

SONIA  
MEHRA  
CHAWLA





# SONIA MEHRA CHAWLA

The Embryonic Plant and Otherworlds

10 Chancery Lane Gallery

*Katie de Tilly Contemporary Artists*

10 號 贊 善 里 畫 廊

A VIBRANT LIFE PUBLICATION







# ON SONIA MEHRA CHAWLA

Katie de Tilly

10 Chancery Lane Gallery is proud to present Sonia Mehra Chawla's solo exhibition "The Embryonic Plant and Other Worlds." Sonia's work has been involved with interconnectivity since her early days as an artist where she juxtaposed the urban landscape with living existence. She is fascinated by the intertwinings of both organic and non-organic systems, patterns and linkages.

Her current series of works are inspired by the writings of French Philosopher Michel Foucault's heterotopias. Foucault's states, *"I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendents of time and the determined inhabitants of space."*<sup>1</sup> With these ideas Sonia creates her multi-layered, multi-dimensional canvases that link the inner world of our minds to the matrixes that exist within all of nature.

Captivated by the cycle of life as a natural process and flow from birth until death she embraces the idea of decay and the macabre as an inevitable and beautiful process. Her worlds are imagined and futuristic in feeling due to the mysterious terrain of complex surfaces and biomorphic towers. Ironically, the imagery all exists in nature however alien it feels. The figures, primarily female, glide throughout the otherworldly landscapes on a narrative journey that puts the viewer both in isolation as well in relation to all objects of her paintings. Her technique mixes both print and hand painted imagery some taken from the 16th century book by Robert Hooke who wrote Micrographia, the first book describing observations made through a microscope.

Sonia's video works further play on the process of birth and decay with her series Hyperbloom Transitions. A female portrait layered in petals morph into seasonal changes transitioning the identity of human figure. Like a Goddess of nature and a medusa's seduction the mesmerizing image lures the viewer into her fragile existence.

Sonia Mehra Chawla's works are an endless journey of searching and questioning deep existential ideas and philosophies that in the end bring us all together into the same realm of humanity and nature and life's ever changing cycles.

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<sup>1</sup>This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres," and published by the French journal Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.



# BIOMORPHICS OF EVOLUTION

Veeranganakumari Solanki

As the day brightens into a futuristic reality of evolution in the *Biomorphic City: A Self Sustained Living Ecopolis*; spatial architectural structures float into a serene uniform landscape. The human forms begin to appear – all women – a new birth, a new life, the reality of a fantasy and the hope and imagination of a new utopia.

This biomorphic self-sustained city created by Sonia Mehra Chawla is a visionary creation of a future mega-city which addresses the challenges of energy management, spaces, nature, architecture, evolution and the quality of life. This creation sustains itself with bioreactors, solar acceptance and environmental filters that dissolve back into nature. In a contemporary situation, where there is a conscious effort to embrace and return to the “natural”, are we regressing into highly fundamental technology, which actually harms instead of protects? Sonia questions this by proposing the use of nature’s waste by humans instead of the reverse production of bio-degradable waste. The artist’s creation envisions algae and natural by-products produced during algae cultivation that are refined to produce renewable energy sources.

The works in this exhibition are mediations into nature’s cycle which reflect the temporal flow of birth and regeneration. The biomorphic shapes that resemble warm snowflakes and amoebic structures metamorphose into biological interventions in the atmosphere to generate new forms of hope through layers of imagery. History transforms and evolves into memories of the future and imaginations from the past. The artist’s imagery is inspired by macro images, microphotographs, documents, and diagrammatic representations of human anatomy and of exquisite ornamental single-celled organisms, which exhibit complex but free patterns of growth, reproduction and movement.

Inspired by these organisms, Sonia draws various larger creation of an imagined future within the compositions of nature into these minute simplistic complexities. She says, “The transition and transfiguration from beauty and desire into death is inevitably, a transformation of sense perception.” The layering of works through the artist’s varied use medium – from painting, printmaking, photography and video – enhances the refined hybridism of form and life with prototypes from homogeneity and heterogeneity.

The labyrinth or networks of veins in *Embryonic plant: Hyper bloom*, map a chaos of unknown but compulsive order which circulated through every living being in nature’s mechanics. The visuals at once suggest the vulnerability of decay inherent in the formation of the new. The embryonic springs to life the chaste development of a new seed, a renewal that will explode into a hyper-bloom. The throbbing pulse of the vital, fragile form is treated cautiously to prevent deformation and create the right kind of growth and transcendence into evolution.

