptist church, his minister father and equally devoted mother constantly exposed him to biblical stories that continue to resonate in his work today. The world that he has imagined for his own art plays on similar principles of storytelling. He nevertheless tries to detach himself from making his pieces about specific, ethical obligations. The artist tells *Smithsonian Magazine* in an interview, "I think sometimes my stories start to lean toward a moral, but in the end it's up to each viewer to choose which way to go. I don't like to point and say, 'This is the right way.'" But despite his lack of push for a particular moral stance, Hancock still tries to incorporate the archetypal senses of good ultimately persevering over evil into his stories.

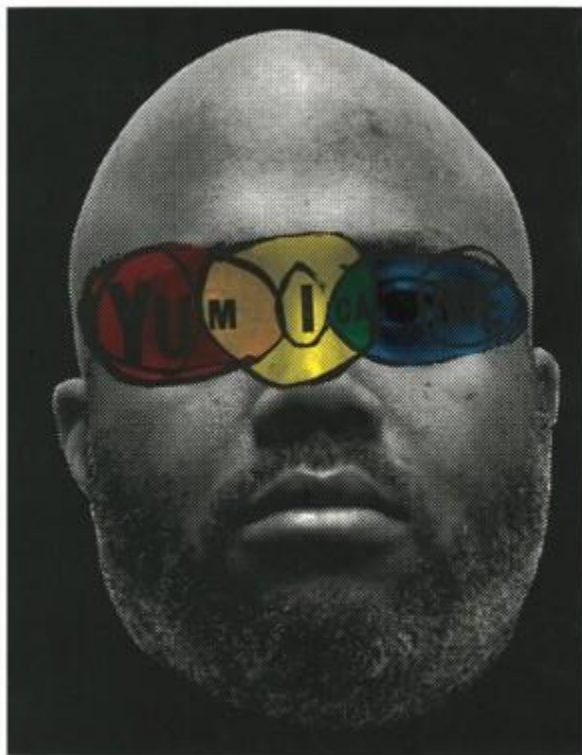


Hancock also calls on inspiration he receives from his mother, manifesting her dual personality into his use and lack of color in his paintings. His decisions to either use or neglect certain colors is always deliberate, feeling that if he were to simply choose colors at random there would be a disconnect between himself and the painting. He has named this balance "Painter" and "Loid." Painter is present when Hancock uses colors, particularly bright pinks, and is meant to act as a mothering spirit in his narrative. Loid, on the other hand, deals only in black and white and is in turn derived from Hancock's fascination with the written word and how it appears staunchly on plain paper. Loid is presented as a father energy and oversees anything involving text and lack of color. In his appearance on the PBS series "Art21," Hancock explains how these spirits relate

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directly back to his mother: "She is Painter and she is Loid, wrapped up into one. She is the smiling face of Painter. She is the color that you get from Painter, but at the same time she could be stern. When she put her foot down, when she spoke her word, you had to listen. And if you didn't, she made, you know, sure that you listened the next time. So, she was also Loid. So, in a way, the mother and father energy in my universe are both my mother." Hancock also puts himself into his universe, planting an alter ego named "Torpedo Boy" in conjunction with his other characters. While Torpedo Boy is human and therefore inhibited by his often inflated emotions, his purpose, along with Painter and Loid's, is to serve as the first line of defense against the Vegans in protection of the Mounds.



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Now based out of Houston, Texas, Hancock continues to make great strides with his characters. He was recognized for his talents in 2000 and 2002 by being selected to show in the "Whitney Biennial Exhibition" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. At the mere age of 26, Hancock was chosen as one of the youngest artists to ever participate in the esteemed survey. In addition to his travels and other galleries, he showed his work in a New York City exhibition for the prominent "James Cohan Gallery" this year.

So while the story of the Mounds and Vegans may continue to create a centerpiece for artistic turmoil in Hancock's mind, those intrigued by his unique ability of expression will be pleased to see the fight go on. Hancock sums up the significance of this story in his interview with New

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York City creative guidebook *Revel in New York* by saying: "I feel it's important to have this narrative coupled with paintings because it's something I haven't really seen before in the fine art world. I mean painters throughout history used narratives, even the abstract expressionists did, but I wanted to take it to a different place. I want to tell explicit stories and have them be major components of the work in order to create a new hybrid conversation." And this conversation seems to be working well for the painter, and happily so; he has managed to form a linguistic style that puts the viewer right in his zany mindset, allowing each one the chance to momentarily draw their sword to defend what they see fit. Are they a Mound or Vegan? Hancock, true to form, lets the viewer decide.