

Article

Making Genus: Exploring Gender Roles Within Utopian Societies

Dariana Nistor

Independent Researcher and Designer

Abstract

The 'Making Genus' project comes as a multi-faceted response to an unassuming, mono-directional quest – creating genderless utopia. Spanning across several mediums of expression such as graphics, the moving image and fiction writing, the work encapsulates a textured, non-linear approach to world making processes. Deeply rooted in feminist science fiction and feminist epistemology, the project is defined by an attempt to employ utopian tropes to (re)write speculative narratives.

The continuous, deliberate 'juggling' exercise between writings, drawings and films unravels a world which gradually opens itself to the reader, viewer, traveller, learner—a world depicting a post-gender utopia, a place where social constructs fade and utopian dreams become tangible realities.

The weaving between science fiction, feminist theory and architectural theory comes as the most evident assembly—means of expanding the already “controversial” feminist line of thought to new dimensions, pushing its limits to fictional realms and creating worlds around its premises.

Keywords

utopia; island; science-fiction; post-gender; speculative; narrative.

The project is based on works belonging to feminist science-fiction writers. It borrows utopian tropes to create its own science fiction narrative. Ursula Le Guin (1969) suggests that 'science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive'. Science fiction, in other words, is not concerned with the future, it is concerned with the present. Science fiction makes use of the idea of an unknown, distant reality and the opportunities it poses by placing it in a future world, in order to draw on current issues and propose speculative alternatives. In the case of this project, current cultural differences between the binary genres and the obstinate, almost fetishised classification represent the core of the discussed issue. This categorisation exercise creates hierarchy and

power structures, placing a group within the hegemonic role and the others undoubtedly becoming subordinate parties.

'There are plenty of images of women in science fiction, [but] there are hardly any women', Joanna Russ (2007) argues. The backbone of this work is represented by a tight web of works and quotations which are used extensively with an aim to highlight women's voice in the field of future thought. The feminine narrative voice dictates an approach to writing which, intrinsically, aims to move away from traditional academic writing techniques. In an attempt to question the conventional written format, feminist writers employ the use of the

first person, coining a deeply 'autobiographical aspect of feminist writing' (Rendell, 2010). Additionally, the writing in first person comes as a deliberate resistance to the assumption of the universality of the academic text, the default masculinist representation, which in its rigidity and pre-set form, proclaims and perpetuates ideas of structure and hierarchy.

The world is created through this superimposed layered system, where writing sits at its core as the initial aspect that needs to be questioned and deconstructed. Subsequently, a similar approach can then be attributed to the manner in which architectural representation cultivates standardisation and canonical repetition. The morphology of the proposed drawings follows closely the organisation of architectural space, lacking physical boundaries or built thresholds. The non-engineered character of the drawings alludes to depicting organisms rather than built forms. The lack of visual hierarchy and structure-less congregation of the proposed elements is an attempt to depict the imagined world itself, same rules applied – content and context.

