

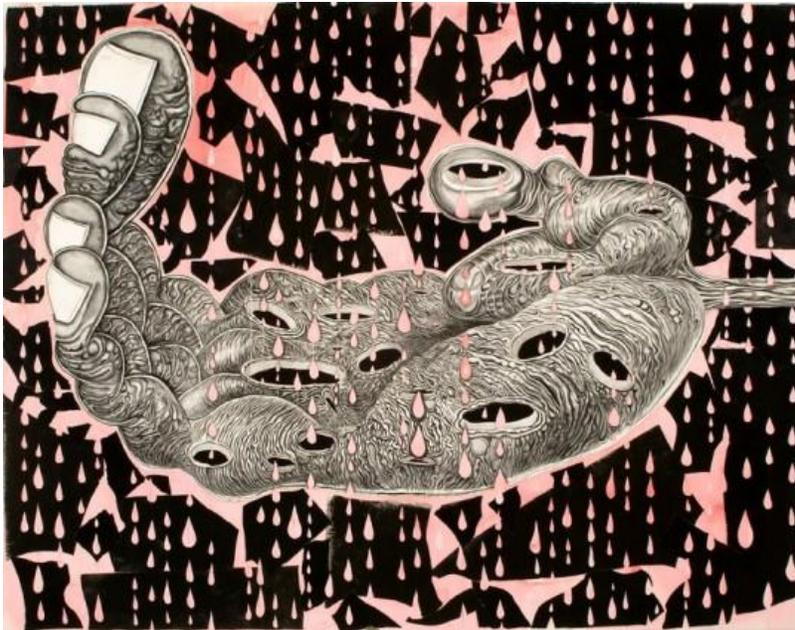
## JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Ayers, Robert and Doyle Hancock, Trenton. ““I Guess I’m Greedy!” Robert Ayers in Conversation with Trenton Doyle Hancock” In *Sky Filled with Shooting Stars*. May 26, 2012.

### ***“I guess I’m greedy!” Robert Ayers in conversation with Trenton Doyle Hancock.***



I was delighted to learn that Trenton Doyle Hancock’s work was included at the [First Kiev International Biennale of Contemporary Art](#), that I visited this week. (We had hoped to meet up and have this conversation in Kiev, but when Mr Hancock decided against traveling to Ukraine – very sensibly as it turned out – we spoke on the phone the weekend beforehand instead.)



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "The Bad Promise" (2008)

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He is an artist whose work has intrigued me for a long time: he famously invented a narrative structure – involving a struggle between the warring Mounds and Vegans – to provide a subject matter that sustained his work for several years. I’m not aware of another artist who has made art in quite that way.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "Descension and Dissension" (2008)

I had met Mr Hancock only once before, when he visited Seattle to install *A Better Promise* at the Olympic Sculpture Park there. I reviewed that installation for Huffington Post and included a number of his comments about his work in the article. That 2010 meeting provided the jumping off point for the conversation posted here, and you might find it useful to read [that review](#).

