

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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CANVASSING THE AREA: Hancock had to get creative to figure out a way to super-size his art.
photography by Bill Surface

Trenton Doyle Hancock's paintings have hung in some of the world's most prestigious museums. Now he's got a piece where people might actually see it: Cowboys Stadium.

In the early 1990s, Paris, Texas—like many towns in our state—was defined by high school football. Kids grew up with dreams of playing under the Friday night lights in Noyes Stadium, hoping that would start them on their way to a featured role on Sundays at Texas Stadium. I was one of them. So was my friend Trent, a backup defensive lineman nicknamed "Nintendo" by coaches for his love of playing video games and drawing the characters in them. I didn't make it. He did.

"Nintendo"—now known in galleries and museums the world over as Trenton Doyle Hancock—didn't actually make it to the NFL. He didn't even play college ball, concentrating on art studies at Paris Junior College and then Texas A&M-Commerce. Yet he still secured a featured role at the Dallas Cowboys' new stadium: he's one of 14 contemporary artists commissioned to create "monumental, site-specific installations" as part of Jerry Jones and his family's Dallas Cowboys Art Program. Their pieces are installed near entryways, ramps, and concourses with the highest traffic, ensuring that they will be a very real part of the stadium experience, not just a bit of good PR shoved into a corner.

Trent's contribution, a 100-by-40-foot mural titled *From a Legend to a Choir*, hangs above a pedestrian ramp. Its location allows stadium-goers to analyze the work as they move from one level to the next. In a way, it also allows them to analyze Trent as he does the same thing, moving from the somewhat insular art world into the wide-open spaces of public consumption.

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Not unlike the team that takes the field at Cowboys Stadium, Trent won his roster spot through a draft of sorts. The Joneses assembled a council (including Michael Auping, chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth; Charles Wylie, curator of contemporary art at the Dallas Museum of Art; and collectors Howard Rachofsky and Gayle Stoffel) to recommend a cadre of artists on which to bestow this unique opportunity. “I’ve been on a lot of public arts panels,” Auping says, “and I’ve never been on one where the level of art chosen has been as high as this one.”

From the beginning, Auping felt it was important that the committee consider Trent, with whom he was very familiar. Auping was one of the first to display Trent’s work in a major museum, when he brought *The Life and Death of #1* to the Fort Worth Modern. “He was young and vibrant, with lots of ideas and inventive energy,” Auping says, recalling the 2001 show. “But Trent is no longer an up-and-coming artist. He’s a very important artist.”

It’s hard to believe that the guy with whom I used to trade *Star Wars* figures is now a major player on the international art scene who sells pieces for upwards of \$42,000. In many ways Trent hasn’t changed since our childhood. He’s still built like an undersized nose guard. He still wears blue-rimmed glasses. He still collects toys. But his thick, graying beard reminds me that years have passed since our playing days. He’s now 35.

Trent’s paintings, murals, and drawings are a psychedelic playground, populated with characters born from the religion-based mythology he has created. It’s an entire universe inhabited by species known as “mounds” and “vegans,” constantly evolving and so complex that he penned a companion comic book (*The Trenton Doyle Handbook: Volume 1*) that tells the origins and back stories of characters like Homerbuctas, Bow-Headed Lou, and Sesom (Moses spelled backward). A painting or mural may contain thousands of different elements that, together, tell a story of past and present, darkness and light, good and evil. While black-and-white forms remain a hallmark of his work, his later pieces have progressed into an orgy of color, due in part, Trent says, to an orgasmic dream by one of his characters. Despite those sexually charged origins, children often connect with Trent’s work more quickly than adults. My son has taken a liking to his work through exhibition summary books—though I must admit that some of the more anatomically correct images cause me to turn the pages quickly.

His appeal to children actually makes sense, since the artist remains a big kid himself—more than a bit of “Nintendo” lingers—and his pieces are so colorful and tactile that you want to grab them, run your fingers over them. I recall looking at one piece and thinking, “Is that the cap from a bottle of detergent?” Sure enough, it was. It’s not unusual for him to place the top of a seasoning container or the bottom of a plastic Easter egg onto a piece if the color makes an impression on him. As a collector of stuff, he has scraps of paper, bottle caps, and other assorted items catalogued and waiting for the chance to transcend their previously mundane existence.

The Cowboys Stadium installation, though, required a larger scope than detergent-bottle caps and colorful bits of paper. Trent began work on what might become his definitive piece last May. After a couple of months of drawing in his Houston studio, he felt like he had created something worthy of the magnitude of the program. He submitted his idea to the advisory group; they told him to keep drawing.

“I’m used to saying, ‘Here you go,’ and washing my hands of it, really,” Trent says. “But this time, it wasn’t the case.” It was a frustrating process for an artist who has been featured in galleries from Shanghai to Istanbul, but one to which he was glad to submit. To him, the historic nature of the undertaking and the chance to share the experience with the other 13 artists who were selected by the Joneses were worth the trouble.

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After several more starts and stops, the work that emerged was a hybrid of several previous projects. It most resembles a 2003 painting called *Choir*, owned by the Whitney Museum of Art in New York. *From a Legend to a Choir* is set in a field of vegetation with the artist's signature black-and-white mounds and colorful ribbons. Examining it closely, one can spot a character resembling Trent. He also was able to localize the piece with a figure in a football helmet and by relocating Reunion Tower into the middle of the fields. The title ties the artist, the art, and its installation site together: "Legend" is the name of a pivotal character in Trent's mythology and the street that runs in front of the new stadium. "The piece is about abundance and a new beginning of sorts," he says, "and takes place in my version of Genesis, where the colors are vibrant and pure." It's a perfect metaphor for a new era of Cowboys football in a fancy new stadium with the biggest high-definition TV in the world.

Then, logistics: Trent had to determine what method he would use to transfer his art from a piece of paper to its oversized canvas. He first considered a group of mural painters he had known at a time when he lived in Philadelphia. Ultimately, his search led him to a group based here in Dallas.

E.H. Teasley & Co. has produced signs, banners, and billboards at its shop just off Corinth near the Trinity River levees for 59 years. Its tin buildings look like a couple of small airplane hangars and would never be mistaken for the architectural masterpieces that often house Trent's art. But the folks at Teasley know their way around football stadiums. They annually hang huge banners at the Cotton Bowl and will continue their relationship with the New Year's Day game at Cowboys Stadium. When Trent walked into Teasley, it was very similar to the print shops he was accustomed to using in the art world.

Rowdy Bush was in charge of bringing this massive work to Cowboys Stadium. He first loaded an image of the drawing into his computer and embarked upon an intricate process of enhancing the original colors of the painting (making the reds more red and the blues more blue) so it would have more "pop" at the stadium. Initially, Trent felt compelled to look over Bush's shoulder and advise him on each change, but as they became more comfortable with each other—and Bush began to understand more about how Trent thought—he was given more freedom. Bush broke the image into a 60-section grid, each piece of which had to be approved by Trent and the advisory council before it was deemed stadium-ready. Once Bush finished, the mural was printed as 25 4-by-40-foot sections that Teasley hung like wallpaper.

That's how many of Trent's closest friends and family regarded his work before. They saw it as wallpaper. They didn't fully appreciate the high esteem with which he is held throughout the world. But everyone understands what it means to be featured—no matter how weird the piece looks to him—on a wall at Cowboys Stadium. "My family probably reacted more energetically to the news than anything else I've done in my career," he says. "They all love football, and they all love the Cowboys."

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