

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

Trenton Doyle Hancock by Bill Kartalopoulos, BOMB Magazine,
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Trenton Doyle Hancock's expansive visual universe is animated by a narrative premise: 50,000 years ago, an ape-man masturbated into a field of flowers and fathered the Mounds, benign plant-animal hybrids who communicate in bursts of color. Pale, skeletal creatures called Vegans seek to destroy the Mounds, whose only protector, Torpedoboy, is an ineffectual superhero. This capsule summary has been repeated often in descriptions of Hancock's work, but over the years his narrative canvas has expanded: an entity named Ploid—who synthesizes line, color, text, and image—now reigns in this cosmos, and a heroine named Undom Endgle—the reincarnated soul of the first Mound—has emerged as a powerful champion of virtue.



23 ART – TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!, 2014, ink and acrylic on paper and mat board with excised lettering and gesso, thirty sheets, each 19 x 12 inches. Photo by Paul Hester. Images copyright Trenton Doyle Hancock 2020. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York.



The influence of comics on Hancock's work has often been noted, usually citing his epic narrative continuity and recurring comic book iconography. But more significant are the ways in which Hancock's work relates to comics formally. Hancock has explored the dynamic between comics and other forms since he was a collegiate editorial cartoonist and art student inspired by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's comics anthology *RAW*. As a working artist he has brought elements of comics into his vast and varied practice, which includes painting, drawing, printmaking, video, performance, and more. He directly synthesized comics and installation-based drawing in *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw* (2014), a work that also brought his fictional narrative universe in contact with his autobiography and with history.

Today Trenton is working on a long-form graphic novel while continuing his painting practice. A conversation with him about the relationship between comics and painting seemed timely when we first made plans to conduct this interview. I had no idea how urgent parts of this conversation would become by the time we spoke in May 2020, in the middle of both a global pandemic and a national movement protesting the ongoing epidemic of state-sanctioned violence against Black Americans. Trenton and I spoke online via Zoom; I was in Brooklyn, New York, and he was in Houston, Texas.

BILL KARTALOPOULOS: I'm always interested in the interaction between comics and other forms, particularly within a gallery or museum environment. And this kind of hybridization has been part of your practice throughout your career. Right now you're writing and drawing a full-length graphic novel intended for publication.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Right.

BK: Why have you taken on this project now?

TDH: Well, it's funny because I started out wanting to draw comics. That's what I groomed myself for in high school: to graduate and take my portfolio to one of the big comics houses. I ended up going to college and taking art courses, and one thing led to another and I became more of a painter than a comic book artist. But I never lost sight of that first love.

When I began working as a professional artist, I had a goal or manifesto, which was to bring to the gallery setting at least some echoes of my love of comics—I wanted this idea to come across in the display of the work and in the format. I started to see my work as a graphic novel that you could walk into. I steered clear of doing a traditional graphic novel, because for me it was all about making this new, hybrid form—bringing in painting, performance, and printmaking—in a different way than the traditional panel-by-panel thing.

In 2013, I attended San Diego Comic-Con for the first time. That was a game changer for me. It gave me a new format to think about, which was a lot freer and nerdier than what the painting world was able to offer me. Experiencing the various textures of Comic-Con was the push I needed to begin my own toy designs, which led to an illustration campaign, which led to a short film. After all of that was completed, I began to think seriously about producing a graphic novel. I wanted to get all of the ideas I've been working on into one unified format, and the best, clearest way to do that was a comic. It's also the most democratic way to get the information out to a lot of people. People who may never go to a museum would be able to pick up a comic book and see the information.

BK: I want to go back to that idea of creating a graphic novel that someone can walk through in a gallery space. There are two different ways of thinking about comics that are both valid but that get conflated. One is as a part of culture, and that can relate to iconography and aesthetics, narratives and genres, and things like that. But then there's also what you were talking about: the comics form, which is a neutral,

structural approach that has more to do with sequence and text-image combination. Often when comics get talked about within the art world, people skim past the formal part of it and focus more on the cultural part.

Your work brings in both of those things. You're bringing some of that comics' iconography—especially with *Torpedoboy* and the idea of a universe and a big epic narrative—but at the same time you're bringing that structuring to the presentation of the material.