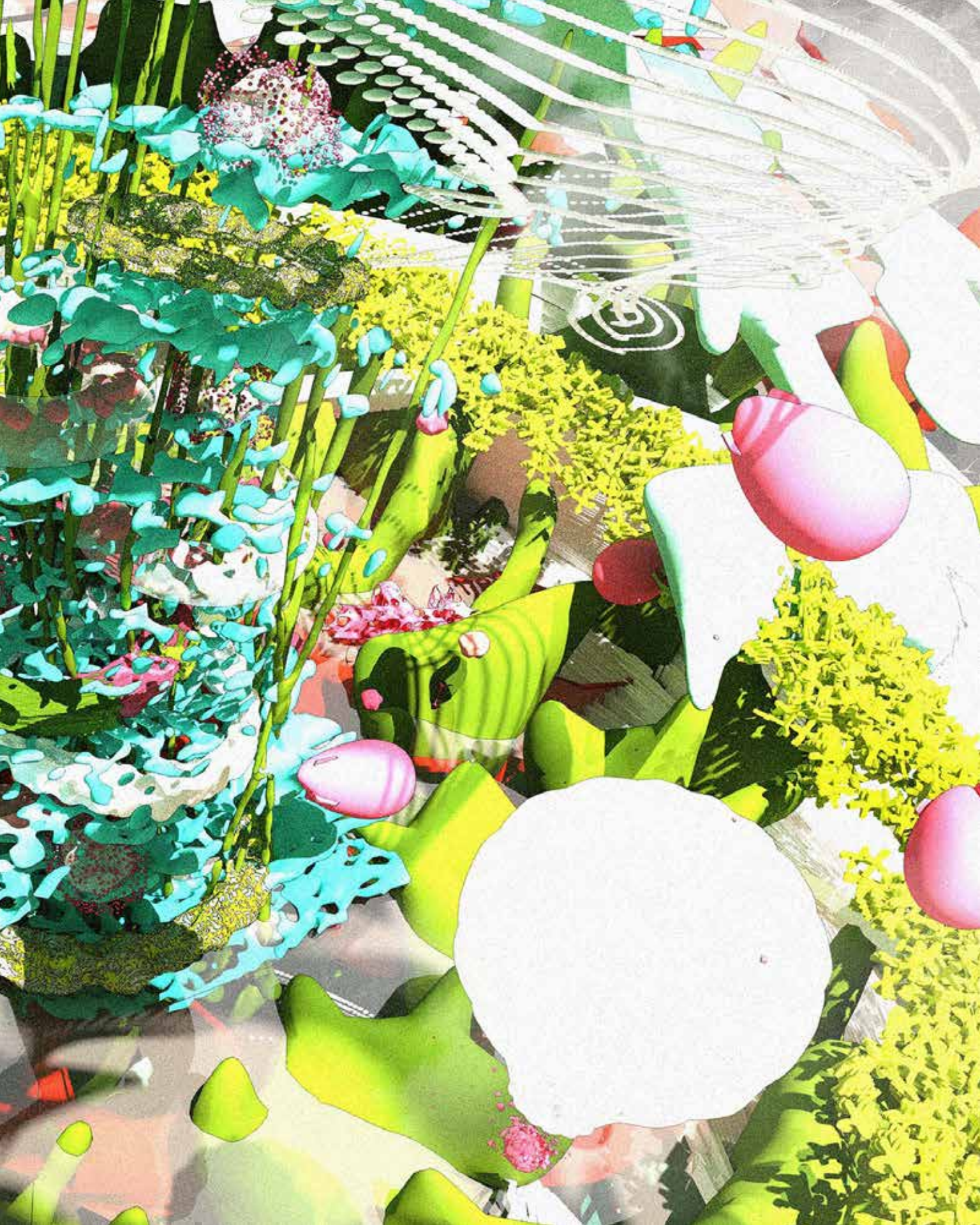
A third layer which aims to help the work transcend several means of representation is the moving image. Through its intrinsic overly exposed nature, the moving image opens up the discourse to other dimensions. The moving image constructs and deconstructs the argument, it is both sustaining and condemning. The moving image in the context of science fiction sphere offers a completely different experience, as it transposes in real time the existence of alternative worlds which defy constraints and shatter boundaries.

The architectural discourse comes together as an amalgamation of several utopian tropes, traditional science fiction tenets that draw on feminist works on the genre, while bringing the proposal to contemporary realms, through the allusion to present issues related

to gender and the further use of social-media and the moving image as representation techniques.

The post-gender society inhabits an island (see utopian trope) located in the North Sea, on the footprint of Dogger Bank. The place does not recognise any of the gendered social constructs and seems to have moved away from any sort of social constraints, standing against hierarchies and rigid structures. The work draws attention to the tight connection and interdependent relationship between spatial organisation (the built environment) and social institutions. It critically assesses the link between the action of creating gendered spaces and their subsequent effect of accentuating gender segregation, naming this vicious circle a "gendered perpetuum mobile" which needs to be stopped. In an attempt to resolve this issue, the proposed spaces on the island follow key principles which define both the spatial and social mechanisms: the lack of hierarchy, enclosed structure and rigid forms transpose themselves into a lack of social boundaries and thresholds that define a society which relentlessly creates utopia.

