

# WEIRD SCIENCE

BY TOM MORTON

Let me begin by describing something I do not fully understand (and neither, in truth, does anybody else). Quantum entanglement is a phenomenon in which two or more subatomic particles, such as protons or electrons, exhibit a connection even when separated over vast spatial and temporal distances, moving in a way that's analogous to individual dancers coming together in a minuet, and seemingly communicating with each other instantaneously, no matter where in the universe they happen to be. If these particles are indeed exchanging information faster than the speed of light, then this would contradict Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity, a paradox that led him, in a 1945 letter, to describe quantum entanglement as 'spooky action at a distance'. Today, most physicists shy away from the notion that entangled particles are somehow 'speaking' to each other, preferring to think of them as a unified object with a single, quantum state, albeit one that may be distributed, unaccountably, across great tracts of space-time.

Defending his own use of the complex findings of research scientists to create literary affect, the novelist Martin Amis stated that 'I may not know much about science, but I know what I like'. In part, this is a comic riff on the philistine's stock response when confronted with an avant-garde cultural artefact ('I may not know much about art...'), but it also points to the fact a field such as quantum mechanics is pregnant with poetic possibilities, which artists can tease out in a way even the most knowledgeable scientific mind cannot. Witness the work of Max Boyla, who has adopted Einstein's phrase 'spooky action at a distance' as the title of his solo exhibition at Palmer Gallery, and whose paintings, sculptures, and time-based media pieces explore how what we call 'reality' is actually much weirder — and more wondrous — than we commonly suppose.

While Boyla's paintings manifest in the gallery space as two-dimensional planes — whose shimmering, mutedly cosmic surfaces appear to respond eerily to our presence as we draw towards them — during their production phase they were actually closer to three-dimensional objects. Making these works, the artist takes lengths of poly-satin, then folds, creases, and sometimes (as in the case of *Unfolding Envelope*, 2025) compresses them between wooden boards. The flat fabric is thus given volume, and far flung points on its surface meet and touch, a state that recalls not only the phenomenon of quantum entanglement, but also the writer Vladimir Nabokov's words in his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951): 'I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way to superimpose one part of the pattern on another. Let visitors trip.'

Next, Boyla submerges his poly-satin in a hot dye bath, where he treats it with what he has described as an 'alchemical concoction' of dyes, pigments and binder (we might note, here, that suffusing his fabric with colour erases the customary distinction in painting between medium and support). Significantly, while he says he 'may have a rough idea of how each painting will turn out', his desire is to be 'as removed as I can be'. Accordingly, when we inspect the examples in his Palmer show, we find no visible trace of the artist's hand, almost as though these were not authored artworks at all, but rather autonomous, self-generating entities. As Boyla observes: 'How the work has dried dictates form. What creates the image is how the paint settles'.

Another thing I don't understand, or at least can't form a useful mental picture of, is four-dimensional space (when I Google an animation of a tesseract, the 4-D analogue of a 3-D cube, all I see is a rotating shape resembling the screensaver on the laptop of a '90s Trance DJ). The reason for this is that, like all humans, my biological and perceptual apparatus is restricted to three spatial dimensions: length, width and depth. Were a four-dimensional being to appear before any of our eyes, it would be visible to us only as a shifting, three-dimensional 'slice' of itself, passing through our reality. Contrastingly, should this 4-D being happen to look our way, it would simultaneously perceive not only the entire outer surface of our bodies, but our internal topography, too (if that feels incomprehensible, think of how we're able, at a glance, to see not only every face, but also the interior of a 2-D square).

Boyla's art cannot, of course, grant us such perceptual powers. What it does do, however, is adroitly re-evaluate the dimensional logic of how a painting is produced, while also making us alive to the limits of how we see. Looking at the repeating, Rorschach-blot-like, quasi-autogenic forms in works such as *Primordial Stew* (2025), *Ominous Destiny* (2025) and *All you see is glory* (2025), we experience a kind of sublime disorientation, in which many of the most fundamental properties of painting as it is commonly understood are thrown into doubt. Yet another example of this occurs when we consider the fact that Boyla's canvases (more properly, stretched poly-satins) are usually hung on a gallery wall, or otherwise vertically suspended — a display strategy that gives each work a 'top' and a 'bottom'. And yet, unlike most paintings in the art historical canon, whether figurative or abstract, there is little if nothing in these images themselves that suggests this is the correct way they should be positioned in space. I'm reminded of the fact that our infinite universe has no 'up' or 'down', and that such co-ordinates are always relative to our own, finite selves.

Notably, Boyla is a maker not only of discrete artworks, but of exhibitions as environments, and each piece in 'Spooky action at a distance' contributes to the show's charged atmosphere, at once ominous and oddly alive, which the artist has likened to that of the 'Zone' in Andrei Tarkovsky's masterpiece of Soviet sci-fi cinema *Stalker* (1979) – a hauntingly enigmatic terrestrial landscape in which the laws of Newtonian physics do not always obtain. At Palmer Gallery, we encounter the sculptures *Everything inc.* (2026) and *A lonely speck* (2026), which are respectively formed from an abandoned steel sink unit fitted with a coloured lightbulb, and a similarly junked length of black, monolithic, mica-speckled kitchen countertop, featuring a circular incision, and another bulb. From such seemingly unpromising detritus, the artist has created objects that suggest planets, or suns, or celestial wormholes, set into the endless firmament. Looking at these works, we get to thinking of vast shifts in scale, from the domestic to the cosmic, and of how certain forms repeat themselves across creation, from the micro to the macro. Examine *Everything inc.* closely, and we'll note that the sink's twinned bowl and drainer resemble the mathematical symbol for infinity:  $\infty$ . Given this, Boyla must have found the work's punning title irresistible.

Like the universe itself, 'Spooky action at a distance' also has a temporal dimension. Played on a loop, and emanating from an inaccessible, spectrally-lit room, the sound installation *13th floor* (2026) takes the band Chromatics' instrumental track *Saturday* (2017), which featured in an episode of David Lynch's TV series *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), and slows down the drums, so that they suggest the pounding rhythm of industrial machinery. We might read this, on one level, as a way of opening up a time portal to the exhibition space's past, when what is now Palmer Gallery was the Palmer Tyre Company, which produced parts for military aircraft during The Second World War. (Palmer, of course, is also the surname of the *Twin Peaks* character Laura, whose murder drives the series' increasingly surreal narrative). If there is a sense, when experiencing Boyla's work, of everything being connected, it is no more in evidence than here.

Projected on to a gallery window, the elusive video piece *Awake without prior notice* (2026) takes its title from a line in the opening pages of Philip K. Dick's classic sci-fi novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), in which the protagonist, a detective who hunts down rogue synthetic humans only to discover that he is, in fact, one of their number, experiences surprise at finding himself 'awake without prior notice' – an early clue to his real identity. Dick's novel is a meditation, among other things, on what constitutes an authentic consciousness, and we might keep that in mind as we watch Boyla's video. What at first glance appears to be footage of luminous galaxies forming and reforming in the black beyond is actually an accidental pocket recording made on the artist's phone, during a cycle ride through London's teeming streets. As with his paintings, there is no evidence of the artist's hand, here, indeed apparently no will at work at all. Still, some unimaginably long and complex chain of cause and effect, beginning with the Big Bang some 13.8 billion years ago, resulted in this video being shot, at this particular point in the space-time continuum. We do not need to ascribe intention to the universe to marvel at what it creates – at the way it casually slips the stars into our pockets, and new thoughts into our minds.

#### *About Tom Morton*

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