

## *Signals: A Visceral Landscape of Light and Form*

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*I think our destination is neither utopia nor dystopia nor status quo, but protopia. It is a state that is better today than yesterday, although it might be only a little better... Because a protopia contains as many new problems as new benefits, this complex interaction of working and broken is very hard to predict.* – Kevin Kelly, Founding Editor of WIRED Magazine

*Protopia*, the title of Burren College's 2022 MFA interim exhibition, encapsulated the diverse art pieces of Amelia Rafle, Lindsay LeBlanc, and Catherine McDonald. The various works included in this exhibition were illustrative, sculptural, interactive— a truly disparate collection of creations all unified under the idea of Protopia: an experience of past, present, and future ecologies.

*Signals*, the strange and otherworldly structures made by Catherine McDonald, were of



particular interest to me. Upon entering the gallery space, which in and of itself had an aura of eerie disquiet, the first thing my eyes alighted on were the forms (or *signals*, if you will) central in the room. The outline of them was both organic and inorganic, their presence grounding me in that aforementioned sense of discomfort.

Perhaps discomfort is too strong a word for my feelings when looking at Catherine's work. A more apt way to explain it would be to say I was disconnected from the world. Her arrangements of light, colour, texture, and sculpture were successful in its execution of mood above all else. As I walked through the installation, it was like walking through a moonscape, or on another world. The integration of the sculpture with the floor of the gallery reinforced the illusion (or more fitting, the simulation) Catherine's work created in the space. Overall, the work was aesthetically lovely. The changing multicoloured

lighting, and the complex combinations of natural and manmade materials like sparkling salt and luminous copper brought a vitality, an almost living essence to the exhibit. This duality was very compelling, and I would very much like to see Catherine continue to explore the idea in future projects.

While I thought the series as a whole was a promising start, there were a few things that could have been improved upon. In my opinion, one of the biggest problems with the work was the general lighting and the height of each piece. To further push the otherworldly energy of the piece, it would have worked well to make some of the forms taller, or even to spread them further out on the floor to allow areas to be interacted with or even stepped on. Having such sharp contrast between the viewer and the sculptures, as well as the room being well lit, dispelled rather than suspended my disbelief to a certain degree. Another thing I thought was not particularly successful in *Signals* execution was the artist statement accompanying it. The decision to deviate from normal formatting for that type of text was clever and visually appealing, however if you are not privy to the inner-workings of Catherine's studio practice, it would be easy to miss out on much of the context when viewing the exhibit.

All critique aside, Catherine's contribution of *Signals to Protopia* was not only fitting for the theme, but also successful as stand-alone works of art. Perhaps she will bring *Signals* to life once again in a different exhibit, or move on to something new, but regardless I think that she should be very proud of what was accomplished for her 2022 interim show.