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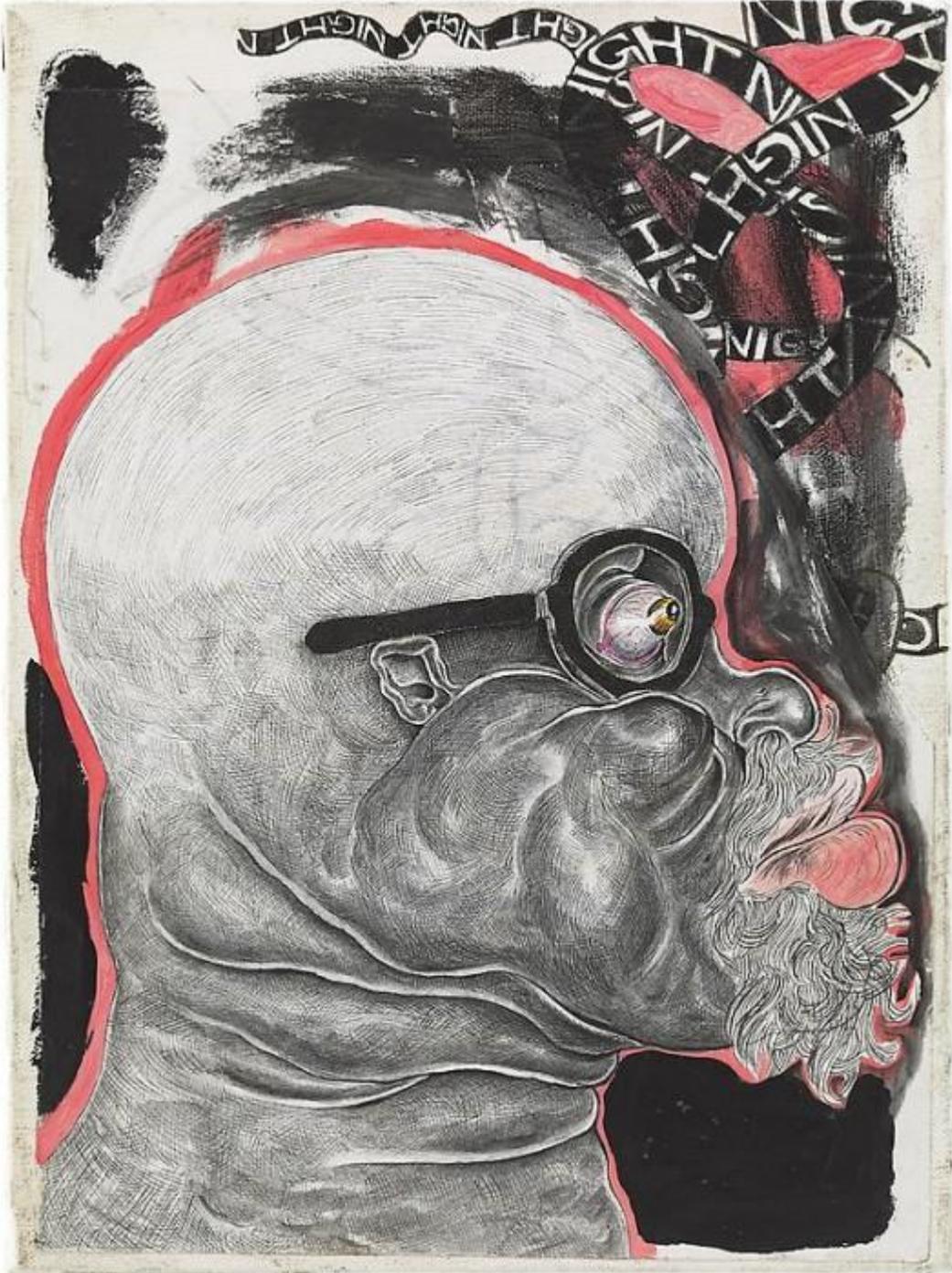
Trenton Doyle Hancock "A Better Promise" (Installation, Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle) (2010) (Photo: Laura A Bell on flickr)

**Trenton, when we talked almost two years ago you said that you were anticipating some pretty fundamental changes in your work. Tell me, have those changes come about?**

*Yes. Right now I'm smack in the middle of them. I feel as if I've made a definite transition in the past two years. Now I'm dealing with the self – or my own skin, in other words – in a very direct way. This has little to do with the [Mounds and Vegans] narrative that I'd set up. It's indebted to it in a lot of ways but it's just as much a reaction to it, and there's a noticeable shift. Particularly in terms of how you enter the work, and how the work is now aware of the viewer's existence. As though there's eye contact, both literal and figurative.*

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Trenton Doyle Hancock, "Portrait of the Artist Under Night" (2012)

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**I was surprised at how small some of this recent work is.**

*Yes. They are small manageable images, and right now I feel it’s necessary for them to be that way. I’m currently working towards a show with Jim Cohan in November and there will be large things there – up to 7 x 11 feet – but the things you’ve been looking at are much smaller.*

**Is that because they provide an antidote to the larger things you’ve been doing? After all you’ve been doing some much bigger work.**

*Yeah. Especially working on public art projects in these last few years. My idea of scale has shifted dramatically, and I’m able to think on a wider spectrum than I used to.*



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "From a Legend to a Choir" (Dallas Cowboy Stadium) 2009