Describing the prime centre of this series, Sonia speaks about the images that constantly reoccur to reveal composite systems and structures, both within and outside the body – mapping the “inside-out” – thereby creating a sublime but decadent imagery. The artist says that her “work often concerns the internal mechanisms of visual imagery and the process in which these mechanisms address the mind. Networks of intricately interwoven branches are exaggerated to resemble blood vessels and arteries within the body.”

Images of beauty and exuberance are infused with a sense of the macabre and both time and space are impregnated with a sense of heightened reality. *Distant Shores* and *Biomorphic Daydreams* discover the evolution of shapes with the dominating presence



of the assertive but genteel femme, while blurring boundaries between life forms of humans, animals, plants and organisms. The experience of these imagined spaces centred on the female form and nature, are the centre of ephemeral love, life cycles, decay and regeneration. The artist refers to this feminine aspect as one that relentlessly questions the conventional notions of beauty and desire. Her subjects transforms from taut youth to withering wrinkles, only to regenerate through her offspring's maternal roots.

Akin to a constellation peppered across this series, the artist's recurring forms create an invisible web around the works and the viewers entering this space. An exchange of sap causes a realisation of change in the mundane and renewed outlook into the future of the past world within worlds of realised utopias. The artist, who is strongly influenced by the thoughts of Michel Foucault, reflects on his philosophy of "heterotopias" that designate real or imagined spaces of escape, departure, transformation and revelation. She creates an arrangement of realised utopias within the concept of heterotopias, which could suggest a mirror of our own experience, thereby letting the viewer connect with the artist's work at a subjective level.

*History-Memory-Transfiguration: Signs of Skin* connects nature's forms with the human form, bringing everything back into the centre of evolution with a light emanating wisdom from 'Other Worlds'. The antique illustrations of organic forms represent life processes that transform into skin blossoms of women. This connects with the ongoing transcendence of mortality and rebirth in her video series which suggests "transitions of burgeoning, blooming, ripening and withering."

*Hyperbloom transitions*, transform into blooms which add and take away from one another to create an advanced level of evolution with the base of nature. In other animations, branches form polar trees pass on the secrets of successful evolution into the future generations of nature.

There is a clearing in the visual distance that is so new; it cannot be grasped at once. Sonia's works are an ecology related evolution, correlated to the natural world, evolution and the human form, translating and transitioning nature's complicated system and growing pains into blooms of futuristic, real fantasies of utopias. The viewer seeps into this labyrinth to become a part of a new developing aesthetic.





# BORN OF WATERY REALMS AND FUSING CELLS;

## A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF THE BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

Deeksha Nath

Sonia Mehra Chawla quotes Jaishankar:

*As if from a lake  
I surface for air,  
mirrors and ripples embracing me  
through layers of sleep.  
I greet the chilly dawn,  
newly-born each morning,  
cracking through the fragile eggshell air.<sup>i</sup>*

Botticelli's Venus<sup>ii</sup> is brought to mind, born from the lake, her nakedness partially concealed behind long golden hair, looking back at the viewer as we gaze upon her alabaster form of which we are afforded an endless glimpse as angels blow away the drape that another woman is rushing forward with which to cover Venus' modesty. How different is the woman in Sonia's *Metamorphosing Female*, to which these lines refer. Sonia's women also emerge from water, they too are 'newly-born' and they too are self-aware, of their newness, their femininity and the condition of being observed. Yet her women are inward looking, their eyes shut and focused on their own being not 'their-being-as-that-which-is formed-only-in relation-to-the-others-gaze'. Thus they are beings in the universe, i.e. like everything else, formed by a multiplicity of single cells not because they are observed, brought to sight.

The graphic patterns on the canvas are inspired by 18th and 19th century microphotographs, documents and diagrammatic representations of single-celled organisms that occur in the ocean. These cross-sections seem highly complex and ornamental for such base creatures. Sonia has selected fragments from this world to reveal evolutionary mechanics and represent the upward growth of species where single celled creatures are the bottom-most and human beings at the top. And it is these

types of cells that are the basis of all life, wherever they may lie on the evolutionary scale.

The process of compounded growth is central to Sonia's work as she delves for inspiration into the extremely personal and transformative experience of becoming a mother. If we are to consider 'roots' and thus the deleuzian structure of interconnectedness as being organic and 'un-grid-like' with a central point from which spring almost uncharted paths then in Sonia's work this would be the woman-mother-nuturer.

