

EDDIE CLEMENS
FIRST EDITION, THIRD HAND
31 OCT – 23 NOV 2019

Tu'i Malila was a Madagascan radiated tortoise said to have been given to the Tongan royal family by Captain Cook in 1777, and owned by them until its death in 1965, when it was estimated to have been 188 years old. This animal is referenced in Philip K. Dick's seminal 1968 science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, where it functions as a talisman for what the author perceived as the vanishing of authentic human experiences, such as empathy for animals, and their replacement by simulated equivalents.

In Eddie Clemens' third solo exhibition at Bowerbank Ninow, *First Edition, Third Hand*, Tu'i Malila likewise becomes the central node in an expansive thematic network. Navigating between history, fiction, technology and the everyday, Clemens works to ground the idea of the cyborg in the history of the Pacific. In this case, Clemens' engagement with the material is carried out "third hand," from the position of a viewer and researcher without direct access to the remains of the tortoise and the Tongan cultural context within which it is located. This installation is part of a larger research project investigating how the beguiling alternate realities of popular culture narratives, particularly science fiction films, intersect with and flavour our experience of the world.

To this end, Clemens has created an installation that re-imagines level 9, 10 Lorne Street as the Tyrell Corporation headquarters from *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's 1982 film adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. He likens the sloping façade of the Lorne Towers building, constructed at the end of the 1970s, to the immense, pyramidal structure in Scott's film. Clemens does this by way of a video projection that consists in part of a digital rendering of the inward-sloping window frames that are concealed by the walls of the gallery. This row of windows are depicted pierced by roving beams of light and reflections from water that reference the set design and lighting of the Tyrell boardroom scene in *Blade Runner*. For the exhibition opening, Clemens has arranged for a camera drone to shoot footage of the exterior of the building and approach the balcony, paralleling the famous effects shots of the "spinner" car landing at the Tyrell Headquarters in Scott's film.

By tying the gallery space to this seminal piece of 1980s cyberpunk world-building, Clemens foregrounds the contemporary relevance of the concerns of Scott's film: surveillance society, the interface between technology and identity and the replacement of governments by corporations. The timing of the exhibition reinforces this synchronicity: the date of the film's events, as stated in the opening text crawl, is November, 2019. However, by focusing on the peripheral figure of Tu'i Malila, an animal that appears only in the epigraph to Dick's novel, Clemens navigates an idiosyncratic path through the text, inverting hierarchies of value and scale and complicating simple one-to-one correspondences between the film and the current zeitgeist.

The video element of Clemens' installation further explores the idea of the cyborg in the Pacific, making use of video footage from David Attenborough's 1960 BBC documentary

series, *The People of Paradise*. In this film, a scene of Attenborough feeding Tu'i Malila on the grounds of the Royal Palace in Nuku'alofa transitions into footage of coconut crabs, which Attenborough's voice-over describes as resembling "ghastly, inanimate mechanical robot[s]." This strange juxtaposition speaks directly to the themes of Dick's novel, pointing towards the interchangeability of organisms and mechanisms. In Clemens' work, the idea of mechanical connectivity and system design become interleaved with biology and genetics; the Loc Line and Unistrut product groups that this installation employs become clades or species with their own strange agency and life. The segmented hoses and claw-like grippers of the Loc Line holders that Clemens has designed to support his books become like the limbs of coconut crabs, motile appendages that hover eerily on the boundary between machine and being.

In addition to the projection elements of the installation, Clemens has created a space that reflects the Tyrell headquarters' multivalent status as both a corporate headquarters and a manufacturing plant for "replicants," or artificial life-forms. Supported by a metal Unistrut framework, a 3D printer creates models of Tu'i Malila's empty shell, using dimensions taken from drawings made by Auckland Museum taxidermists¹ and tourist photographs of the tortoise's preserved remains. In this way, Tu'i Malila itself becomes a hybrid organism, a cybernetic ghost struggling to manifest itself into the physical world.

Also included in the exhibition are three sculptures that interrogate the textual history of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*. First edition hard- and softcover copies of Dick's novel, as well as an authentic original *Blade Runner* screenplay, are supported by custom-designed "third hand" soldering stations constructed from Loc Line coolant hose, coiling and grasping like robotic tendrils or tentacles. Clemens draws the viewer's attention to the physicality of the text-object itself, contrasting the fragility of the aged paper with the metallic grasp in which it is held. These book-support mechanisms are anchored to an anodized metal base in the shape of Tu'i Malila's shell, again positioning the animal as a skeleton key that unlocks a potentially infinite web of textual and thematic correspondences and interrelationships.

In this body of work, Clemens invokes Tu'i Malila as an enigmatic, polyvalent figure that softens the boundaries between nature, culture and technology. The historical details of the tortoise itself are somewhat difficult to pin down; despite its anecdotal provenance as a gift to the Tongan royal family, there is no historical record of Cook having been the gift-giver; likewise, the age of the tortoise itself is unclear, as it is possible that more than one animal bore the same name.² In this, Tu'i Malila becomes a kind of versioned being, an identity that persists beyond a given physical form. The tortoise functions as a vessel, its shell a container for a range of narratives that connect the cybernetic to the Pacific.

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1. Joan Robb and E.G. Turbott, "Tu'i Malila, 'Cook's Tortoise,'" *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, vol. 8 (December 1971): 230-232.

2. Brian Gill, *The Owl that Fell from the Sky: stories of a museum curator* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2012).