TDH: Right. That's exactly how I've been thinking of it over the years, thinking of the flexibility of the fine art world and what you can get away with. It was my understanding that I could get away with quite a bit and never be held accountable for respecting comics as a form. I never wanted my work to rely on lip service by simply stating that I loved comics. I never expected people to believe it. I knew I had to prove it. I needed the structure of comic book language to be integral to the installations, even if I was making up rules and breaking many more rules as I went along.

I was thinking a lot about the gutters in between the paintings. From this painting to this painting to this wall installation to this sculpture—what's the primary image that I want people to come away with? The secondary? And so on and so forth. Then I really started playing with ideas of time within the gallery space. Those are the things that I started to key in on and that were most interesting to me in the graphic novels. The linearity of things wasn't so important at the time. Instead, I wanted people to walk away with an overall feeling that they had entered into a very specific world.

BK: If you look at a comics page, there's a combination of linearity and simultaneity. Comics usually

page 23: Installation view of *Undom Endgle and the Souls' Journey*, 2018, Styrofoam, epoxy, steel, automotive paint, silicone, and wood base, 82.5 × 70 × 31.5 inches. Photo by Tony Luong.

prioritize linearity over simultaneity because it's important to clarify the intended reading order of the images. Whereas that priority is reversed in gallery contexts because it's a three-dimensional space that a person can move through however they want to. And when curators work to structure the visitor's attention, it's often with the understanding that every piece is an isolated, unitary object, so it has a lot of space around it, and you're supposed to focus on that one thing and then move on to the next. What you're talking about is a format that can structure the reader's attention, but where each piece has a built-in relationship to the others in the room.

TDH: I also wanted there to be autonomy. In any show I do, each element has to be able to live on its own. It just so happens that when those things get together, the possibility of some larger, grand arc can take place. And whether that arc is legible in a traditional sense, or a material one, or an emotional one, you can key in on it. That's how I've built my practice. You can look at different bodies of work and see different arcs. But like you were saying: What gets prioritized? Is it the simultaneity of things? In my installations, hopefully the synergy of the text, textures, and images prompts closer inspection. Each autonomous image I create is its own universe with its own logic, and then the story, the textual aspect exists somewhere else on a separate plane. I must admit, when it comes to my paintings, I don't care if people fully understand the story of the Mounds and the Vegans. I want people to invest in the moment with the material, face to face. That is the most important thing. However, the graphic novel prioritizes the story, vocabulary, and characters. There's a different utility for it.

BK: In terms of the Mound universe and its backstory, the individual paintings seem less like panels from a comic and more like fragments from a culture. My family's Greek, so it's a very easy reference point: in a culture where there are these strong heroic myths, you might see a vase that has a picture of Herakles performing

one of his famous deeds, but you're not relying on the vase to tell you the entire story. The vase has beauty in and of itself; the picture has beauty in and of itself. It connects to an archetypal story, but it's not playing a strictly functional role in narrating that story to you. When I see one of your paintings or other individual pieces, it kind of strikes me in that way. It has that independent life, while also reflecting on or somehow manifesting part of the narrative of the Mounds.

TDH: I think you nailed it in terms of showing people a window into a culture that you get the sense extends in both directions, that there's something that came before this picture and something that came after. It's not trying to show the whole story, but it gives you the sense that there is something larger. I think that comes from the strong culture of images, music, and poetry that I grew up with, especially in the Black church in the South, which is all about a kind of sensorial grounding: If you can hear it, if you can feel it, if you can touch it, then it's real. The Black church promotes a connectivity to the earth, which then itself is a connectivity to your family and a past and a possible future. I wanted to make a work that felt like it was doing that. Maybe it was my attempt to create my own culture because I never quite felt at home in any one of the places that I was meant to be a part of. Whether on the football team: I didn't feel completely like a jock, but I felt like sports were a rite of passage that I had to go through. In terms of Christianity and attending church, I liked some of the stories, and I liked playing drums and being part of the music. I valued the sense of family, but I didn't believe much of the biblical text from a moral or ethical standpoint. Any group that I was put into wasn't quite right. Building my own world through my work was my attempt to create a culture cobbled together from failed culture.

BK: I know you drew a comic strip or a panel cartoon called *Epidemic!* in college.

TDH: Yes.

