#### Sci-fi glow into the darkness

#### MFA in Art & Ecology Interim Exhibition

December 10, 2022-January 13, 2023

In just a few days the gallery of the Burren College of Art changed completely in order to accommodate two exhibitions of four Art & Ecology Postgraduate students. During those days, the gallery turned into a dark space where the audience was experiencing a new place*.* *Protopia* is neither utopia, dystopia nor status quo. There are many new benefits; however, there are also a lot of problems. According to Kevin Kelly, founding editor of WIRED Magazine, it means that today is a little better than yesterday.

Catherine McDonald is one of the three artists who shared the big space of the gallery to present *Protopia*. She combines natural and synthetic materials to create spaces that stand between the real and the imagined. With her multi-layered installations, she seeks to reframe constructed perceptions of the more-than-human. Walking into the gallery, McDonald’s sculptures were the first to look at. I felt their invitation for observation and as soon as I got closer I realised I needed to spend some time viewing and investigating every detail.

Mountains, volcanoes, rocks, and ponds are just some of the words that came into my mind while I was looking at them. Their forms looked so organic counter to the synthetic materials McDonald used. The way they were built into the floor caught my interest. Sculptures and floor had the same grey colour and the line that separated them wasn’t visible to the naked eye. A signature detail of the sculptures was the colourful lights, reminding me of disco, which made the work even more mysterious. In addition to that colourful glow were also other bright lights which worked as shadows of the sculptures. Those shadows were creating new forms in the space making interesting connections with the sculptures and the “disco” colours.

Getting closer to the “pond” sculptures, I noticed a blue liquid moving inside slightly. A silver colour powder was drawing lines in the blue, in a similar way of petroleum into the sea. Experimenting with different materials, McDonald created an atmosphere close to science fiction. Her work as well as her approach brought to mind the work of Sarah Knobel who connects natural and artificial materials in order to create hybrid sculptures. This combination exists in everyday contemporary life. It can be an emergency sign for the environmental problems but it can also show us how these contradictory materials actually work together and finally give ideas for solutions.

Veronika Constantinou, 2023