

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

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A view of Trenton Doyle Hancock and Ballet Austin's collaborative performance *Cult of Color: Call to Color*, 2008.

Trenton Doyle Hancock and Ballet Austin's rousing collaborative performance centers on a struggle between color-loving, meat-eating mounds and misanthropic, white-skinned vegans.

Trenton Doyle Hancock is known for sprawling installations that spill over gallery walls and floors in a three-dimensional torrent of handwritten words and cartoonish images. Figures tend to be fragmented and partial; space is compressed, with multiple perspectives collapsed onto a single plane; and flashes of color weave throughout the otherwise black-and-white proceedings, operating at times almost as active participants in the drama.

All conspire, in most of Hancock's recent work, to relate an ongoing epic of cosmic battle between Mounds and Vegans, influenced at once by Raw Comics, an evangelical upbringing and, more idiosyncratically, by the artist's unfortunate encounter, during his graduate school days, with a pair of humorless vegan roommates. The saga pits colorless, skeletal Vegans - who live underground, far from the life-giving rays of the sun and the nourishment of

red meat - against Mounds, who embody the life principle and take the form of piles of pink, white and black flesh.

When Hancock was approached in 2005 by Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, to collaborate on a dance project for the company, it wasn't immensely clear how this work would translate into music and motion. While the troupe presents avant-garde as well as classical ballet, it had never before worked with an artist who came on board with a preexisting narrative (more commonly, artists are invited to create sets or costumes for an already chosen story), and the challenges were clear from the outset. They include the temporal flux of Hancock's epic, which moves back and forth in time, and the fragmentary forms taken by bodies in his imagery.

The first problem was solved by isolating a single episode and engaging a dramaturge to transform it into a linear narrative. The story thus produced involves an insurrection within the Vegan community when a heretical priest named Sesom ("Moses" backward, indicating his status as prophet) discovers the thrill of color and promotes it

value. With words eliminated from the mix, Graham Reynolds, the young Austin-based composer engaged to create the score for the work, was able to create a synthesized sound narrative in which characters and plot points are distinguished by what turn out to be surprisingly hummable musical themes. As for the character's forms, Hancock worked out rough sketches for each, which were translated into costumes by Susan Branch.

The result, titled *Cult of Color: Call to Color*, represents the joining of forces of several very different art institutions. Working closely with Ballet Austin was Arthouse, a local nonprofit visual art space whose director, Sue Graze, is a longtime Hancock supporter, having met the now Houston-based artist while he was still a student.

(Hancock received a BFA from Texas A&M in 1997, and completed an MFA at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in 2000.) In conjunction with the ballet's premiere, Arthouse presented an exhibition titled "Cult of Colour: Call to Color: Notes on a Collaboration," which included early sketches of sets and costumes, rehearsal videos, copies of the musical score and other artifacts of the working process. Also involved was the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, which was responsible for executing Hancock's design for a massive backdrop representing schematic trees in brilliant hues. The costumes were fabricated by Alexey Korygin, the costume supervisor at Ballet Austin and Irene Corey Desin Associates, while the props were built from Hancock's designs in a collaboration among the artist, freelance designer Dwight Markus and the Ballet Austin production team.

An exuberant mix, the 90 minute *Cult of Color* successfully addresses multiple audiences. I viewed it on two nights- the first was attended largely by Ballet Austin's regular crowd while the second featured a special presentation for the visual-arts community. Both performances met with standing ovations. The plot, as summarized in the program, comes off as deeply strange (e.g. "Three Vegans, Paul, Anthony and Bow-Headed Lou, are dining at a bar of bones, Sesom entices them with Mound meat and the promise of color. The new disciples meet and recruit Baby Curt and Shy Jerry"), though perhaps no more so than a synopsis of Swan Lake. But *Cult of Color* doesn't require a working knowledge of Hancock's hermetic cosmology. It's broad outlines offer an easily understood, universally resonant tale of repression and, possibly, liberation.

The ballet opens with four Vegans dancing somewhat mournfully in their cave. These wan beings have generally humanoid body shapes and chalk-white skin, but each is distinguished by various protuberances; some evoke exteriorized rib cages, others suggest potbellies or migrating silicone implants. The masks that cover their heads are

their most distinctive features- among the larger community of Vegans gradually introduced in the first act, one has an inverted cone head with eyes protruding from stalks, while others have exaggerated bug eyes, floppy ears or, in one case, an elaborate rectangular arrangement rising up like a picture frame. The costumes were designed so that the dancers' faces and expressions are visible beneath the masks, giving these otherwise alien creatures distinctly human emotional lives.