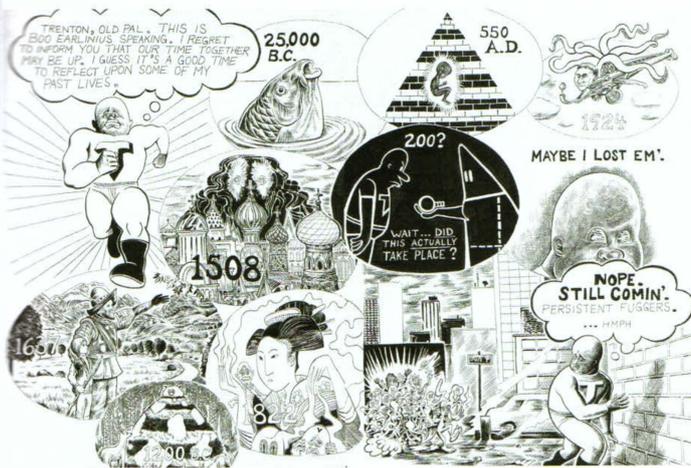
BK: I don't want to over-determine anything, but I can't help but note the title under the current circumstances that we're speaking in. You named the comic strip after a dystopian science fiction novel from the '60s about the return of the plague to New York City.

TDH: Yeah...

BK: Why did that book strike you, and why did that seem like a good title for the strip?

TDH: Each time I moved to a different college I would be part of the school newspaper. I was always the resident comic artist and illustrator. And that was on top of all my painting coursework and everything else. My plan was to be a professional painter when I graduated, but if that didn't happen, I'd have a plan B: Shop my huge portfolio of editorial cartoons and illustrations to various papers. I had been doing the cartoons for several years when I took a course called "Art of the Book" at East Texas State University. It was a great class. We were deconstructing the idea of what the book is, making our own books and commenting on sequence and story. One of our assignments was to take a found book and do an intervention with it. One of the books that the library happened to be throwing out was called *Epidemic!*. I skimmed through it and got the gist of what it was about, but instead of manipulating the book's interior, I decided to imagine the book being the source of a sickness.

I made a stencil of the text on the front of the book, which was *Epidemic!* in, I think, Roman type in orange. Then I made a cardboard template, bought orange spray paint, and tagged the whole print building. The ceiling, the floor, the tables, the chairs, the printing press, everything. I wanted it to feel like the building was sick, and the text was the measles or something like that. It was my version of being punk, I guess. They were either gonna love the project, or they were gonna kick me out of school. Turns out they loved it. And now pieces of that project are floating around the country. People



27 ART – TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

grabbed parts of it when they were going to tear the building down. I still sit on an *Epidemic!* chair in my studio to this day.

I had gone through several titles for my weekly comics, and none of them felt right. Then I got the idea to merge my fine arts investigations with my comics stuff. The *Epidemic!* cartoon was one of my first attempts to fuse high and low art. My editorial cartoons became much weirder at that point. They were loosely based on whatever was topical each week, but it wasn't straightforward commentary.

BK: You've brought *Epidemic!* back in different forms since then, including your sequence of drawings *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw* (2014), and you had a show called *Pandemic Pentameter* (2016). Does the return of some version of that name symbolize something? Like you're making a more explicit commentary, or you're reassuming the role of an editorial cartoonist?

TDH: Assuming the role of someone who's spreading a kind of sickness. There's this assumption, especially as a Black artist, that the way you talk about things has to be in the most positive light for the race. And I never quite understood where I stood with any of that. I always questioned what kind of information is good, especially when it comes to image-making. Because if it's provocative and it haunts you or keeps coming back to you, then to me that's an interesting image. And with that idea in my head as an integral, foundational aspect of my worldview, those words *epidemic* and *pandemic* were very fitting.

Of course now I want to steer as far away as I can from the word *pandemic*. I'm tired of it! But that's always kind of where my head has been: this is a sick world, and you deserve sick images.

TRENTON DOYLE
HANCOCK PRESENTS THE
MOUNDVERSE, CHAPTER
2: VEGANISM, 2020, ink on
paper, each 24 x 36 inches.

BK: After art school you had this thesis statement that you were going to resolve a dialectic between painting and comics, and at the same time you were bringing story very specifically into your work. Were there artists whose work gave you some ideas about ways to triangulate image and narrative and sequence?

