

The Jewish Museum

Draw Them In, Paint Them Out: Trenton Doyle Hancock Confronts Philip Guston

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200. Introduction

NARRATOR: Welcome to *Draw Them In, Paint Them Out: Trenton Doyle Hancock Confronts Philip Guston*.

Although Hancock, a contemporary Black artist, and Guston, a white Jewish artist working from the 1930s - 1970s, are from different time periods and backgrounds, their work similarly draws on the language of comics to address issues around racism, antisemitism, and complicity in white supremacy. Both use repeated symbols and characters in their work, developing their own worlds and visual vocabulary to explore these issues. Hancock often directly references Guston's paintings in his own.

The friction between serious social issues and the use of satirical humor to confront challenging subjects is echoed throughout the exhibition. Paintings of cartoonish Klansmen hang on bright pink, yellow, and green free-standing walls that curve and jut, allowing audiences to encounter these paintings as they would perhaps at a carnival. This is a nod to the haunted history of the fairgrounds Hancock visited as a child growing up in Paris, Texas, which decades prior had been the site of a horrific lynching.

To explore the exhibition, we recommend starting with the cylindrical structure in the middle and then moving clockwise through the space.

201. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Coloration Coronation*, 2016

NARRATOR: This piece, titled *Coloration Coronation*, was made by the artist Trenton Doyle Hancock in 2016. It is a large unframed artwork on a horizontal canvas, measuring 90 inches high by 123 inches wide. The artist has combined many materials, including acrylic paint, collaged canvas, synthetic fur, and colorful plastic bottle tops.

This enormous painting dazzles the viewer with its vibrant color scheme and cacophony of comic characters, all part of the mythical world created by Hancock. Standing in the center of this scene is an imposing figure cloaked in white, with a noose around its neck and black upside-down hammers for feet. This is Hancock's character Ploid, a figure of vengeance in the artist's mythology. Here he is portrayed without a face – in fact, there is a hole in the canvas where Ploid's face should be. Ploid's white cloak is opened to reveal a smaller depiction of another character, Loid whose face is obscured by a number 12. He is grabbing the breast of a rainbow-colored goddess named Painter. Colors from her body drip down between the fingers of a large veiny black hand that rises ceremoniously below the dueling spirits and in front of Ploid. Here is Trenton Doyle Hancock sharing thoughts about this piece.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: This is the coming together of two spirit energies, Painter who's an energy of color. The opposite side of her coin is a character named Loid, and he's the reason that we can read text in my work, and this is the coming together of these two energies into one being named Ploid.

NARRATOR: A sea of characters and faces flood either side of Ploid, as if they are attending this momentous coronation. Many of these are caricatures of Hancock's face, bald and geometric in shades of browns, black, and navy blue. Alongside him are black and white striped creatures he calls "Bring Backs", child-like and largely devoid of features except eyes. Drawing on classic "squash and stretch" animation techniques, mouths and heads are pulled open and apart beyond human limits to reveal strings of teeth, clenched fists, and other cartoonish forms. Around these creatures are body-like forms and repeated circles in hot fuschia, lime green, oranges, navy blue, and yellow. This piece has three-dimensional elements. Painted bottle caps of various sizes are glued on, giving these characters and their surroundings dimension and pattern.

The bottom of the canvas is painted to look like tiles in a quatrefoil pattern, like an oval with a pointed piece off of each long end. They are in terracotta, yellow-brown, and dark brown, that recede and crisscross, leading your eye to the central figure. This pattern of tile was in Hancock's grandmother's home, and he says:

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I see each one of those blocks as a family member. You know, those are ancestors.

NARRATOR: Several inches above the canvas, positioned on the light pink wall, the word "CORONATION" is spelled out in bold all cap letter cutouts, each letter painted a bright red, blue, green, or purple. Above the "R" and first "N" in the word "Coronation" the letters "L" and "R" appear in black, forming the alternative word "COLORATION" that completes the title of the work. Wordplay is as much a part of Hancock's practice as the fantastical beings who populate his images.

202. Philip Guston, *The Studio*, 1969

NARRATOR: We are looking at a painting by artist Philip Guston titled *The Studio*. It was created in 1969 and is an oil on canvas. The painting is 48 inches high by 42 inches wide. It's exhibited here in a silver frame, and hung on a soft-sea blue wall.

This scene, which shows an artist's studio, is rendered in a cartoonish manner, with rounded figures and objects and crude black outlines. Every brushstroke is thick and visible, emphasizing Guston's quick hand and the luster of the oil paint. It focuses on a large figure in profile, who fills the right side of the painting. He appears in a pointed, but lumpy white hood, with two thin, vertical, black slits for eye holes and a meandering dotted line down his side, giving the impression of stitched cloth. The back of his triangular form is painted in brushy charcoal, showing a creeping shadow across his back. His outfit recalls the white pointed hood and robe of a member of the Ku Klux Klan, but here painted comically, rather than as an agent of terror.

