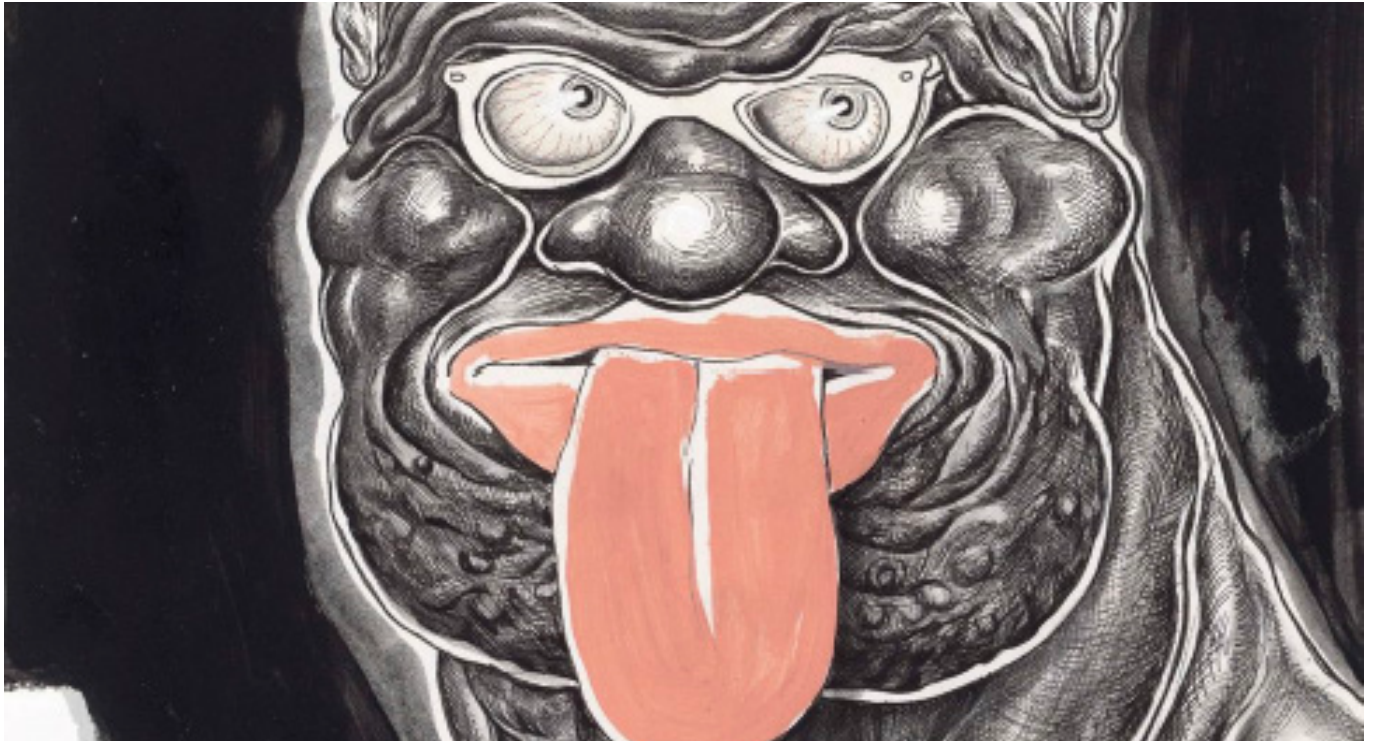


## TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

Scott Indrisek, *A Mound Grows in Harlem: Trenton Doyle Hancock*  
at the Studio Museum, Blouin Artinfo, 20 March 2015



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Self-Portrait with Tongue*, 2010 (detail)

Trenton Doyle Hancock is many things: A Texan with a fondness for comic books, Philip Guston, and the bodily grotesque; an artist whose practice has involved a ballet commission and a sprawling wall painting for the Dallas Cowboys' football stadium, and will soon grow to include a live-action film and series of toys; an obsessive devotee of the online spelling game *Spelldown*, the handwritten notes for which he has scanned and repurposed as an artistic wallpaper. "Skin and Bones," his recently opened retrospective at the Studio Museum Harlem, charts how Hancock's drawing-intensive endeavors have evolved over time — starting with a series of pencil sketches he made as a 10 year old, depicting a superhero named *TorpedoBoy* hoisting violent polar bears and evading the treacherous hands of giants. There's a shockingly deliberate throughline from those childhood imaginings in a series of drawings and paintings depicting Hancock's self-created lineage of warring creatures (the *Mounds* and the *Vegans*), up to the most recent work in the exhibition: A 30-page illustrated story that puts *TorpedoBoy* (now a bald African-American, rather than the bespectacled white dude he started as) against a Klansman borrowed from Guston. "Skin and Bones" is a messy, wild, irreverent joy — don't visit if you're not prepared for a room-sized

graphic narrative involving scat play — its innovative exhibition layout perhaps a model of the artist's rude and hyperactive brain.