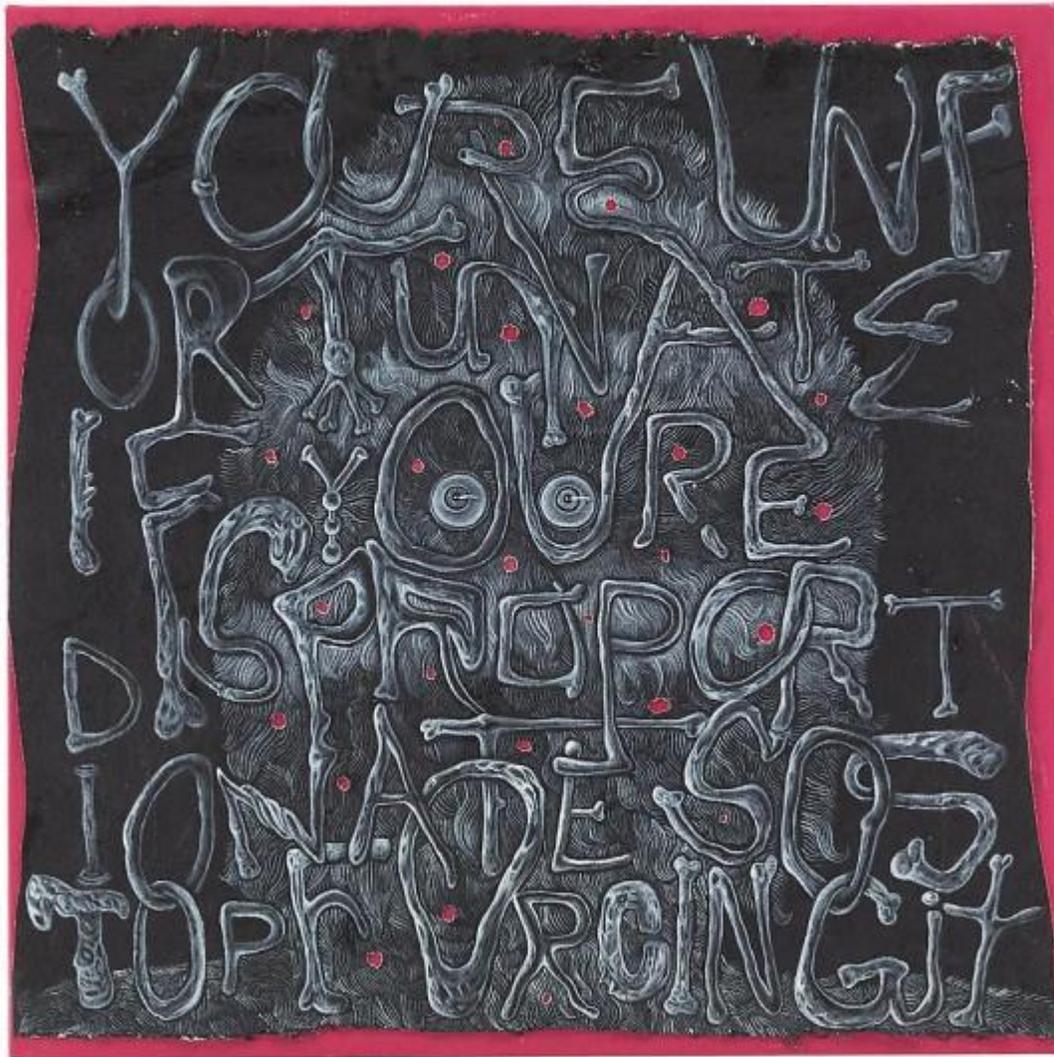
**I remember you admitting you’d found the scale of the Seattle project “scary”.**

*Right. And it’s not just scale in terms of how big it is, it’s more about how many cooks there are in the kitchen. Working with designers, and fabricators, and managing the scale of what it means to be an artist. All of a sudden I’m put in the realm of people like Paul McCarthy, artists with multi-tiered practices. (I’ve always asked myself how those guys do it. How do they get things made and then go home at the end of the day and keep making other things?) But now I find myself slowly but surely becoming one of them, and I think that was what I was finding daunting: “Oh my god, if I*

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*can do this, and figure out how to make these things happen, then that might open the door to some even larger things!” That’s wonderful, but it means I have to step through that door and perform.*



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "You're Unfortunate if You're Disproportionate so Stop Forcing it." (2012)

**Whereas the smaller things are like little headache-y meditations. There’s one in particular that struck me. It’s called (hilariously, I think) *You’re Unfortunate if You’re Disproportionate so Stop Forcing it* (2012)**