One of the most important issues in relation to current spatial institutions that this work addresses from the outset is the organisation of current urban enclaves. It suggests that the existing urban networks have been created by a very specific social group, for the same social group, failing to take into consideration the needs of other participants at public life. The prevalence of the private/public dichotomy has also been of great interest for feminist theorists. Leslie Kanes Weisman (1981), in her manifesto for environmental rights for women, suggests that the private space of the home and its symbolic meaning reinforces gendered stereotypes, perpetually disconnecting each gender from the 'opposing' spatial configuration: women from



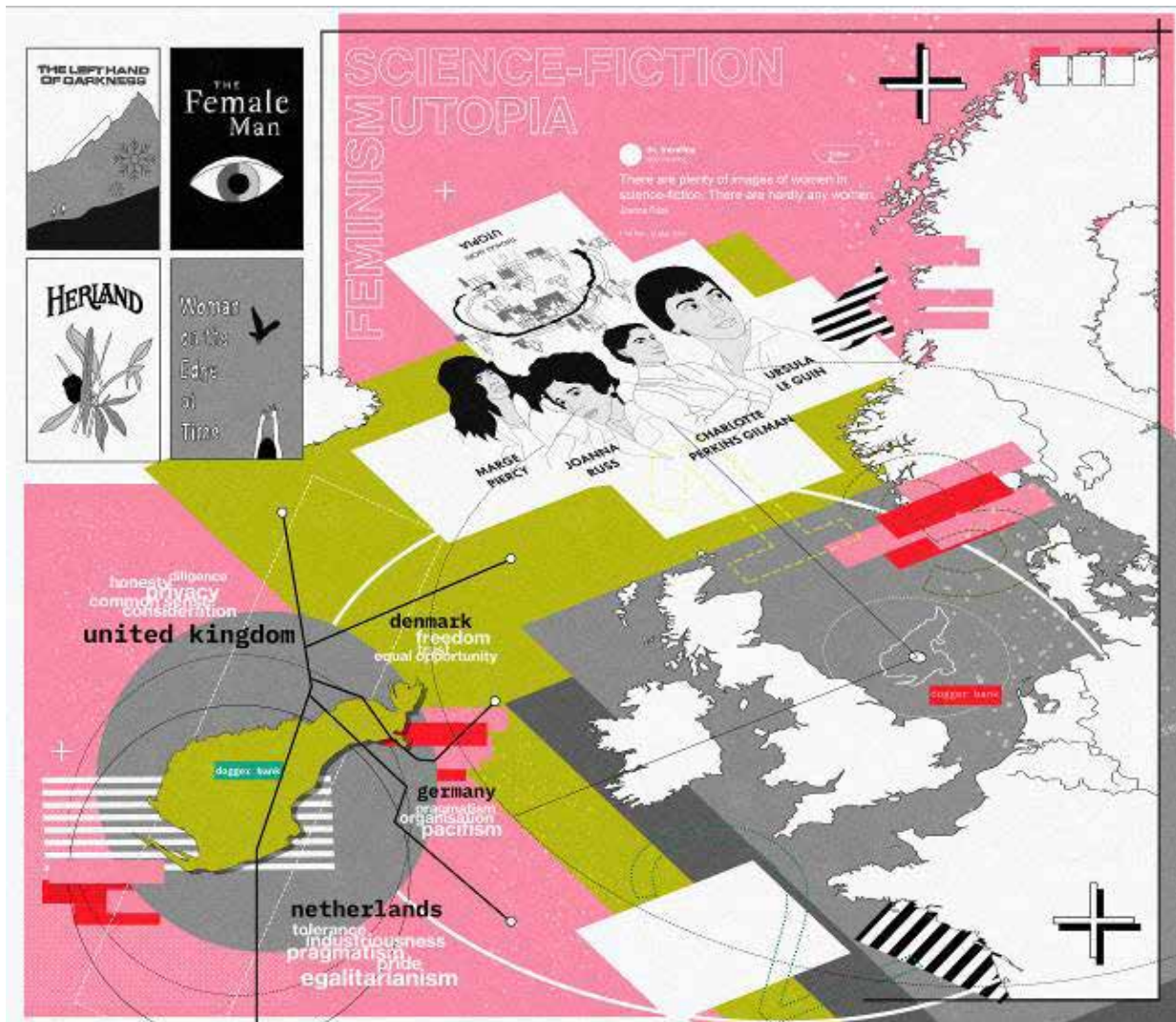


Figure 2. Making Genus – Contextual Issues, 2021

the public domain and men from the private sphere of the household (Weisman, 1981), which becomes detrimental to both groups. Figure 5. Making Genus – Permeable Spaces, 2021

The work then continues by questioning conventional social structures such as the nuclear family arrangement; the proposal opens up inclusive discussions regarding matters of gender binarity, sexuality and economic status. Through the critical nature of the work, an intrinsic holistic approach is created, which assures that the work unpacks not only architectural or social matters, but a set of other overarching issues that help

in painting utopia, issues such as governance models, technological and environmental strategies.