The story is propelled by Sesom, the disaffected priest, who is roused from his torpor by Painter; a female character in a flowing rainbow dress, Painter represents the world of light and colour that the Vegans rejected in their primordial past. When Sesom brings the gospel of color to his fellow Vegans, some readily join his "cult" and engage in joyous celebration of their new allegiance. In the first act, the converted vegans dance around a giant Mound, a large hillock of black, white and tan fabric that rolls around the stage on wheels. The Vegans pull hunks of "mound meat" from its various openings. Then a "miracle machine"- a flat, stagelike structure flanked by leaf-shaped wings- slides onstage.

When the Vegans thrust their packets of mound meat through a vaginal opening in its center, it spews out colorful eggs. Eventually, four "color babies"-dancers in skin-tight costumes of various rainbow hues- roll out from under the machine and engage in a spirited dance. The first act ends in an orgiastic climax of frenzied movement.

But trouble is brewing, since one of the Vegans, a character named Betto, has only pretended to be converted to the color cult so as to undermine it. The second act is visually and emotionally darker, as Betto strips off his white skin to become a god of darkness, and is surrounded by his "darkness babies"- like the color babies, they are clad in tight costumes, this time black. The second act focuses on battles between the forces of Betto and Sesom, in which the latter's followers are routed and in cases dismembered and their body parts strewn across the stage. Redemption appears in the figure of Painter, who revives a stricken Sesom and seems to defeat the evil Betto. However, the very last scene of the act reveals a seemingly contrite Betto dancing with a color baby- only to break its neck in the dramatic final moment of the ballet.

Music, movement and visual elements blend seamlessly in *Cult of Color*. The score, created with a combination of sampled and live music fed through a synthesizer, is full of aural references, as when Betto's ill intentions are suggested by passages that seem drawn from Ennio Morricone's music for Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns, or when the physical abandon of the converted vegans is abetted by wild Klezmer-inspired music. Movement is similarly

evocative. Choreographer Mills has endowed characters with distinctive postures and moves. Sesom, for instance, in knock-kneed and comic, while Betto frequently adopts the akimbo pose of an African sculpture, which gives him an aura of power and intimidation. In the end, the ballet's effectiveness was the product of a clear division of roles among artist, composer and choreographer. After a few initial meetings, each worked largely independently until the final rehearsals.

Thematically, the ballet lends itself to various interpretations. On the one hand, it can be read as a repudiation of asceticism in favor of optical beauty, and an affirmation of art as a realm of freedom. On the other, the battle of the "good" white Vegans, who convert, and bad "black" ones, who resist, has peculiar racial overtones that Hancock, who is African American, must have been aware of. However, the role of full-spectrum color as mediator and redemptive force might be read as a vindication of the 'post-racial' notion of hybridity so much in vogue at the moment. Color aside, the ballet also offers a political parable about deceit, power, oppression and liberation. Here, the ending has an ominous implication- Betto's last act suggests that the forces of repression and tyranny can never be completely overcome.

One is also struck by the focus on flesh, eggs and orifices, which brings to mind Matthew Barney's elaborate allegory revolving around the cremaster muscle. And hovering over all religious overtones- the Vegans, reawakened to color, are born again into a realm of flight and grace. As a lapsed Catholic, I couldn't help connecting the redemptive mould meat to the sharing of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. But the celebration of sensual indulgence points away from Christian renunciation and toward the polymorphous sexuality of more "pagan" practices.

Ultimately, any and all such meanings intermingled in a production that swept the viewer along in a thoroughly satisfying blend of sound, imagery and movement. There is a modern tradition of collaboration among dancers, musicians and artists going back to Picasso's legendary Cubist sets and costumes for Jean Cocteau's 1917 ballet *Parade* (the music was by Erik Satie) and Noguchi's sets, starting in the mid '30s, for Martha Graham. The best known later partnerships have involved artists from Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Alex Katz to David Salle and dancers including Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Paul Taylor, Molissa Fenley and Karole Armitage. There is always a tension in such productions as different artistic modes compete for attention. But when it works, as it does here, the results can be magical.