TDH: Philip Guston is probably the first place people go when they think of me and the bringing together of these elements. Not that what he was doing was by any stretch creating a narrative that made sense in a linear fashion; he just made pregnant images and happened to use some of the same forms, i.e. characters, from painting to painting. So he wasn't necessarily developing a linear narrative, but he was a world-builder. That's something I felt like I could get a handle on. There were other artists I was interested in that were doing a similar thing. Basquiat did it: You might see this head that's decomposing from painting to painting, or bodies that are eviscerated or falling apart. They don't have names; you don't really know who they are. But you do get a sense that Basquiat was building a kind of world. However, I wanted to add something new to the conversation, which was an explicit narrative that accrued history and answered to itself. Something additive and not subtractive.

When I was an undergraduate, I had a roommate who was a graduate student in English literature. He said, "I've got these books you may like." And they happened to be *RAW* magazines. I had never heard of it, but I thought, "Okay, I'll give them a look and see if they're interesting." They were *the most* interesting things that I had read up until that point! I was like, "Where have these been all my life? These are so strange."

And the way I've always thought about anthology books or films is that I like to imagine it all coming out of one mind. So *RAW* really started me

The She Wolf Amongst Them Fed Udom's Conundrum, 2016, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72 x 108 x 4.25 inches.







30 BOMB 153



31 ART – TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

thinking that I want to exercise all the aspects of my brain and my hand and make art that in a conceptual way talks about the multiplicity of things and the complexity of the human mind. That's why, when I create a body of work, I try to imagine the individual pictures in a variety of media. One may be all ink. And another might be a combination of painting and ink. And another one's more found object and paint. And different scales and things like that.

RAW magazine introduced me to the work of Gary Panter. I made connections between Gary's work and the work of Basquiat. I also saw connections between their works and those of de Kooning and Picasso. Gary was doing his own take on Cubism. I saw the painterliness in what he was doing, further giving me license at the time to pursue that in my own work. To make things even more serendipitous, Gary attended the same college I did, albeit in the 1970s. We wouldn't have *Pee-wee's Playhouse* if we didn't have Ric Heitzman and Gary Panter, who both came out of East Texas State University. I took this as a sign that I was at the right school and that these are the weirdos that I'm supposed to be in league with.

BK: Your series *It Came From Studio Floor* (2003) explicitly synthesizes comics and painting. The content about Torpedoboy felt like your *Watchmen* to me: the dark, dystopian take on the superhero comic. I'm very interested in the form of it too because it really depends on sequence. One installation of it had the text painted right underneath each image. Another used numerals that corresponded to text on other walls. How did you conceive of that piece's presentation in an exhibition space, telling a story that depended upon the interaction of that text and those images?

TDH: The inspiration for this body of work was my own *studio floor*, thus

Installation view of Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass at MASS MoCA, 2019. Photo by Tony Luong.

The Impatience of Progress #2, 2010, pigmented paper pulp, stencil washed paper pulp, and STPI handmade paper, 82.75 x 71.25 inches.



This is the Way, 2012, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 12 x 9 inches.

The Former and the Ladder or Ascension and a Cinchin', 2012, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 84 x 132 x 3 inches.



the title of the exhibition. There were two disparate but related components to the project. One was literal in that I gathered scraps of paintings and trash from my studio floor and glued them together to form large flexible memory rugs. The second interpretation of the studio floor came from a textual place. I made anagrams of the words studio floor and used them as text to build a narrative. Then I created images to go with this text, which turned into an absurdist tale about Torpedoboy, vegans, tofu, and a prostitute. The ten drawings that comprised the narrative were tightly drawn in graphite with accents of acrylic paint. It was important that these images be executed in a straightforward, classical way because I wanted the text presented in an opposing style. Scrawled on the wall in black paint, dripping onto the floor; it can be in some ways like the language of protest. It was necessary for the text to be physical, to point very directly back to me, my body. I experimented with how big the letters could get and how anthropomorphic they could be. The tightly framed drawings and the wall text were soldered together as one experience, just as comics are. Originally, the aforementioned rugs were displayed alongside the graphic novel panels and the wall-written text.

EK: That first *Epidemic!* project—stenciling artwork all over the walls of the building—seems related to the way a lot of your installations function, where you use that aesthetic of protest, painting all over the walls and really infesting the space with text and paint.

TDH: Yeah, yeah that's true.