The model of governance is a hybrid one, it encapsulates ideas extracted from utopian socialism intertwined with anarchism. The island belongs to the people occupying it, equally – it is a common good with people having equal access to it and equal owning right. It is partially an anarchist society due to the voluntary and cooperative nature of its organisation - governmental power is limited and dispersed. Once again, through the speculation exercise that science fiction compels us to undertake, contemporary issues such as political and governmental



Figure 3. Making Genus – Travelogue as Utopian Artefact, 2021

matters can be deconstructed and re-assembled in infinite iterations, each unfolding an otherness.

The work also assesses the relationship between people on the island and their both immediate and wider environment. Following closely another science fiction trope, the work positions itself in relation to the current global environmental issues, looking at offering solutions that compel us to imagine alternative possibilities. The island itself performs as a self-sustaining organism and proposes an ethical way to inhabiting water and becoming a part of the marine eco-system. Alluding to ideas extracted from the work of Donna Haraway (2016) regarding the relationship between cyborgs and other species, the work presents a world where the lack of social hierarchy is transposed to a higher taxonomic scale, becoming a lack of grading order between species.

This quality of the society plays on a character feature that is considered “womanly” by contemporary social norms: empathy. The adoption of this feature by the whole of society alike draws on another feminist science fiction trope, where individuals adopt both “manly” and “womanly” characteristics: for instance, they are both warriors and carers. The empathic lifestyle, the positioning of self on the same layer as other beings has deeper repercussions in the manner in which technology comes to the equation, offering possible solutions to a society to which all contemporary industries and their negative effect on the living environment is unquestionably not an option.

The work is defined by its intrinsic critical nature, followed closely by the speculative character. The science fictional aspect of the project allows the discourse to



Figure 4. Making Genus – Floating Island Organism, 2021

be both analytical and present, while also taking the shape of a thought experiment, being hypothetical and visionary.

The architectural language is defined here by a series of utopian tropes which take the form of architectural

artefacts. All the elements of the island work together to create utopia, fostering the before-mentioned interdependent relationship between special and social agencies in an ethical and considerate manner, each being a crucial component in the island-mechanism.

