

## Brown Study

By Tom Roberts

Mounted on a corner of Michael Curran's living room closest the kitchen, about five feet up and a foot high, are three units of taciturnity or evasion, the shape of lady's finger biscuits and coated in chocolate.

Now I think of it, I'm drawn more and more to this assemblage. It was the first thing I went to in Tesla's Room. It engaged me in conversation because it was so aloof. I think it is key to understanding the wonderful perversity of Matthew Tickle's approach to scientific knowledge.

Nikola Tesla was a master of what is called picture thinking, but which might better be described as object thinking. He would construct an experiment in his imagination before attempting it in his laboratory. Perceiving all of the equipment he might need as lucid objects in mental space, he could turn them in his mind as if he'd had them under a lamp, examining their dynamics. He would set the experiment running and make modifications as it went.

An extreme state of picture thinking is reached through over-contemplation. The complex dynamics become too intricate to describe. The general shape of the thing in motion is lost. It becomes static, a freak object, without the kind of nuanced shading and shifting emphasis that might render it in all its liveliness to an audience, an investor or an advocate. And yet to describe or make a diagram of the object of thought without thinking enough about it, accounting for it in all the relations it enters into – is to risk mistranslation, and deny the object of thought its own life.

What you get is a brown funk, or something close to it. That's what Tickle calls it. By rights, it should be a blob of heartbreak. The sad evidence of too much time used up in contemplating, and not enough time spent communicating.

What really strikes me is the *elegance* of the brown funk assemblage.

As with some of the best work, and incidentally the best home-making, especially when you live in a Hovel, Matthew Tickle is taking something bad and turning it around: From being an intolerable condition of thought, he has turned the brown funk into a purposefully reticent assemblage. Its purpose is to dignify the ineffable by refusing to speak of it.

I can't really account for the making of this product. As much as it pains me to say it, it almost takes on a life of its own. I don't want to breach the gap between imagining it and knowing about it. Though I know I should. To my mind, the brown funk is a hardening of the compositional matter of contemplation itself, into a defensive and protective material. Something like a horn or a shell made of intense contemplation, formed by thinking too much, if that's possible, and thereby compressing thought into a hard, impacted mass.

And now Mr. Tickle has honed this material into an assemblage that bears comparison with a phrase he used as the title for another installation: "*What the eye can't see the heart can't grieve for.*"

As often as not, sayings like these aren't spoken or sung with the intention of foreclosing or denying knowledge. Instead, through an excessive generalisation that speaks of the very thing it denies, an adage acts to guard the object of knowledge from description, in order to preserve its complexity. It's a singular act of intervention.

The adage works by a kind of lonely example. It tries to steal its object more time. It's been at it forever.

In return, the complexity of things passes back a covert dignity to the hoary old adage and its speaker. It's an exchange of values: A pact with the world unseen.

But it's also a pact with the audience; because all the while the speaker is admiring the ineffable object of knowledge in motion, and letting you know he or she is admiring it.

Here lies the perversity. Tickle himself cites Herman Melville's story *Bartleby The Scrivener* – a story of Wall Street [1853]. Bartleby works for a legal copyists. Asked to proof some documents, Bartleby answers "I would prefer not to." He goes on to decline a series of demands, while remaining within the legal system to the point of inhabiting the copy firm's Chambers.

Bartleby refuses to reproduce the terms of his employment. His reticence is singular, and it draws attention to itself. But it's also protective of what Bartleby surely feels is a non-convertible, non-translatable value. It is suggested that his refusals are performed on behalf of the dead and the unaccounted-for. Prior to working in Wall Street, the scrivener had been sacked from the dead-letter office, where he handled mail that had not been picked up.

The problem lies, perhaps, in the value thus accorded to Bartleby himself. His peers cannot see it: Even his employer, who indulges Bartleby's peculiarities, cannot see it. The subjects of his refusal cannot see what Bartleby refuses to do on their behalf - but we the readers are asked to appreciate it. There's the rub: In the visible and official system in which Bartleby moves, his actions are not understood. Melville intervenes to privilege the viewer with an understanding of their value. But the scrivener derives his unusual status in our minds from two sources: From his refusal to play his employers' game; and from the complex, non-reproducible body of a people, who remain forever outside of description.

The dead and the unaccounted for are still invisible, still misunderstood or misapprehended, mistranslated and subject to the power of legality. It is also precisely because Bartleby occupies a position in the legal system – however lowly – that he is able to act against it. In this sense I am ambivalent about Bartleby's singularity, even as I admire his reticence. Should we be looking at Bartleby or the unaccounted-for?

Is Bartleby ultimately preservative of both the ineffable in its very ineffability, and the legal system in its power?

Tickle too plays on this difficult and intriguing bind, with a different complex body in mind, but he transfers his reticence into an artifact. The brown funk might be a temporary state preserved as a memory; there is a suggestion of moving beyond it. The assemblage also appears to be modular - you could add more units to fit a different-sized corner.