Hancock grew up in Paris, Texas, earned his undergrad degree from East Texas University, and decamped to Philadelphia to continue his schooling. A two-year residency program after graduation brought him back down to Houston, where he's been ever since. As a teenager he was torn between the worlds of cartooning and illustration and the more rarified climes of the professional art world. He penned a comic for his college newspaper — "I was grooming myself," he said. "I thought maybe I could be Charles Schulz." That passion was tempered by a growing consciousness of contemporary painting. "I'd just learned about Guston, Basquiat, and Schnabel," he explained. "They were bringing in all the things they were interested in into this pressure-cooker. I started thinking about painting in a broader sense — that it could get a lot done."

Around the year 2000, Hancock began making a series of drawings and paintings based around a world of his own devising. This slapstick Boschian universe, too intricate

to properly gloss over here, features lumpen beasts known as Mounds, often at odds with their peers the Vegans — gangly, emaciated, biomorphic squiggles. (The Vegans started off as realistically human characters who looked like they'd moaned their way through a two-month hunger strike; Hancock has made them more alien over time.) At the Studio Museum these drawings are hung salon-style over a looming wall-painting of a Mound. Interspersed throughout are incongruously realistic pencil drawings of young, blonde, white girls, most of them sourced from Missing Person notices on milk cartons. They represent, he said, the internal souls belonging to the Mounds. "When a Mound passes away," he explained, as if this was all quite normal, "his little white girl goes up to heaven."

Near the top of the wall hangs one of the earlier instances of TorpedoBoy's resurrection into Hancock's pantheon. He stands with his back to the viewer, furiously masturbating. Another section of "Skin and Bones" focuses on a series of what he terms "elastic self-portraits." These depict Hancock in various funhouse iterations — in some cases exaggeratedly overweight, running on a treadmill or yearning towards an elusive cheeseburger. One of the earliest self-portraits on view is executed on the top of a pizza box from Pizza Inn, where Hancock worked in the '90s. Another is a nausea-packed summary of a flu-ridden week spent at the Skowhegan School. "I'm using myself as a measuring stick or pin-cushion," he said. "It's good practice in terms of developing other characters, with myself as that starting point."

TorpedoBoy reappears in a 2003 series, "It Came From Studio Floor," which is composed of a number of drawings and an accompanying narrative wall text. While the character may have begun as an aspirational self-portrait, now he's more down-and-out: a fingerlet of drool droops from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes are tomato-red. "He's very flawed," Hancock lamented. "I'm sometimes terribly ashamed that he is a part of me." The artist began the series by jumbling anagrams of "studio floor" — like "I LUST FOR DOO" — which he then interspersed into a provocative and absurd story. (Short version: TorpedoBoy accosts some Vegans and steals their bounty of tofu, which he then uses to purchase a session with a "bio-engineered prostitute made by the government" who agrees to entertain his lurid fecal-fantasies.) "I recognized that I could conceivably sit and draw all day and not stop," Hancock said, explaining the generative background behind the series. "I need to find ways to make drawing harder for me to do: What kind information can I wade through to end up at the drawing? This process was the exact thing. The end result

was much more layered than if I had just made up a crazy story about Torpedo Boy."

That same sort of rich density of information is at play in 2014's "Step and Screw," a 30-part narrative in which TorpedoBoy is tricked by a Klansman into getting up on a stool to screw in a lightbulb — a preamble to what might be a hanging. (The story ends with a cliffhanger.) The images are accompanied by text tracing far-flung connections between Hancock's biography and that of helicopter-pioneer Henry Adler Berliner, Philip Guston, and the town of Paris, Texas. "Step and Screw" is perhaps the work in "Skin and Bones" that most directly addresses the painful history of race in America; discussing it, Hancock reflected on the public lynchings that were common in Paris through the beginning of the 20th century.

The artist's own identity as an African-American, and the issue of race in general, is "not something I want to be the first thing people see, or even the last thing people see" in the work, Hancock said. "But in that journey, maybe that's a room or two they pass through before they get out." Thankfully for the artist, and for us, that imaginative architecture seems to be in a state of constant