Julia Kristeva has written<sup>iii</sup> that with the beginning of motherhood, which begins when a woman gets pregnant, she becomes passionate about herself. This passion for self manifests in an inward 'looking' that is a turning away from the outside stimulants of man-lover-world towards the growing fetus-baby-child. She also uses the phrase 'mystery of gestation' not as a theoretical turn but really to describe how, despite the sciences desire to know the biophysical process of birth, it remains in some part in the realm of the unknowable.

Motherhood is in some ways outside of the woman's control, she may have decided how and when and with whom to conceive but beyond that she is not the absolute master of her journey. Kristeva locates the discourse of motherhood within the discourse on the crisis of identity. Motherhood is characterized by instability, it happens to the organism not the subject (that is the 'self-aware thinking person'): it happens but I'm not there.<sup>iv</sup> Neither parturition nor birth are final, they are the beginnings of something other than themselves – the onset of maternity for the mother and the beginning of life for the child.<sup>v</sup> With maternity is the loss of autonomy. The journey is one that begin with extreme narcissism conditioned by the pure physicality of pregnancy and transforms to extreme 'sacrifice' (the child becomes the supreme



being for the mother). And thus it may be something both desired and despised (this latter experience is almost always hidden, unspoken, unacceptable).

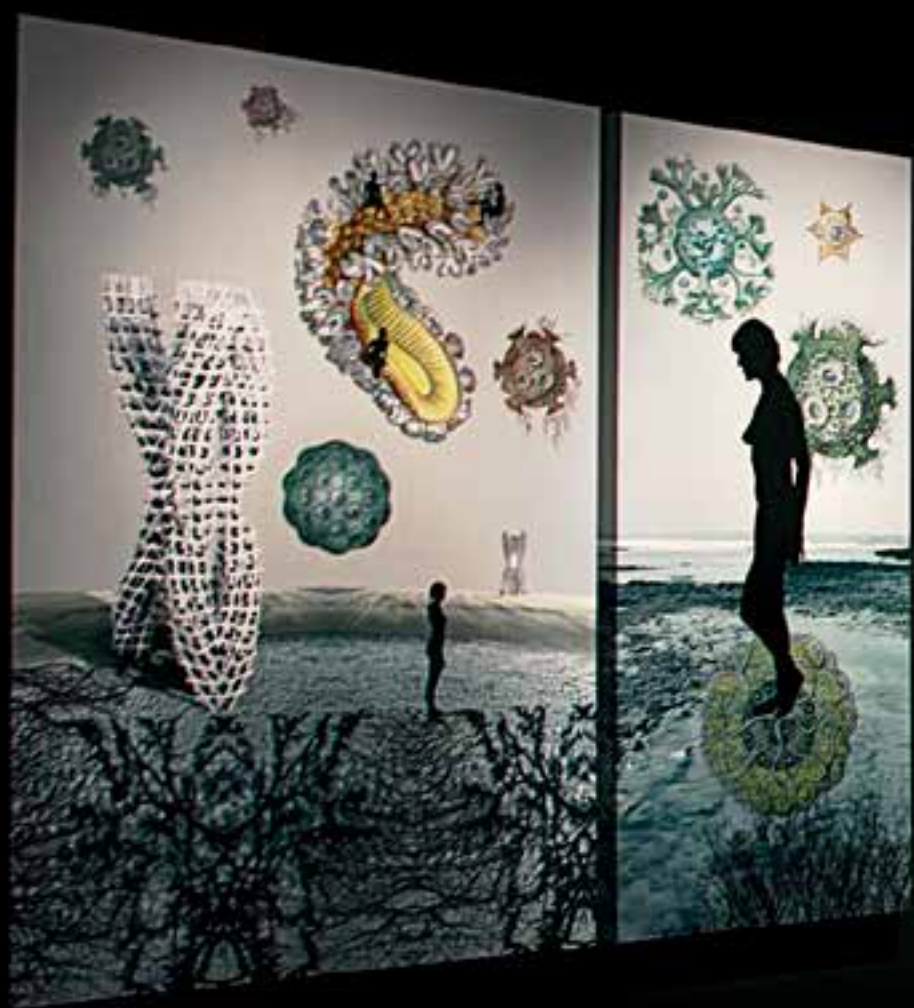
It is this latter unspoken, almost that allows me to view the *Transient Hyperbloom* series as quite complicated, the petals, algae, coral patterning evokes ideas of decay in its application on the facial skin. One or two in particular with their scaled faces surrounded by serpentine strands of hair remind me of Medusa. The myth of Medusa has her born of the ancient marine deities, siblings Porcys and Ceto. She was envisaged as beautiful and terrifying, Ovid described her as once a ravishingly beautiful woman who incurred the wrath of Athena when she lay in her temple with Poseidon, god of the sea and in punishment the goddess turned her hair into serpents and her face so terrible that onlookers were converted to stone.<sup>vi</sup> The water theme abides as does the transformative experience brought on by 'lying with a man': the terrible curse of feminine beauty, bodily desire and lusty copulation.