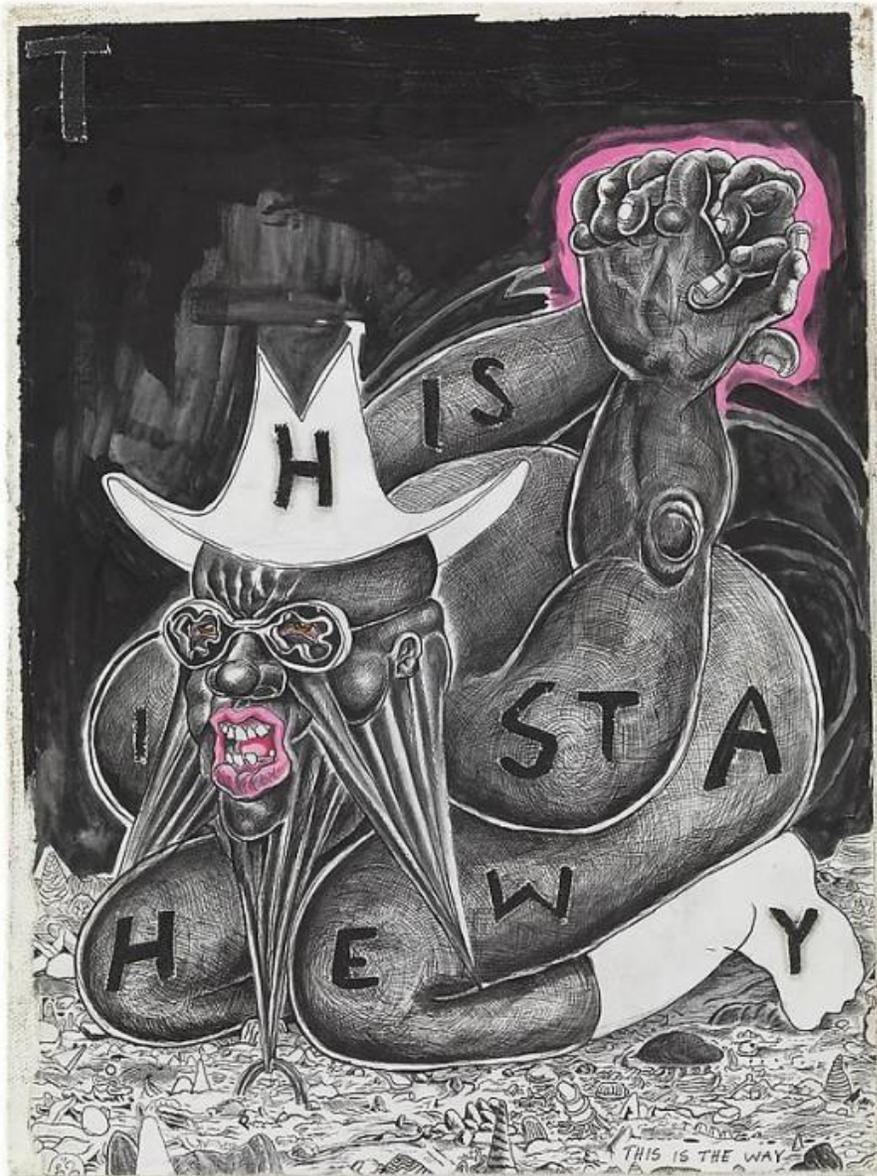
*Every single day I come up with these little aphorisms, or thoughts about life. And I make notes. I have pages and pages full of notes. They’re all around my phone, and any scrap of paper I can find I’m writing this stuff down. You’d be surprised – there’s mountains and mountains of this*

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*seemingly trivial stuff, but that stuff ends up being the titles of paintings, or the jumping off points for poetry, or other kinds of things. It’s an aspect of the work that I definitely want to exploit.*

*Now that I’ve escaped the bounds of the old super-narrative I can say, “OK, what is content for me? If it’s not what Mounds and Vegans get up to at night, then what else is there?” So I started really paying more attention to those everyday things – like You’re Unfortunate if You’re Disproportionate so Stop Forcing it. Not only does it rhyme, but when you start thinking about it, it’s about being yourself, no matter how weird that might be.*