Figure 5. Making Genus - Palace of the People, 2021



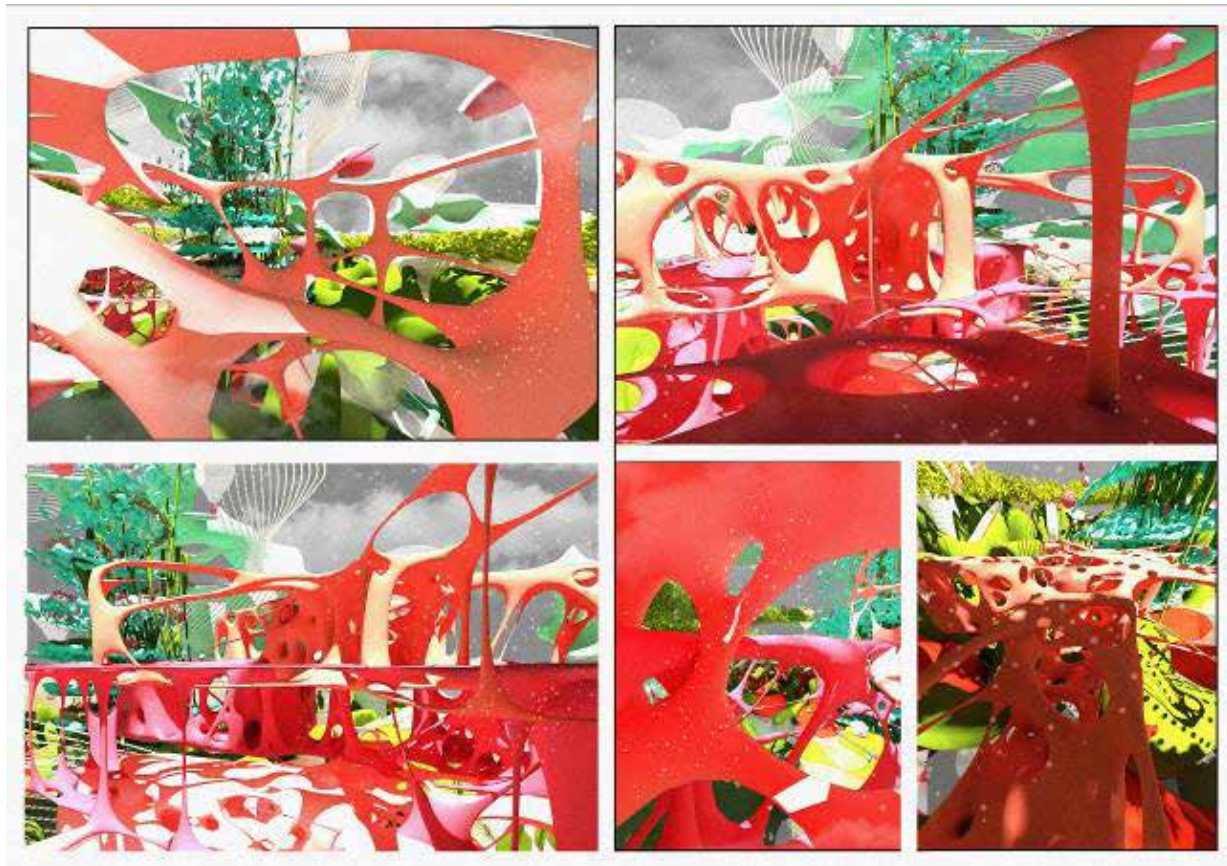


Figure 6. Making Genus – Governance Models, 2021

Utopian artefacts glossary:

- Sp(l)aces
- Governmental capsules
- Palace of the people
- Airships
- Growing roots as foundations
- External membrane
- Electrolysis swamps
- Algae growing pods

Elements such as the living sp(l)aces, the palace or the airship system are described within the work and are revealed gradually, as the narrative unfolds. Alluding to current domestic spaces and the nuclear family arrangement, the proposed living spaces are individual and offer a limited range of possible activities that can be undertaken inside. People living on the utopian island spend the majority of their time in collectivity-eating, playing, working and raising children together.

This collective time is spent in the Palace of the People, the place that sits at the heart of the community, bringing people together. And while there is no pre-set functionality for any of the spaces on the island, each (re) adapting to current needs, the role of the palace seems to remain constant: a place for celebration, nurture and learning.

In parallel to the social and critical nature of the discourse, the work also touches on the technological aspects (see science fiction trope) of creating utopia. Starting with the self-growing roots which take the role of structural foundations, the external membrane which offers a protective layer to the island-organism, as well as making use of sunlight, aeolian and tidal energy, the organism responds to contemporary environmental issues, aiming to offer speculative solutions, questioning current strategies that prove to be insufficient. Algae is grown, harvested and used as the prime matter of

