

Curated by Irene Shum, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

Major funding for the Contemporary Focus series is provided by Cecily E. Horton.

## Contemporary Focus

Trenton Doyle Hancock

### Public Programs

**Artist Talk: Trenton Doyle Hancock  
in Conversation with  
Senior Curator Michelle White**  
Wednesday, February 6, 7–8 p.m.  
Main Building

The above program is free and open to the public.

Menil members enjoy additional events.  
Visit the museum or [menil.org](http://menil.org) to join or for more information.



**front** Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* (detail), 2014. Ink, cut-and-pasted paper, gesso, acrylic, and graphite on paper. Each sheet 19 × 12 in. (48.3 × 30.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © Trenton Doyle Hancock. Photo: Paul Hester.

January 25–May 19, 2019

THE MENIL COLLECTION

*Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!*, a series of thirty works on paper by Trenton Doyle Hancock, combines illustrations and text in a comic strip-like format. Mounted on the top half of each panel, black-and-white ink-and-acrylic drawings on paper depict Torpedoboy, one of Hancock's alter egos. Answering a call for help, Torpedoboy finds himself dangerously surrounded by hooded Ku Klux Klansmen. Below the drawings, anecdotal text related to Hancock's upbringing in North Texas blends with dates and details associated with the history of racism in the American South.

The artist's work draws from an elaborate self-created mythology that he has been developing since childhood. At age ten, Hancock created Torpedoboy, a central figure in his Moundverse, an imaginary world where an epic struggle unfolds between good and evil, between the Mounds and the Vegans. This ongoing semi-autobiographical saga allows him to explore complex social issues and engage in critical thinking. The artist states, "I am interested in a culture of people that think progressively and want to move forward, and oftentimes there are growing pains involved with that questioning and the waging of mini-revolutions within yourself."

*Step and Screw!* is the artist's first overt confrontation of racial injustice. Its title is a play on the name of the vaudevillian film actor Stepin Fetchit. Despite being one of the first well-known and successful Black actors, Fetchit played characters who were often lazy and performed menial tasks, perpetuating negative and offensive racial stereotypes. This dichotomy sets up the difficult unanswered question of what an individual's responsibility to their community is. Visually, Hancock's Klansmen directly reference the hooded and masked figures in the work of modern American artist Philip Guston. Similar to Guston, who was aware of KKK activity as a Jewish youth in Los Angeles in the 1930s, Hancock, who is Black, grapples with the legacy of the Klan in Paris, Texas, where he was raised. In the fourth panel, the viewer learns of the brutal lynching of Henry Smith, who was mutilated and burned at the stake in front of a crowd of 10,000 onlookers in 1893. The series ends inconclusively with text asking the viewer to "stay tuned for the exciting conclusion,"

while the inscription below describes a standoff of opposing rallies between the New Black Panther Party and the Ku Klux Klan in Paris, Texas, in 2009 following the racially motivated murder of Brandon McClelland the year before.

For this presentation, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* is installed in a shed designed by the artist. Constructed in the center of the gallery and illuminated by a single light bulb, it echoes the story told in the drawings, as viewers are also "taken to the shed." On the exterior of the structure and the surrounding gallery walls, the artist has created a new tableau of related site-specific drawings, extending the narrative beyond the thirty framed works.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* (details), 2014. Ink, cut-and-pasted paper, gesso, acrylic, and graphite on paper. Each sheet 19 × 12 in. (48.3 × 30.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © Trenton Doyle Hancock. Photo: Paul Hester.

Born in Oklahoma City in 1974, Trenton Doyle Hancock lives and works in Houston. Hancock studied illustration at Paris Junior College, Texas (AS, 1994), where he started *Epidemic!*, a weekly editorial cartoon that he developed further at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M University, Commerce; BFA, 1997) and at the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia (MFA, 2000). Hancock has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, and his work is in the permanent collection of such significant museums as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas. The Texas Cultural Trust has honored Hancock with a 2019 Medal of Arts Award.