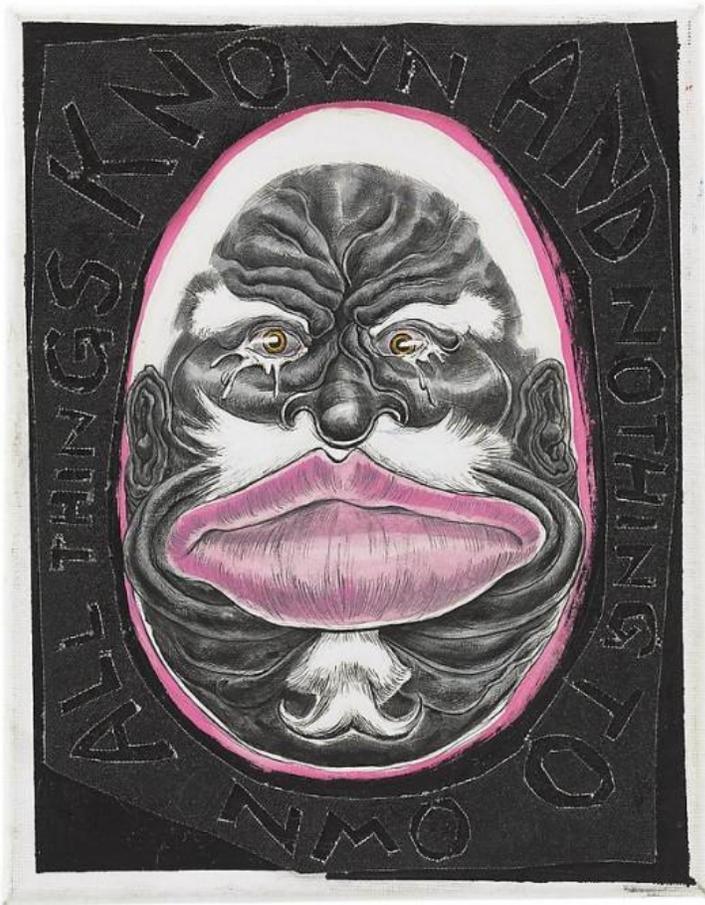
Trenton Doyle Hancock, "This is the Way" (2012)

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**I’ve been struck before by the importance of verbal language in your work. I remember you talking about wanting to be the kind of artist who could do anything they wanted, for whom all media were available. The interaction of the visual and the verbal seems to me to be an aspect of that way of working.**

*How can I put this? It’s like you’re given certain things. If I’m being completely truthful with myself, I’ll admit I’m not really a painter. Or I’m not the kind of artist who loves paint. I know painters like that and I know I’m not one of them. I can use paint, and I’m pretty proficient at it, but it’s there to service something else. I’m like a conceptual artist who happens to use paint. Paint is at my service, just like text or words are at my service, or found objects. Any cultural detritus can be used, and reformed into other things. It was in that regard that I was really most interested in in the sort of artists that you just mentioned – and I think back in the day I was thinking of Kippenberger and Mike Kelley. The type of artists who just seemed to own culture. They owned it. Duchamp might have been the first to own culture, to just say, “It’s mine.” I guess I feel like I’m taking another step towards that: “What do I own?” That’s actually the biggest question in my studio right now. I guess I’m greedy in that way.*



Trenton Doyle Hancock, "All Things Known and Nothing to Own" (2012)

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**“What do I own?” is a pretty fundamental question for an artist.**

*Yes, it’s a very very basic thing to think about.*

**But you know, it’s a question that a lot of very successful artists manage to get right through their career without ever contemplating.**

*And that amazes me. Artists who get by without asking that question must have this preconceived notion about ownership. Or they settle, and that’s. They settle on the things they’re comfortable with so things remain stable. But if you’re constantly in this place of stability then you’ll never grow.*