This figure is painting a portrait of himself on a small white canvas that rests on a tall easel with a thin wooden back. His thick and oversized brick-red right hand drags a black paintbrush across the canvas; his thumb nail and knuckles are outlined with simple black lines. In his equally large left hand, which is white and reminiscent of a Mickey Mouse glove, he holds a cigarette to his face. Although the artist's mouth is completely covered by his hood, a puff of gray smoke emerges between the painter and his likeness. At the bottom of the canvas, from left to right, there is a red palette with a mess of paints, a red paint can with a wire handle full of scraggly brushes, and an ochre glass.

The back wall of the studio is painted bubblegum pink. Brushy red curves hang from the ceiling suggesting curtains, framing the scene below. From the top left of the painting, a single lightbulb dangles from a long, thin black cord; the verticality of it echoes the back of the easel and the paint brushes. To the bulb's right on the back wall, there is a simple round white analog clock, with one hand pointing at two o'clock. Behind the figure on his right side is a window with a green curtain rolled up halfway, revealing a sliver of blue sky beyond the studio interior.

Here is Musa Mayer, Guston's daughter, on this painting.

MUSA MAYER: It's a signature form. So is the clock. So is the easel. The green shade in the window. The curtains create a stage-like presence, as if something is being revealed to the viewer. And then of course there is the perennial cigarette. My father always had a cigarette.

NARRATOR: Taking in this scene we see that the Klansman is not committing hateful crimes, but is wrapped up in the solitary, high-minded pursuit of artmaking, and self-reflection. Guston considered his satirical paintings of Klansmen to be self-portraits.

MUSA MAYER: This is probably the signature work of this period because it depicts the artist himself— not necessarily only my father—caught red-handed, [laughs] as some have said, and it really speaks to complacency or complicity with racism. The art world was so often removed from social conscience. But it's also a very intimate self-portrait. It's an ineffably strange image that always has a kind of mystery and power associated with it.

203. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Epidemic! Presents Step and Screw!*, 2014

NARRATOR: We're in front of a massive artwork entitled *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* This is a large plywood shed, 11 feet wide and 10 feet high on each of the four sides, with a 30-part black-and-white graphic memoir hung inside. Hancock created the graphic novel in 2014, but this structure was made for this exhibition. The structure inside and out tells us the story of Torpedoboy, Hancock's bald, middle-aged superhero and alter-ego, lured into a shed by Philip Guston's Klansmen. He thinks he's there to help them change a lightbulb, only to discover that he will be their next victim.

The outside of this box-like structure is covered completely in large vinyl blow ups of single panels of Hancock's cartoon. The oversized images allow us to see every translucent brush stroke of Hancock's black paint on white. The images are executed in a highly graphic, manic style, exaggerating Torpedoboy's antics and panicked state of mind with extreme close ups, radiating jagged lines, and whiplashed double takes.

Let's start with the front of the shed, which has a black background with a white line drawing of the Torpedoboy, in a T-shirt and tighty-whities, holding up a very round light bulb. The cutout for the doorway obscures most of his body. A cartoonish Klansman looks up at him from the right side of the entrance. Moving clockwise around, the left side of the shed features black lines on a white background. In this image, Torpedoboy rips open his button down shirt to reveal the letter "T" on his superhero uniform underneath. In a speech bubble he proclaims, "This looks like a job for Torpedoboy! What? I'm required by law to say that so layoff".

On the backside of the shed, opposite to the entrance, a dark-skinned hand screws in a lightbulb, rings of light radiating off of it. Below, the word, "Eureka!" On the last side of this structure, Torpedoboy stands cowering, sweating on a short stool. The room now lit, he sees he is surrounded by four Klansmen, one holding rope and another a paper bag. Across the top, the jagged painted words ask, "Is the bag for my head?"

Moving to the inside of the shed, we are surrounded by exposed plywood walls. A single-lit lightbulb on a black cord dangles through the open ceiling. The graphic memoir is displayed in two parallel lines across the side and back walls. There are 30 works total, each 19 inches high and 12 inches wide, displayed in matching thin black frames. They are all black ink on white paper. At the top of each page there is a square panel featuring one image from the comic strip. Below, Hancock hand-carved a timeline into the pages. His writing is nearly invisible, ghostly, with the cut-out letters floating above a white mat board. The excised text recounts key dates in his life and development as an artist, intertwined with Philip Guston's biography, punctuated with instances of white supremacist violence, in particular the lynching history of Hancock's hometown of Paris, Texas.

204. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Step and Screw: The Star of Code Switching*, 2020

NARRATOR: We are looking at a painting by the artist Trenton Doyle Hancock titled *Step and Screw: The Star of Code Switching*. The materials are acrylic, graphite, synthetic fur, plastic bottle tops, and paper collage on an unframed canvas. It was made in 2020. The dimensions are 84 inches high by 84 inches long; it is hung on a saturated yellow, free-standing curved wall.