EK: *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* was packaged in the exhibition catalog for *Skin and Bones* as a comic book insert. The drawing style is different than the one you used in *It Came from Studio Floor*, but it's also very direct and clear. Similarly, you've got these two simultaneous tracks of text and image. Thinking about what it means to put responsible images or messages into the world, how does the material that's in *Step and Screw* fit into that *Epidemic!* context?

TDH: The *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* comic arose from an urgency in my practice. That urgency centered around an awareness of white supremacy and the traumas associated with it, particularly the lynching history of my hometown of Paris, Texas. As I ruminated on this history of heinous and inhumane treatment of Black people in my local community, I tried to fuse it with concerns from my painting life. I chose Philip Guston's buffoonish klansman as a costar for the comic. I imagined him meeting up with my alter ego, the Black superhero Torpedoboy. It struck me as a poignant juxtaposition, and I saw the material moving in the direction of the politically conscious work of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which I first saw in *RAW*. In fact, *Step and Screw!* was a direct love letter to *RAW* magazine.

The idea to make the comic came to me in February of 2014, when I was invited by the NAACP to be the keynote speaker and honoree at their chapter in Paris, Texas. After the ceremony, I sat with my mother and my ninety-two-year-old grandmother, who both recounted horror stories of growing up in fear in Paris. They mentioned specific instances of lynchings in the area, ranging from 1892 to as recent as 2009. Out of anger and confusion, I began to research these stories, making connections to newspaper articles both local and nationally. Eventually, I was able to construct a timeline. The comic took shape as an absurd linear narrative in which Torpedoboy is unwittingly lured into a house by Philip Guston's klansmen to change a light bulb. Annoyed by the request, he finds his way onto a footstool to screw in the bulb. When the lights go up, he realizes he is surrounded by klansmen, and it ends on a cliffhanger. Underneath each panel is a calendar entry that charts dates of lynchings, abolitionist history, the life of Philip Guston, the life of Torpedoboy, and my own autobiography. None of the entries are meant to correspond to the above storyline, but there are mysterious connections due to the proximity of the two charts and our tendency to fuse language and image. I decided to add

EPIDEMIC! to the title after I began the process of drawing the comic. It seemed fitting as I focused on the nature of white supremacy and the communicable tactics that keep it thriving.

I was scared to put that book out publicly, to tell that story. Because quite frankly, I'm still frightened of Paris, Texas. I was trying to have some dialogue with a past that I felt a little bit oppressed by. Here I am now as an adult who's actually lived through some stuff, and I can re-approach this idea of corrupted material, or corrosive material. Material that has a kind of radioactivity to it. And I can utilize it in a more nuanced way and relate it to history.

BK: It synthesizes a couple strands of your work. Your show *And Then It All Came Back to Me* (2012) was more directly autobiographical and self-referential than your previous work had been. Afterward you continued developing the Mound narrative but a lot more self-representation came into the work. Why bring those strands together?

TDH: I got to that place because of the works I made between 2009 and 2012. During those years, I totally abandoned my Mound and Vegan images and was only doing self-portraits—dozens of drawings of myself in what I call "conditions." That was me commenting on the condition of being trapped in a body, having to exist in a body that's going to die. I was thinking about mortality, twisting my body into cartoonish squash-and-stretch positions—but a real human can only stretch so far. The limbs are going to break. It's going to compromise the body.

When I look back on them, with what's happening now, they look like they were drawn today, commenting on the compromising of the Black body in a political way. However, those drawings were the diaristic documents of traumatic personal experience, family deaths, and failed relationships. I was in an existential place of trying to bring it all back to me, thus the title of that show, *And Then It All Came Back to Me*. Then I was able to imagine myself as a

projection, an avatar, a character of consequence. After those years of drawing and introspection, I trusted that the character of Trenton Doyle Hancock could break from the narrator role and be part of the narrative alongside the Mounds.

This was the beginning of a rebuilding of trust in my character building and world-building. I credit my then-girlfriend, now-wife, JooYoung Choi with a lively, ambitious energy that she brought into my life. She helped me fall back in love with the things that made me *me*: comics, toys, the kinds of films that I would go to as comfort food. I found myself re-engaging with that material with a renewed purpose, to use it all as source material to build a more rich and personal story.