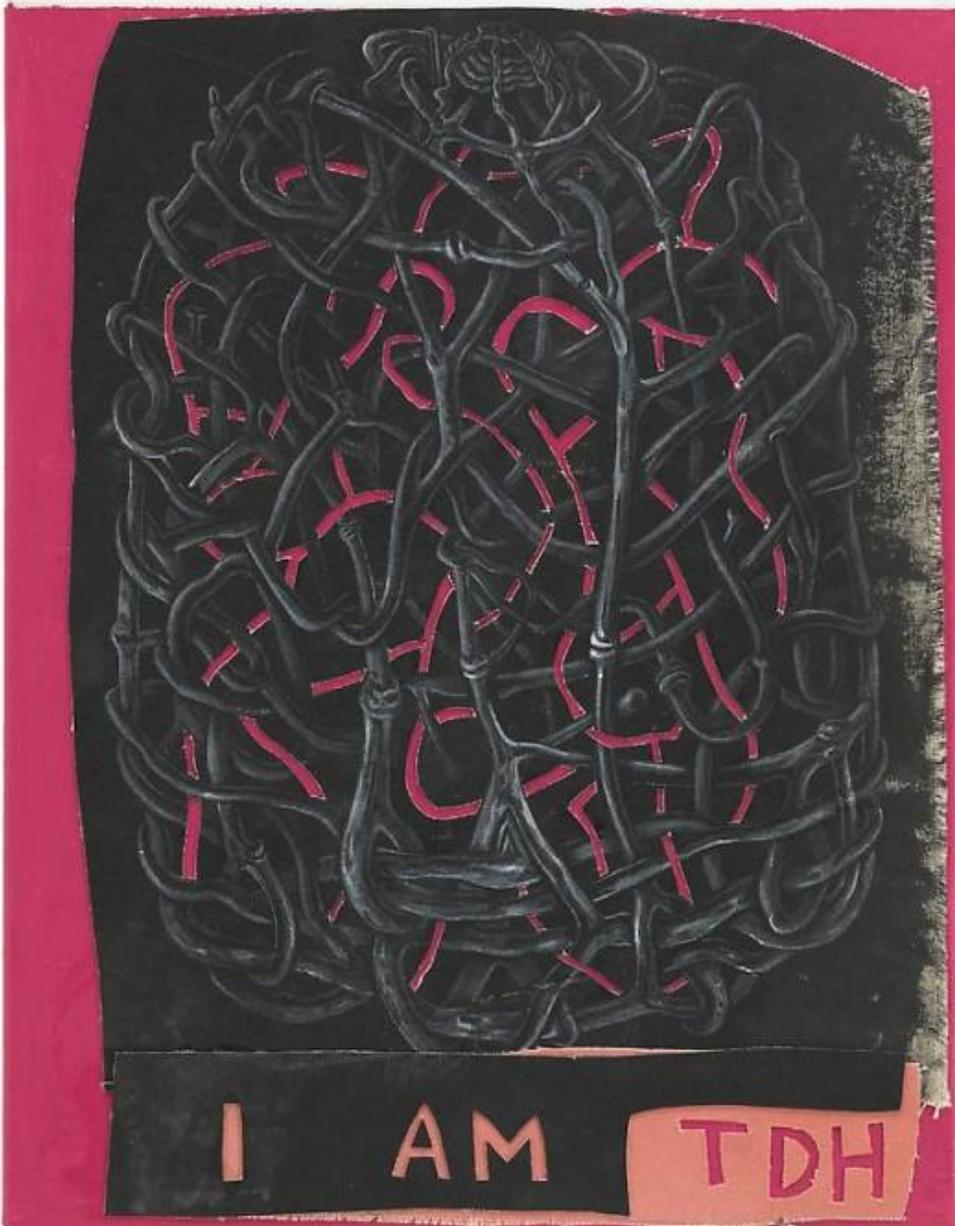
**Like you say, they’re fearful. They’re afraid to ask fundamental questions. They keep their art at one remove. I can understand why of course. It’s a lot easier. But they’ll never know the kind of satisfaction that can come from discovering things.**

*Because the risk never happens. The risk of failure. And I think you have to fall a few times to get to that thing that is truly essential and that is better, whatever better means. You have to really try and find it, or strive for it.*

**It’s about working without preconceptions. Even when you stumble upon this “better” thing it you may not be able to articulate what it is, but there’s a moment when you know it’s happened.**

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Trenton Doyle Hancock, "The Loss of Lies Reossifies the Cross of Eyes" (2012)

*Right. And a lot of times it's in hindsight that you realize that it's happened. "Oh my God! That was the thing, and I just wasn't aware of it at the time." And you have to backtrack sometimes and rediscover your discoveries. It's also about being aware and knowing when those things happen because like you say they never look like what you think they're going to look like.*

**I love that question you're asking yourself, "What do I own?" That's a beautiful way of expressing it. What are the other big issues that you're dealing with presently?**

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*It’s funny – when I ask “What do I own?” That’s a big cultural umbrella that encompasses any of the components that makes up my identity. I guess an important thing for me is that I’m a big collector of things. Physical objects. Some people might say I’m just a hoarder, but there’s a bit more of a logic behind the way I gather things, but I live in and amongst this sea of stuff. One of the conundrums or questions or challenges in the studio right now is how to figure out what’s important about my stuff. These are the things that built up to that narrative, but all of a sudden it’s not about that narrative, and I’m placing the emphasis back on this sea of information that I have. It’s daunting, but right now the question is how to create a hierarchy of meaning and importance out of the things that I’ve been gathering; and how to start to draw a line between the thing and some sort of culturally agreed meaning of that thing; and how to begin placing those objects in categories. Who knows, that might become a big part of my art in the near future, just the archive. I’ve always seen the thing that I do as a sort of anthropological archival thing, but this is cutting to the chase and saying it really is about that. I can prove it. I have warehouses full of shit just waiting to be just tagged and recorded, and in a very scientific way.*

[Unless specified otherwise, all images courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery.]