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## 'I'm Constantly Looking at Toys': See Inside Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock's Studio, Jam-Packed With Action Figures From Star Wars and Beyond

The artist's massive 1970s and '80s toy collection is close to his heart.

Eileen Kinsella | August 9, 2022



Image courtesy Trenton Doyle Hancock

When the artist Trenton Doyle Hancock was a child growing up in Texas in the 1970s and '80s, his mother used to burn his toys, which she considered sacrilegious. He recalls how “the smoke from the burning action figures filled him with power.”

Now, free to indulge his early passions, his studios are filled with action figures (many of which he keeps in his indoor basketball court), along with his comic-style drawings and colorful paintings, which employ a unique visual language and seem to represent universes unto themselves.

We caught up with the artist ahead of his solo show at the Los Angeles gallery Shulamit Nazarian, which includes a new series of large-scale paintings that update his celebrated “Step and Screw” series. They depict Hancock’s alter-ego, Torpedo Boy, face-to-face in an exchange with one of Philip Guston’s signature hooded figures.

**What is the most indispensable item in your studio and tell us why you can't live without it?**

The most indispensable item in my studio is my werewolf head. I identify with the werewolf because I'm nocturnal and I paint mostly by moonlight. The werewolf is also a reminder for me to stay fierce and alert. It's a symbol of the horrors that lurk in the subconscious.



Image courtesy Trenton Doyle Hancock

**What is a studio task on your agenda this week that you are most looking forward to?**

I'm looking forward to finishing a painting that I started a few weeks ago. I've been working on a new series of paintings that include my alter ego and tragic hero, Torpedo Boy, in a conflict with myself as the artist. In these works, Torpedo Boy takes on the role of a villain and we are wrestling over an artwork. It has been interesting to put these two characters in conflict. There are lots of layers in this new series.

It's always rewarding to start on a new work and then see it finished. I see the light at the end of the tunnel on this one particular painting and can't wait to finish it this week. I'm excited to share these new works this September when I have my next solo exhibition, "Good Grief, Bad Grief," at Shulamit Nazarian in Los Angeles.

**What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?**

Music has always played an important role in my life, and it continues to shape what is happening in the studio. But, depending on what I'm making, I'll go back and forth between music and silence. My go-to is usually smooth jazz. I've been collecting music from this genre for over 30 years and I probably know more about smooth jazz than I'd care to admit. I grew up listening to it along with gospel music, and it keeps me moving, and feels comforting to me. In the studio, sometimes the work requires music, other times it just doesn't. If I need to be up and moving, pushing things around and lifting, I will choose the music that fits the mood. When I need to focus and block out external stimulants, I will play classical music or just work in silence.

**Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?**

I like to follow and give props to older artists working today that I admire such as the Chilean-French artist and filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky—I always like to see what he’s up to and working on. Also, Ralph Bakshi, the animator, is great. But I also love to dive deep into accounts that showcase things from the '80s. I love to follow toy makers and toy collectors. My brother recently turned me on to an account that features people who are collecting BMX bikes from the '80s: [@vintage\\_bmx\\_gallery](#). I love to follow pretty much anything related to Memphis Design, and I follow several accounts that focus on horror movie props, like [@rubbermonstersofschlockland](#). Sometimes social media is like sifting through an online thrift shop, and I get to audit other people’s memories. I love that.

**Is there a picture you can send of your current work in progress at the studio?**



Image courtesy Trenton Doyle Hancock

**When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get unstuck?**

I normally don't get stuck when I'm working. Or maybe I should say that I don't get stuck from a lack of ideas. Honestly, I'm more likely to get stuck from having too many ideas, and having a hard time knowing which path I should go down. I always seem to have a steady stream of inspiration, probably because I have such an active imagination. I like having books and toys and objects around me all the time, so I'm never at a loss of things to get inspired by. But, taking breaks from working is important too. It's important to clear your mind, watch T.V. or go to the movies... this helps replenish ideas in the studio.

Also, against my doctor's orders, I keep a big bag of Funyuns around, and some Mountain Dew, sugar-free of course. That'll usually ease things when I'm thinking through my next move.