This painting shows a conversation and confrontation between two standing figures. They are both in profile and facing each other, depicted in white with bright green outlines. The style of painting is one that would be used for cartoon characters in a comic strip. The figure on the left is Torpedoboy, a superhero who is wearing a tight white t-shirt and brief-style underwear, and tall black boots. On his shirt, you can see most of a hot pink uppercase letter "T". His arms rest straight down at his sides. He is bald and slightly heavy set – perhaps in his midlife years. Here is Trenton Doyle Hancock on Torpedoboy.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: When I made him when I was ten or 11 years old, he ... he was this archetypal superhero. He was my response to Superman or Spider-Man he's reluctant to help when he's called, but he does end up in a situation where he becomes a victim.

NARRATOR: Torpedoboy is facing a Klansman in a white robe on the right side of the canvas. His body is a simple triangle with ovals for feet. The tip of his hood makes him appear slightly taller than Torpedoboy. His eyes are two elongated green ovals. Hancock sees this piece as a

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: ...one-panel cartoon that was my alter ego, Torpedoboy, facing off with Philip Guston's alter ego, the buffoonish Klansman character.

NARRATOR: The Klan member extends one arm towards the center of the canvas. Over his open palm hovers a five-pointed star with the points made of fingers. The right half of the star is painted black and has a brown eye, and the left is whitewashed with an icy blue eye.

Here is Trenton Doyle Hancock:

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: In this painting the Klansman is handing over a star, but the star itself is kind of a magical, impish energy that is changing back and forth from black to white, and the promise of owning or aligning yourself with this character.

NARRATOR: While it can be hard to see at a distance, the two white figures are covered in white text. It can be read like a conversation between the two figures. Here's an excerpt of their contentious exchange:

Torpedoboy: What in the hell is that?

Klansman: Take it. It will help you live longer. ... You'll be back to your own color in no time flat.

Torpedoboy: Got a mirror?

Klansman: You're looking at it.

Beneath the star and between the two figures' feet is a small white step stool. It's painted simply with a horizontal line for the top and two diagonal lines for the legs. White bottle caps are arranged on these three lines, giving it a three-dimensional presence.

The background of this painting is a golden yellow, the color Hancock most closely associates with Torpedoboy and his powers, but the hue is almost entirely obscured by black faux fur. Only small patches of yellow peek from beneath the shaggy surface. At the top corners of the painting, the artist has affixed his logos, at left "Mind of the Mound" and at right, his initials "TDH" appear in his stylized hot pink and yellow insignia. On the bottom of the painting, a white strip with alternating black and white letters reads: CODE SWITCHING.

Here's Trenton Doyle Hancock:

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Code switching is the ability to toggle back and forth between vernaculars to gain access or to be seen differently. When I was a kid, I might hear how my folks talked to each other at home versus when we're out.

205. Philip Guston, *The Ladder*, 1978

NARRATOR: This painting titled *The Ladder* is by artist Philip Guston. It was made in 1978 and is oil on canvas. This unframed horizontal artwork is 70 inches in height by 108 inches long. While its height is about the height of an average man, the length, close to 9 feet long, is greater than the wide-open arm span of any person.

The painting shows a white ladder resting against a pale blue wall, with elongated red legs and shoes slung over the top rung. Like the rest of Guston's late work, it was made in a comic style, with rounded forms and thick black outlines. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, even patchy in some parts.

The ladder is positioned about a foot-and-a-half in from the left side edge of the canvas. It's a simple-style ladder, two white poles with seven unevenly spaced rungs connecting them. The first step is quite high off the ground. Guston paints it so it slightly narrows as our eyes follow it up the canvas. He indicates the rounded nature of the ladder with descending, quick, dark gray lines down each side, one of many cartoonish elements in this dream-like painting.

At the base of the ladder is a dark red shoe, resting on its side, its sole pointed towards us. It looks like a work boot, round and chunky, with light-colored dots around the edges that give the impression of shoe tacks. A red leg-like column stretches upwards from this shoe all the way to loop around the top rung of the ladder. A second leg bends at 90 degrees around the top and descends two rungs down, ending with another chunky, lighter pink sole. The rest of the body isn't visible, leaving us to question the logic of the scene. Is someone descending down the ladder, or climbing up?

The background of this painting is a field of blue. It is a brushy and luminous azure, with ruddy undertones showing through in various patches. The visible brushstrokes make the large swath of color look less than solid, perhaps even watery. Two black horizontal lines divide the painting in three sections: one at the base where the ladder stands, the other delineating the wall and separating it from the sky. A ridged orange half-circle with black curled lines at the center, gives the impression of a sun, peeking over the wall at right. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be the top of a head, with curly blond hair and black tendrils falling over the forehead. This was Guston's stylized and abbreviated depiction of his wife.

Here's Musa Mayer, Guston's daughter:

MUSA MAYER: This was painted two years before he died. He was in failing health. He's leaving one foot behind. And you can't really see how those feet are ever going to get up and over, where this iconic head of my mother's is floating in the sea.

She had had a stroke the year before. It didn't affect her physically. It affected her mentally. She was a poet. She could no longer write poetry. Hence her head is sinking.

It's a painting about contemplating what has mattered, which in the end is really love, devotion. It's a very profound and beautiful painting.