Basically all of this led to the graphic novel. You hardly see a panel where I'm not in it, as this bouncing ball you follow through the work. Growing up, I didn't see any confessional comics with Black protagonists. I couldn't find any Black "slice of life" comics that were on the level of R. Crumb or Daniel Clowes, so I imagined making my own to fill this void. I've finally found my entry point back into the comics' space where I'm narrating something. I'm of consequence in the story as the artist, as the author, but there's a kind of accountability that's different than my previous painted work. I can be held accountable, and it's a new, vulnerable, exciting place to be. But it's a result of all these different steps I went through to kind of kill the work and then bring it back to life. And when it came back to life: there I was.

BK: You've created all these new narrative situations. You've merged the characters of Painter and Loid into this new figure, Ploid, and your paintings are re-exploding in response. Simultaneously, you're taking narrative material from the paintings and putting it into this new comic book form. Do you feel you're in a place where there are a lot of open roads back into your own work?

TDH: Oh yeah, yeah. So many things that I've started are beckoning me to come back and move them along. For

instance, I would like to make an arc where my characters express a wider range of emotions. The format of the graphic novel welcomes this type of growth. Four years ago, I wasn't quite ready to think this way. It's exciting to find new potential within myself as a world-builder. For years I was comfortable articulating and re-articulating the same narrative material: "50,000 years ago an ape-man jacked off and made Mounds. Torpedoboy is Painter and Loid's son, and Vegans are the bad guys." So it was fairly contained. I could manage it all. And now I'm questioning the size of my invented universe, the "Moundverse." I'm curious to know exactly how expansive it can be. Who made Painter and Loid? What relationships do Mounds and other celestial and magical beings have to Earthly mythologies, political systems, and ecologies? One of my most recent characters is named Udom Endgle, and she's Black, but she's not human—she's from a family of celestial beings called Soulestians. I'm curious to know what Black people on Earth would think of her? Would they take to her as a god, or as one of them? Would they readily accept her or would they be offended by her presence? To find out the answers, I have to strategize, write, and draw it. I'm bringing together my interests in not just existential things but very local political ideas about how we're shaped as people, about our culture and identity. I have all the material I need to talk about these things. I'm forty-six years old and I feel like I'm just starting. Every prior painting, drawing, and performance has been a stepping stone to get to where I am now.

BK: You're drawing this graphic novel in a pretty straightforward visual style. Other than the narrative world, are there aspects of your work as a painter that you're bringing into the comics form?

TDH: Ultimately, I see the Moundverse graphic novel as never-ending, and I would like to test the limits of its expanse. I would also like to use it as an experimental space where some chapters are approached with a variety of conceptual and

graphic styles. This includes incorporating painterly approaches. An artist like Chris Ware comes to mind; he sets up his books like buildings, with the license to vary his graphic identity from room to room. The painter in me is still primarily concerned with the experience of seeing the drawings in person. Many comics artists these days have switched to digital drawing which leaves no residue or objecthood to reckon with. Having the physically manipulated document is very important to me. That's not to say that it isn't important to many comic book artists, but it's often a secondary thought. I want the panels and pages to be framed and shown publicly in a gallery so people can see the originals in person in order to inspect them and imagine their creation. What you would often see is that I'll cut out panels and glue them in different places; that's how I edit. I edit paintings the same way. That's one thing I've brought from the paintings to the drawings. It's not always an issue of erasure; sometimes it's just old-school cut and paste.

Another thing is that I can extend my autobiography into the graphic novel by exploiting the meta-aspect of the artist or the author. As the narrator within the story, I'm able to take the viewer on a trip to my studio, to the museum or gallery setting, to the comic shop, and to the toy store, allowing a window into the worlds of art making that I often occupy. I have a foot in all of these worlds.

Which kind of goes back to what I was saying: you create the culture you want. I feel that being positioned somewhere in between the world of painting and comics puts me in a unique place. In general I have found that comic artists are suspicious of painters, and I've also found that painters don't fully understand the plight of the comic artist. I don't feel any of that because I know the two forms are rooted in a need to express. It's kind of funny to sit with the purists and hear their gripes about both worlds, and I feel as though I'm perfectly poised to create bridges between the two.

*Becoming the Toymaker,
Phase 5 of 41, 2016, acrylic
and mixed media on
canvas, 40 x 30 x 3 inches.*