Figure 7. Making Genus - Permeable Spaces, 2021

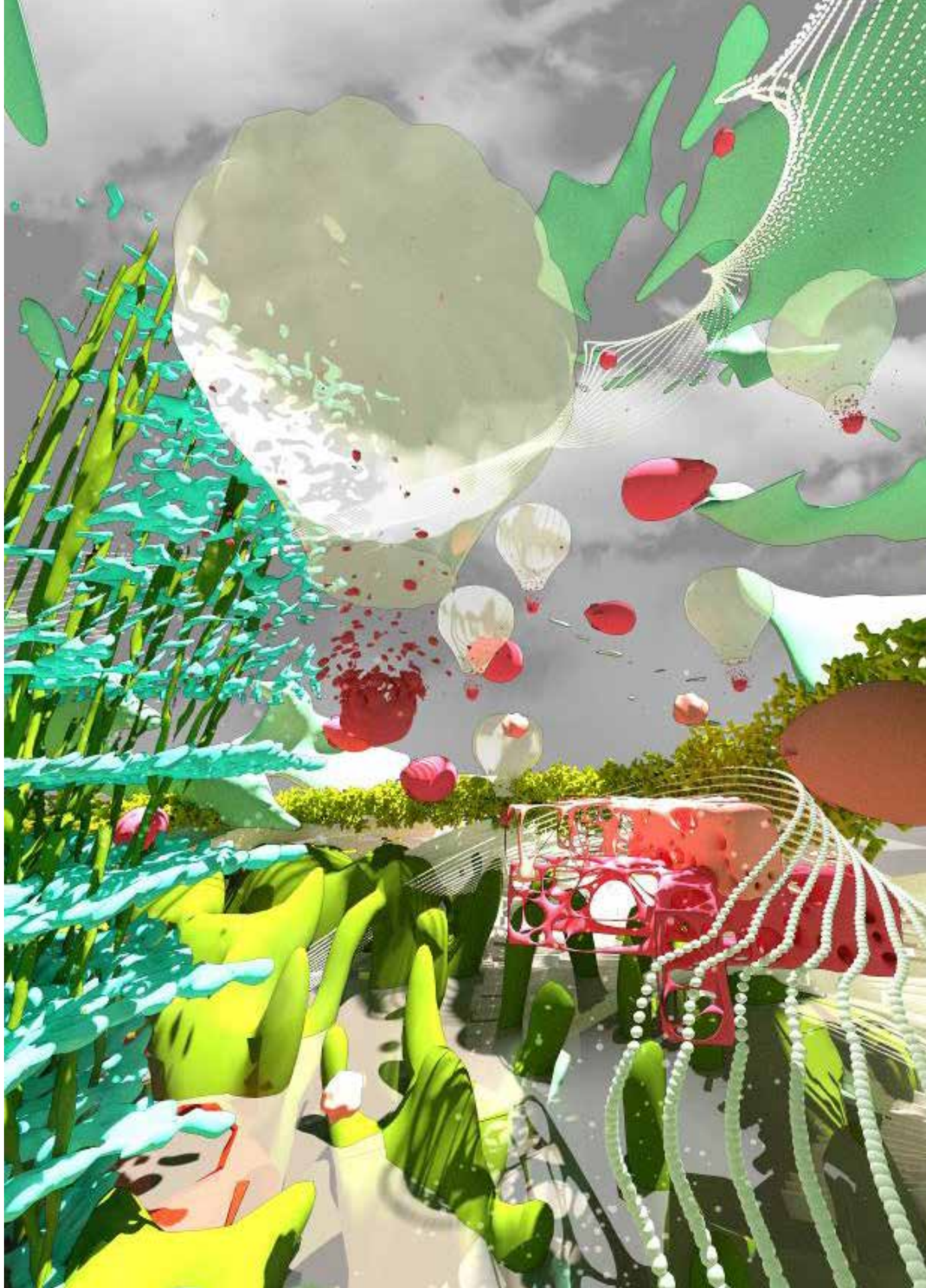




Figure 8. Making Genus – Palace of the People, 2021

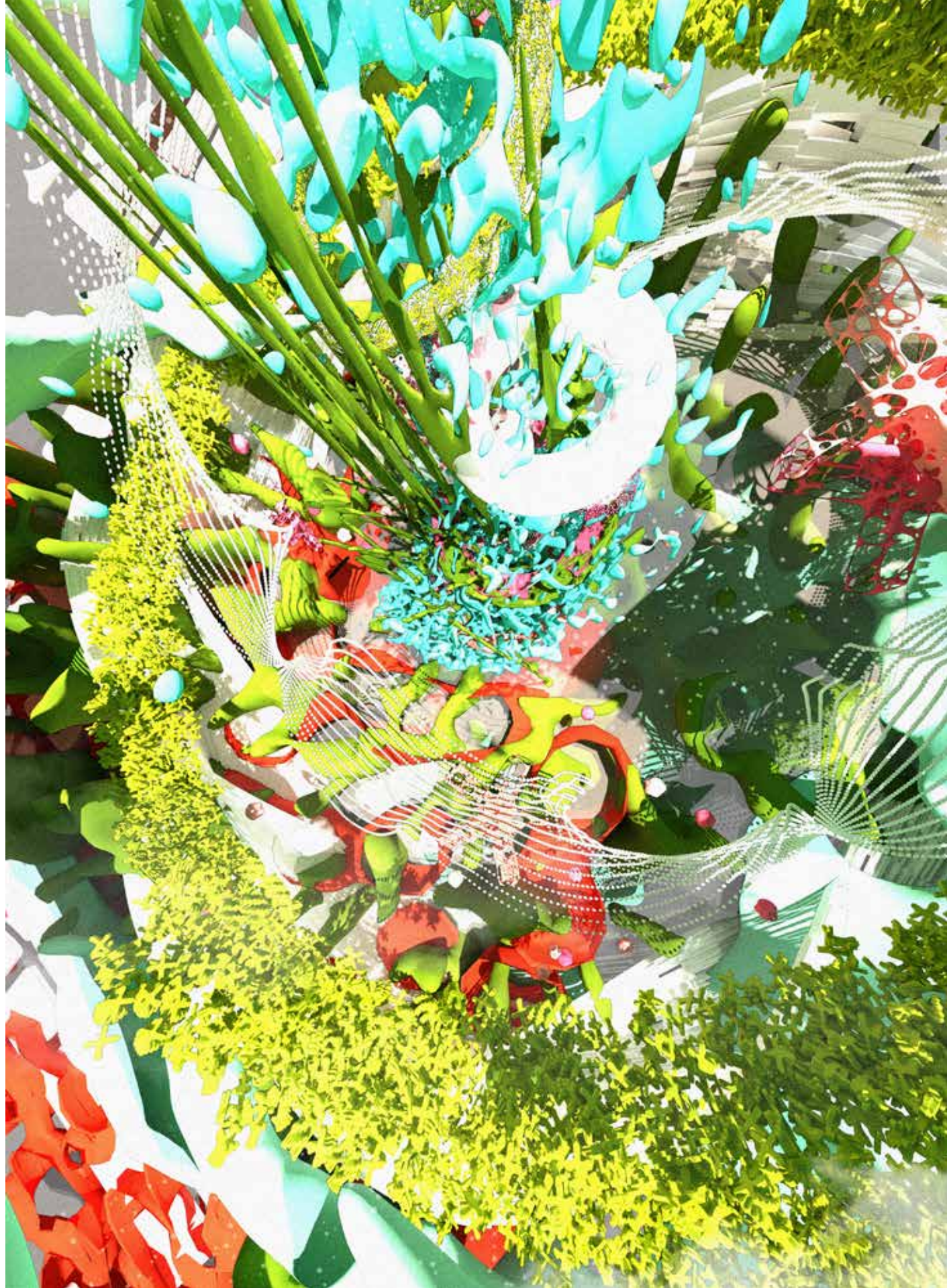
multiple industries and processes on the island: from bioplastics to biofuel production to biomass. In adopting such an ethical, environmental harmony, the utopian society proves that environmental consciousness should be central to the manner in which we construct and conduct our reality, and it compels us to dream the undreamable and imagine the unimaginable – the power of science fiction.

The project takes the shape of a travelogue, a journal belonging to the architectural researcher who visits the utopian island and records their experiences with an aim to share them with their own world (see utopian trope). The organisation of the travelogue is very much conducive to the proposed writing strategy – the layered character of a typical travelogue formed of photos, writing notes, sketches, videos (if digital) supports the non-linear approach to story-telling.

The journey is shared through social media platforms and it alludes to the de-fragmented way of transmitting visual messages deeply embedded in social media performances - short stories. The role of social media is to emphasise the open discourse, to invite to speculation and interaction, while also, once again, accentuating on the polemic discourse, placing it in the realm of contemporary debates: the online sphere. Acknowledging that science fiction, through its highly speculative character, can frequently become the source of controversy, the manner in which the work is shared publicly, online, is testament to the importance of highlighting certain discourses, addressing key issues and open ideas to conversations.

The work aims to show that while describing utopia might prove not to be such an elementary endeavour, then drawing, shaping, writing and sharing utopia might end up being just enough.

Figure 9. Making Genus – Environmental Dreams, 2021



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Figure 10. Making Genus – Chronogram, 2021

