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Art Power Couple

The Love Story of These Two Houston Artists Is Full of Whimsy

JooYoung Choi and Trenton Doyle Hancock use their shared vision to create wildly imaginative (and separate) comic book–inspired creative universes.

By Meredith Nudo, September 11, 2023. Published in the Fall 2023 issue of *Houstonia Magazine*



The love story of Houston-based artists Trenton Doyle Hancock (left) and JooYoung Choi has been going strong since 2010. Image: [Michael Starghill](#)

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, they probably didn't envision that he would one day add matchmaking to his suite of powers. For Houston-based interdisciplinary artists JooYoung Choi and Trenton Doyle Hancock, none other than the [Man of Steel](#) himself launched their story of love, creativity, inspiration, and finding beauty in underappreciated corners of daily life.

It all began in 2010, when Hancock was invited to lecture at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where Choi was a student. Her friends urged her to attend, since their artistic proclivities overlapped. At the time, few other creators shared her colorful visions of pop culture–infused paintings and her belief in the validity of Marvel

Comics and [similar narratives](#) as being valid forms of creative expression. She was intrigued—but she almost didn't go.

“I was sitting at my apartment, and I just heard in my memory these people telling me, ‘You’ve got to go to this talk. This guy, he’s doing something that you’re going to resonate with,’” Choi says. “I was going to stay home and just make some food and hang out. Then, I don’t know, I just had that feeling that I had to go.”



Hancock and Choi have formed a strong partnership by supporting each other's creative processes.
Image: [Michael Starghill](#)

Hancock began his talk with Marlon Brando's monologue from the 1978 *Superman: The Movie*, which holds such fascination with him as an artist that he incorporated elements of the scene where Brando's Jor-El reunites with son Kal-El into his lectures. "I would use that as the beginning of my lectures to ground people in where I was coming from and my relationship to pop media and understanding of family, father-to-son relationships, and all these things that are themes within my work," Hancock says.

At the time of their meeting, pop media wasn't exactly taken seriously as an art form. Choi found Hancock's performance enchanting, because he understood the power of comics, mainstream movies, and other delights all too often (wrongly) dismissed as beneath the appreciation of true creative talent.

Choi and Hancock's love story isn't about two halves uniting to form a whole, but rather two wholes crashing together to form one larger, more powerful whole.

Both artists gleefully infuse their influences into their work, building up lore over time to add texture and context to the worlds their characters inhabit. Raised in Paris, Texas, Hancock is best known for his videos, sculptures, prints, books, toys, and cards featuring the Mounds, as well as the superhero Torpedo Boy, whom he created at age 10. The Mounds are mysterious, gentle cryptids whom Torpedo Boy guards against the menacing and bloodthirsty Vegans. Through this curious world, Hancock dissects religion, race, family, and why the objects we deem disposable are often anything but.

Choi, whose [*Love and Wondervision*](#) was on display at Rice University's Moody Center for the Arts this summer, was born in South Korea and raised in New Hampshire as an adoptee. Much of her work blossoms from a playful world known as the Cosmic Womb, whose all-encompassing eccentricity creates a veritable *Pee-wee's Playhouse* with a catchy theme song, puppetry, sculpture, video, animation, and paintings, reflecting her thoughts on family reunification and transracial adoption; the depiction of queer, trans, intersex, and nonbinary people of color in media; trauma recovery; and the intersections of social justice and the spiritual realm.



JooYoung Choi pictured with her biological father in South Korea. Image: [Michael Starghill](#)

Choi and Hancock’s love story isn’t about two halves uniting to form a whole, but rather two wholes crashing together to form one larger, more powerful whole—kind of like Marvel merging its Ultimate universe with its main universe. They wed in 2016 at the Griffith Park Tunnel in Los Angeles—or technically, Choi says, in Toontown. (The location was [the Toontown Tunnel](#) in one of their favorite movies, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.)

Every day, they notice elements of the other in their art, becoming influences as integral to their creative growth as Muppets and Korean food. “It’s [Choi’s] sense of how things go together. So, if it’s a painting, I’ll see her go through the logic of, ‘What is the theme of this?’ and then she researches a theme and sets things in order,” Hancock says. “I think those things definitely rub off on me. I just go in and see what she’s doing and how she does it.”

A perfect date for them involves trips to secondhand shops, Walmarts, toy stores, and comic book shops to find beauty and cultural commentary in the day-to-day ephemera that goes neglected. Choi also credits Hancock with easing the self-doubt and frustration that comes with working in the arts. “It’s a very mutual relationship,” says Choi, with artistic support and loving encouragement going both ways.



Torpedo Boy (above), a Mound, and Nedfri, a news reporting caterpillar. Image: [Michael Starghill](#)

“There have been so many moments where I didn’t have the confidence to believe or even see that what I was doing was something that might be important to honor,” Choi says. It was Hancock who nurtured in her a desire to branch out beyond painting and embrace her gifts as a sculptor, animator, and videographer.

“You think about all the things that come together in one’s life to allow a very special moment to happen,” Choi says. “All these strange things that happened in my life culminated into my friends telling me that there’s this guy that’s coming to the school and you really need to hear him speak because he does what you do.”

Theirs is a boundless curiosity and joy, a hunger for the world rivaled only by Galactus. And like a filling meal around the grills at Korea House, one of Choi and Hancock’s favorite spots, it’s more magical when shared together.