

His Own Private Mythology

By
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'Bye and Bye' (2002) *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*
Houston

Those of us who spend a lot of time looking at art can usually anticipate what we are going to see. We've made the effort to get to the exhibition, in the first place, because we know the artist's work or have a particular interest in the period or culture under review, and we've often already read the press materials. We don't often come upon shows without foreknowledge or expectations, and when we do, that serendipity is no guarantee that we'll be excited by our discovery. Sometimes, though, the unexpected is thrilling, as it was when I was recently in Houston. A curator friend at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston whisked me off to preview an exhibition about to open at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, down the street. The artist, Trenton Doyle Hancock, she said, was meeting us there.

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The name was dimly familiar to me from Whitney Biennials some years ago, and, I thought, from something at the Studio Museum in Harlem, but I couldn't conjure up an image. "R. Crumb meets Philip Guston," my friend said, helpfully, as she steered me into "Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing" and introduced me to a sturdy youngish African-American man with chic glasses and a graying beard. Hours later, I was still deeply engrossed in conversation with Mr. Hancock and moving slowly among the many, often obsessively detailed works in the show, beginning to recognize characters, following tangles of sinister vegetation and reading oblique texts. I was not only compelled by the artist's inventive command of mark and tone, but also completely caught up in his uncanny, invented worlds, fascinated by his sometimes raucous, sometimes wrenching, sometimes hilarious private mythology.

Organized in sections devoted to key aspects of Mr. Hancock's evolution, beginning with some astonishingly accomplished boyhood efforts, the installation at CAMH first confronts us with an enormous, mainly black-and-white "drawing," "Bye and Bye" (2002). The dense fabric of delicate lines and patches of hatched tone translate Jackson Pollock's pulsating linear expanses into a completely vernacular idiom. It's rather like the work of the obsessed, supremely gifted 10-year-old boy that Mr. Hancock once was, rather than a 28-year-old art-school graduate, albeit a 10-year-old possessed of a fearless approach to scale and a completely adult degree of sophistication; the more time we spend with the work, the more sophistication dominates. Rowdy images begin to assert themselves: engaging and not so engaging critters of all descriptions, gathered around a sort of skeletal tree with dense, tangled branches, crowned by a confrontational skull. As we explore this enigmatic scene and note the extraordinary variety of marks with which it is made, we discover more wildlife among the dark, hatched tree trunks and start to notice the repeated words "bye and bye" scattered across the image. Suddenly, the whole thing reveals itself as an obscure ritual, changing the way we read the related large works installed nearby. "These are part of the Mound series," Mr. Hancock tells me. "It's been going on for some years."

The Mounds are major players in the artist's invented cosmology, benevolent meat-eating creatures locked in a ferocious, ongoing battle with mean-spirited, nasty Vegans who, among other unpleasant attributes, are unable to see color. Confrontations between the two tribes, often involving elaborate transformations and elaborate machinery, shown at different times in the continuing combat, form another section of the show, while, elsewhere, a Mound-Vegan story, rich in wordplay and written in bold capitals, covers an entire wall. (Hancock is a connoisseur of anagrams and word games as well as visual complexities; just as he likes to conflate the visual languages of comic books and high modernism, he enjoys playing with the verbal, even turning his scores from an online word game into wallpaper.)

Another important figure in Mr. Hancock's mythic world is the stocky, barrel-chested "Torpedo Boy," part alter-ego, part superhero. He appears first in those boyhood sketches, holding a wonderful

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shaggy bear over his head. Most recently, he is featured in 30 beautiful, unsettling drawings, with cut-out texts below, itemizing racially loaded events in the history of Paris, Texas, where Mr. Hancock was raised. Here, Torpedo Boy meets Guston's Klansmen, with disquieting results, leading to a cliff-hanger finish. The series, Mr. Hancock says, bears witness to the fact that his home town fairgrounds, which he viewed, when young, as a desirable place to visit, were the site of horrendous public lynchings of African-American men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mr. Hancock's exquisite command of line almost obviates his brutal imagery, heightening the tension and unease that his images provoke.

Other sections of the show focus on Mr. Hancock's permutations of the self-portrait, often in relation to his mythologies, and on his experiments with animating line drawings of his characters' heads. And much, much more. There's a lot to look at, since everything shares the complexity and richness of the first works we encounter. Born in 1974, Mr. Hancock is hardly the only artist of his generation today producing work in which sheer effort and time expended are important components, but unlike many of his colleagues, he never makes that effort seem an end in itself. Mr. Hancock's ravishing drawing skills are always in the service of compelling, mysterious, often disturbing narratives that subtly comment on current issues in wholly visual ways. After this unplanned, fortunate encounter, I'll be watching attentively for his future work.

Ms. Wilkin is a critic and independent curator.