

Rory Tangney
At The Still End of The World

In Philip K. Dick's short sci-fi story *Pay for the Printer*, Dick introduced an idea that he developed steadily throughout his work; worlds without invention and craft. Set in a nuclear winter, machines called the Biltong 'print' replicas of objects. As they grow older, the Biltong produce worse copies that resemble the original less and less. Increasingly, everything falls into disrepair and decay. In the end, the humans are left in a world of ceaseless, obsolete objects. He consolidated this idea in his dystopian Sci-Fi novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and called it "kipple."

Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterdays homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there's twice as much of it. It always gets more and more.

This accumulative process of entropy is the stuff of Tangney's *At The Still End of The World* which, like Dick's "kipple", grapples with the contradictions of mass production and utility. "No one can win against kipple," Dick wrote, "It's a universal principal operating throughout the universe; the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization." Tangney's concern, however, is not so much with objects themselves but matter. The exhibition is made up of mostly salvaged and debris-like materials destined for landfill; rug shavings matted together with latex, celluloid tape, potato starch, dust, cardboard, as well as repurposed artworks and some new, sustainable materials such as cork. As the title suggests, the exhibition's primary concerns are with disintegrating world systems such as late-stage capitalism and signify a necessary transition away from the hyper-consumerist modern world.

Like many of Dick's stories, *At The Still End of The World* begins in what could be the wreckage of a nuclear apocalypse. A figure stands amidst a chaotic conglomeration of discarded and subsequently recovered material. It's difficult to distinguish any item in particular, only textures set themselves apart – fuzzy carpet fibres, tangles of tape, corrugated cardboard, and wood juts out hazardously in every direction. Totemic works populate the space of the main gallery. 'Endeavour,' 'Just looking for a way off this rock,' and 'Some Things I Dreamed of That Came To Pass' comprise of cloth, wool, string, carpet, chainsawed wood, wire and a host of innumerable materials jumbled and piled high. As dishevelled as each totem is, it is refined to its designated space. There is a sense of order to some works too. In 'Nebula, Neurosa, Domus,' a mass of tape, thrown against the wall is caught on a piece of cardboard and nail above, beside which hangs a painted piece of cardboard. Balanced in texture and colour; the shiny, tangled mass of tape offsets the perfect white circle it surrounds. It is satisfying to look at – tactile and affecting – qualities most of the works possess.

A tension arises as the delineation between things and waste is not clear. Tangney leans into the productive chaos of the materials throughout the space, and the intricate ways in which the surrounding sculptures do not yield easy to categorisation. But categorise, we do. As in the alien Biltong in Dick's story, what differentiates humans from these kipple-producing machines is our ability to categorise, associate and make meaning. When I see '20 Years Between Certainties' made up of a heaped sagging mass of celluloid tape atop a cork block I think of 'The Wild Things' from Maurice Sendak's 1963 children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. When I voice this to Tangney, he laughs and says "Mr. Snuffleupagus," the giant anteater-like mammoth from Sesame Street. These associations, of course, reveal our upbringings, employing shared memories as common ground. They demonstrate how these

abstract sculptures invoke emotional entanglements; how our associations with matter and physical objects gives us a sense of identity and who we are as people.

In his book *Genesis*, Michael Seres writes that “The object, for us, makes things slow.” Not simply by the symbolic passing of time they can represent but through memory and forgetting. By reclaiming and repurposing matter, Tangney points us to its historic lineage; of where it came from, what it is now and what it might become, and with that its accumulation of meaning and value. In conversation, he gestures to ‘Its Elusive To Me, Though You seem So Sure Of It,’ the rectangular block of cork affixed to the wall, one of the only materials he purchased for the exhibition. He first encountered this material outside his in-laws house in the UK, originally used as cladding to insulate buildings. The cork exudes an earthy odour. Here, he has sculpted into it, rendering its surface rock-like and organic, in contrast with the surrounding sculptures, which covered in paint, glue, latex, and coloured white, pink and turquoise feel synthetic.

There is a visual fluency throughout the exhibition; the colours pink and turquoise cohere the chaotic works into a conversation with each other. References to Op art – a concentric circle – subtly appear in the disarray. Spray painted cardboard climbs the walls, taking in the gallery building. Tangney’s sculptures assert their thinginess. They have a haptic quality and demand to be peered into, smelled, touched. The tactility of materials invokes the presence of the viewer. It’s not that Tangney employs presence as an aesthetic aim but that he valorises materiality in a way that it can only be appreciated in person. In the face of this doomscape, *At The Still End of The World* playfully celebrates the materials. There is a lightness to his creations and an apparent joy in making.

As one moves from the bright airy space of the main gallery into the bunker-like black cube, the apocalyptic nature of the show becomes palpable in ‘Take Aim At The Light Of Our Accumulated Dreams.’ Pitch black at first, your eyes slowly adjust to the wreckage aided by a muted fluorescent tube. Planks of wood chaotically strewn and precariously balanced pile high with clumps of tape, plastic sheeting, fibrous tufts and wire. A hanging candelabra reveals itself. It has lost its opulence, caked in a dusty white powder with a scramble of tape dangling beneath. As a whole, the installation creates a war-torn image that has sadly become all too familiar in recent news coverage. Seen through the purview of these events, it speaks to the complexity of human relationship to the material world and what it could feel like if it was blown up, attacked, invaded until what we’re left with is an indistinguishable mass of kipple.

Artists foraging around wastelands, creatively dumpster diving, and making anew what others saw as waste is nothing new. Yet, Tangney consciously negotiates his role as an artist fully embedded in the economy of consumerism, interrogating where he locates his own place, responsibility, and fascination – with matter itself. *At The Still End of The World* reminds us that we, too, are composed of matter. Which brings me back to one of Philip K. Dick’s fictive worlds. In another 1960s novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, Dick begins the narrative with an optimistic memo from corporate boss Leo Bulero, upon his return from Mars.

I mean, after all; you have to consider we’re only made out of dust. That’s admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn’t forget that. But even considering, I mean it’s a sort of a bad beginning, we’re not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we’re faced with we can make it. You get me?

In Tangney’s topographical end sphere, perhaps a strange utopia can be found.