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An Artist's New Direction and the Bathroom Tile

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HOUSTON — Trenton Doyle Hancock stood at the back of his art studio, a warehouse space in the Acres Homes neighborhood that is filled with piles of cut-up paintings that he has been recycling since his career began 12 years ago.

He was looking at one of his new works, "The Den," an 11-foot-by-7-foot brown, orange and yellow honeycomb-pattern collage painting that appears to breathe, as if the viewer were hallucinating. It is the anchor piece for Mr. Hancock's "...And Then It All Came Back to Me," the first New York solo exhibition since 2008 for Mr. Hancock, a rising star in the American contemporary-art world. It opens Nov. 1 at the James Cohan Gallery.

"This one in a way told me what I needed to do to these other ones," said Mr. Hancock, 38, dressed in an undershirt, sweat pants and a pair of Adidas sneakers. "It's not like anything else I've ever done."

Anyone who is familiar with Mr. Hancock's critically and commercially successful "Mounds" and "Vegans" series would agree that "The Den," with its strait-laced design of lemon-shaped pieces of paper layered onto canvas, is a major departure for this Houston-based artist whose work is on display at Cowboys Stadium and was included in the 2000 and 2002 Whitney Biennials.

When Mr. Hancock attended the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, he created an imaginary universe populated by Mounds, half-human, half-plant beings who "represent the Earth and stability," and Vegans, who "as a mob are unleashed to upset that stability." The comic-book-style outsider-art hallmarks of the series — including bloodshot eyes, oversize brutish feet, cryptic text — elicited comparisons to Henry Darger and Philip Guston, and the continuing saga has defined much of Mr. Hancock's career.

But he now feels the story line is beginning to distract from the artistry. "The whole reason I did it to begin with was so I had this constant script, if you will, to react against," Mr. Hancock said. "And now it's like, well, the script is my life."

This new period is eagerly anticipated by curators, critics and collectors, and Artinfo has named the exhibition one of the 40 most anticipated fall gallery shows in New York.



Trenton Doyle Hancock in Houston. Joo Young Choi for The Texas Tribune

“When Trenton was first developing his narrative in graduate school, he was playing with the notion of how, as an African-American artist, it would be possible to emerge from the shadow of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” said James Cohan, who approached Mr. Hancock in 2000 upon the artist Fred Tomaselli’s recommendation.

“The narrative became a vehicle to address both personal and social issues through the lens of parable,” Mr. Cohan added in an e-mail. “Now he’s moving beyond this framework to more directly explore his persona.”

Mr. Hancock’s artistic transformation began early last year, when he was giving a lecture at Cornell University. While visiting the bathroom at a graduate student’s house, he noticed that the floor was the same tile that his grandmother had in her house in Paris, the town in northeast Texas where Mr. Hancock grew up.

“I thought, this tile is going to somehow show up in my work,” Mr. Hancock said. “Because there’s no reason I should be a thousand miles away from home, in this dude’s bathroom, and see this. I believe things are gifted to you or put in your path to notice, and this was a big one.”

That tile inspired “The Den.” The restraint exercised on the painting makes it singular, but its personal tone can be found in other pieces in this collection. Out of these 30 new works, many still retain Mr. Hancock’s grotesque eccentricities and savantlike detail, whether in wildly exaggerated self-portraits or large-scale abstract-expressionist pieces.

“Trenton is an artist who completely inhabits his images, and who has a rare capacity for engaging a repertoire of forms and motifs to develop a seemingly endless series of variations on a profound core idea,” Lawrence Rinder, curator of the 2002 Whitney Biennial, wrote in an e-mail.

Mr. Hancock pointed to a painting in his studio that featured muddy-white bonelike pieces entangled like wayward plumbing inside a circular black mass. Lemon-colored and -shaped pieces of canvas, similar to the ones in “The Den,” embellished the perimeter, but those shapes are influenced by something different: a yellow toy he had in the studio called a Keepon, used to help autistic children interact. The yellow framing

the black reminded Mr. Hancock of a beehive, which in turn made him think of his stepfather, Thomas Johnson, who died in 2010.

“One of his sayings was, ‘Keep on keeping on,’ ” Mr. Hancock said. “Keep on. Keep on keeping on. Beekeeper. My stepdad started a restaurant called the Honey Bee. I’m like, oh, this painting is called ‘Kept On Keeping On.’ ”

Mr. Hancock described his stepfather as a “Southern Baptist fire-and-brimstone small-town Texas minister” who was also a black-belt karate instructor, a carpenter who “built half the houses in Paris” and a plant worker at Campbell’s Soup, where he worked nights for 40 years without missing a single shift. Mr. Hancock’s prolific output reflects that industrious nature. His stepfather’s death came close to that of his other grandmother and to a divorce from his wife, a series of circumstances that gave Mr. Hancock renewed purpose. With “The Den,” he has taken a step back in order to take a step forward, creating what is arguably his most boring yet profound painting. “I’m returning to the self and the limitations of my own body and my own autobiography,” Mr. Hancock said. “This is about my family.”