

## Trenton Doyle Hancock *Something American*

James Cohan, Walker Street and Grand Street, New York 17 September – 17 October

Trenton Doyle Hancock's paintings, comic strips, installations and objects are rooted in the mythology of the 'Moundverse' – a world populated by his alter-superhero-ego, Torpedo Boy; 'Vegans', writhing beings that have the ability to possess humans and take over their bodies; and 'Bringbacks', creatures of nostalgia that recall childhood memories, like the toys in Hancock's installations. *Something American*, installed across both James Cohan galleries, expands this world with ink-on-paper drawings from his ongoing graphic novel, large paintings of the Vegans and Bringbacks, and paintings of Torpedo Boy and a Ku Klux Klan member.

Rendered nearly lifesize, Hancock's Klansman is ghostly and cartoonish, a reference to Philip Guston's own Klansmen paintings (a major Guston retrospective was recently postponed over fears that those paintings would be misinterpreted). In Hancock's *SKUM: Just Beneath the Skin* (2018),

Torpedo Boy stands opposite the white figure, who extends the disembodied head of a Black man. Similar heads float around them in a swirling psychedelic backdrop of thick acrylic paint, coloured paper and plastic bottlecaps. Rather than comicbook word bubbles, the characters' conversation is shown in text cut into their bodies. 'No no no know don't touch that damn thing! Germs,' Torpedo Boy says. The Klansman responds, 'Just be just beneath the skin again!' repeated several times on his white disguise. In another meeting in a less colourful space, the conversation continues as the Klansman offers 'The star of code switching' and tells Torpedo Boy, now also a ghostly white, 'Take it. It will help you live longer,' advocating for assimilation or code switching – the practice of changing one's speech depending on the audience – as a survival technique. The hooded figure's language is both seductive, like the language

of white supremacy that allows it to continue to spread, and infectious like germs.

The humour of their exchanges is undeniable, heightened by the cartoonish visuals. But as the exhibition title suggests, they hint at something darker about America. Hancock refuses to present a traditionally heroic superhero. Instead, Torpedo Boy is an antihero, betraying his fallible humanity; wry and at times gullible, engaged in an ongoing exchange with a dangerous figure. In *Schlep and Screw, Knowledge Rental Pawn Exchange Service* (2017), the Klansman offers an apple evocative of the biblical Tree of Knowledge, tempting Torpedo Boy and through him the audience as well. The figures stand on an 'alter' that reads, 'All of this is you'. The desire to be heroic exists alongside a fear of the contagion of white supremacy, suggesting we are all susceptible to its lure, or at least to the human failures of apathy and inaction against it. *Megan N. Liberty*



*SKUM: Just Beneath the Skin*, 2018, acrylic, graphite, plastic tops and paper collage on canvas, 152 × 152 × 10 cm. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York