**What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?**

I admire honesty in work. I know that's subjective, but there is honesty in a kind of mark-making that does not have bearing on the intelligence of the art, but that is doing what it is meant to do. It can be a dumb mark or a smart mark, but I admire a mark that knows what it is. And, I feel the exact opposite about a mark that does not know what it is. For me, a mark can be any kind of

treatment on an artwork, not just a brush stroke or a graphite line. You'll notice in my works that for years I've used plastic bottle caps and tops as compositional tools and activations of color. On one hand, they feel transient, whimsical, and totally disposable, counter to any kind of preconceived sophistication in an artwork. But for me, they can be a pivotal compositional gesture in a work. They speak to my history (I've been collecting them since I was a kid). They also bring with them the weight and context of so many products that have been in our home for years, things that we've grown up with. In that way, they feel totally honest to me and still a surprising way to create a mark or make a gesture on a painting.



Image courtesy Trenton Doyle Hancock

**What images or objects do you look at while you work? Share your view from behind the canvas or your desktop—wherever you spend the most time.**

I'm constantly looking at toys, anywhere I go, including the studio. I keep a toy in my pocket to remind me of the things I love, or I have a shrine set up of things that I like to look at—either action figures or other types of toys and colorful plastic objects, because I often make colorful paintings. Most of what I collect is from the 1980s, the years when I was a little kid. I collect toys from the 1950s and also actively collect toys that are made now too, but I'm always drawn to the '80s.

In addition, I love to surround myself with VHS covers from the '80s and '90s, as well as packaging from toys, games, and other objects from that era—there is a landfill of evidence from this time. I love how packaging is designed to capture and hold your attention, and I love thinking about how to attract someone to an object myself. I recently designed a set of toys featuring some of my main characters as children. They include Torpedo Boy, Udom Endgle, Bringback, and Infants Soul. I was also able to design the packaging for each of these toys which was an incredible experience.



Image courtesy Trenton Doyle Hancock

### **What is the last exhibition you saw that made an impression on you and why?**

I saw a show at Kirk Hooper in Dallas of work by an old professor of mine, Lee Baxter Davis. He's a figurative narrative artist that made a serious and lasting impact on my practice. In fact, there are only a handful of artists who have truly changed my trajectory, and Lee is one of them. And not just me, he has influenced so many other artists. When I was in school, I took every class I could with him. He focused my attention and energy and taught me how to be smarter and to think deeper about how to weave my various influences together. He has so many technical skills, and knows how to make magic happen in an artwork. He is legendary. I always enjoy seeing what he's working on. The new works are void of color, but they have text woven, hidden and written into the work in various states of exposure. It's poetry he wrote himself and is a beautiful way to show his interests in ancient manuscripts, comics, and literature.

### **What made you choose this particular studio over others?**

I have two studios right now. One is a large warehouse in Houston where I've worked in for over 15 years. It's where I go to make larger works, works that are over 10-by-12 feet. It also holds so many of my toys, games, and my drum set. It's been the main space that I've made work for years now. My other studio is newer and much more intimate. This new studio is in a home that my wife, artist JooYoung Choi, and I moved to about a year ago. It's been a long process of moving things over, and we are just starting to make this place feel like home. I was able to commandeer one of the rooms that I'm now using as a studio to create smaller drawings and paintings for my upcoming show at Shulamit Nazarian. To prepare for this show I've had to really focus and am spending a lot of time drawing, painting, and making collages in the house. It's also great because it's summer in Houston and the home studio has air-conditioning, something I don't have in the warehouse. But, I've needed to go back and forth between the home studio and the warehouse studio, since some of my new works are really large.

### **Describe the home studio in three adjectives.**

Convenient, full, comforting.

### **How does the studio environment influence the way you work?**

My environment always has a big bearing on my output, and it also depends on what you need and if you're capable of adapting to different environments. My requirements for the work I'm creating now is a lot of peace, quiet, and focus as it's a new body of work and there's been a lot of troubleshooting, writing, thinking, and making drawings to get ideas out. In these cases, it's helpful to have a space that can be private, with doors, where my cat won't bother me or ask for food. It's good to be shut away from distractions sometimes and my studio at home offers exactly what I need right now.