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- i Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" in *Desire in Language*, Oxford, 1982:237
  - ii Robbins, R. *Literary Feminisms*. New York, 2000: 138
  - iii Jaishankar, N. *Broken. Pyrra: A Journal of Poetry and Things*, 2010
  - iv Sandro Botticelli. *Birth of Venus* c. 1486. Uffizi, Florence
  - v Kristeva, J. *Motherhood Today* <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>
  - vi Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" in *Desire in Language*, Oxford, 1982:237
  - vii Robbins, R. *Literary Feminisms*. New York, 2000: 138
  - viii Ovid, *Metamorphoses* c. 8 AD
  - ix I refer here to *Mighty Aphrodite* (2005), written and directed by Woody Allen, a comedy of a relationship between a man and the porn-star birth mother of his adopted son. It is inspired by Pygmalion.

Excerpts from lead essay by Deeksha Nath  
for *Metamorphosing Female*

Solo Exhibition projects by Sonia Mehra Chawla at Beck &  
Eggeling International Fine Arts, Dusseldorf, Germany &  
Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi.  
2011-2012

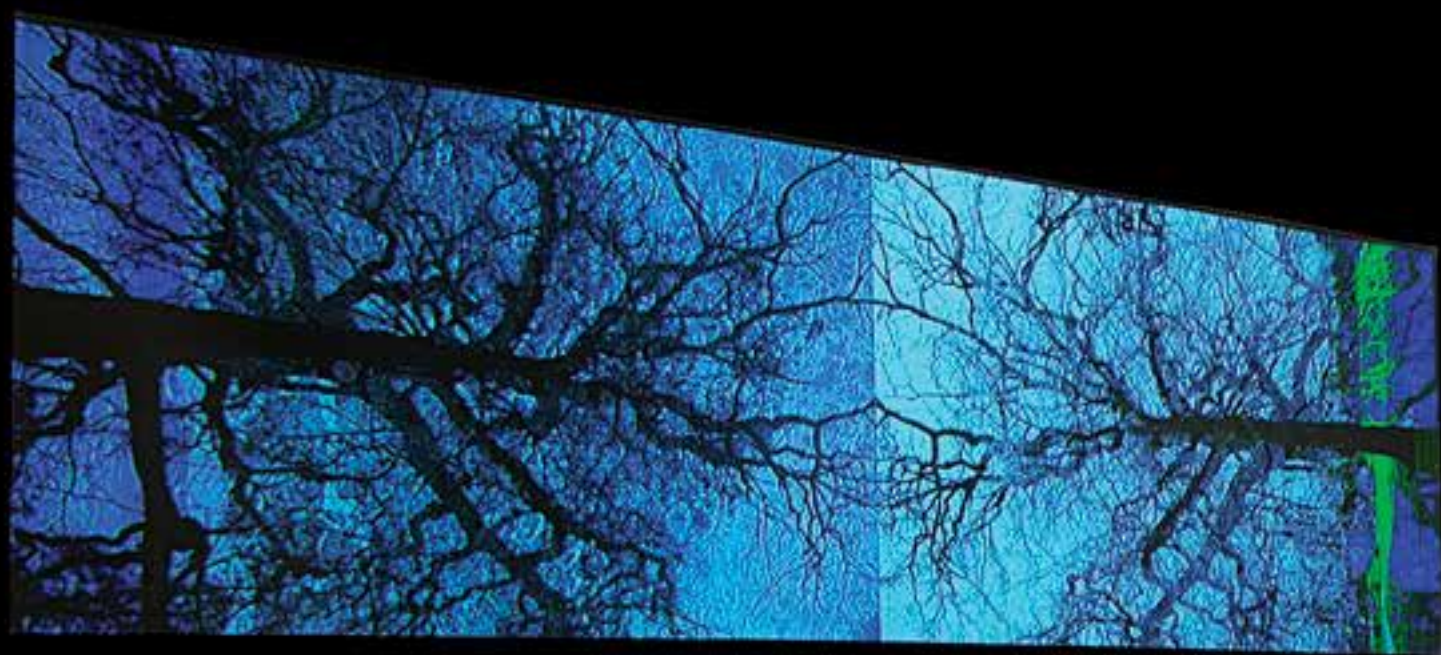




















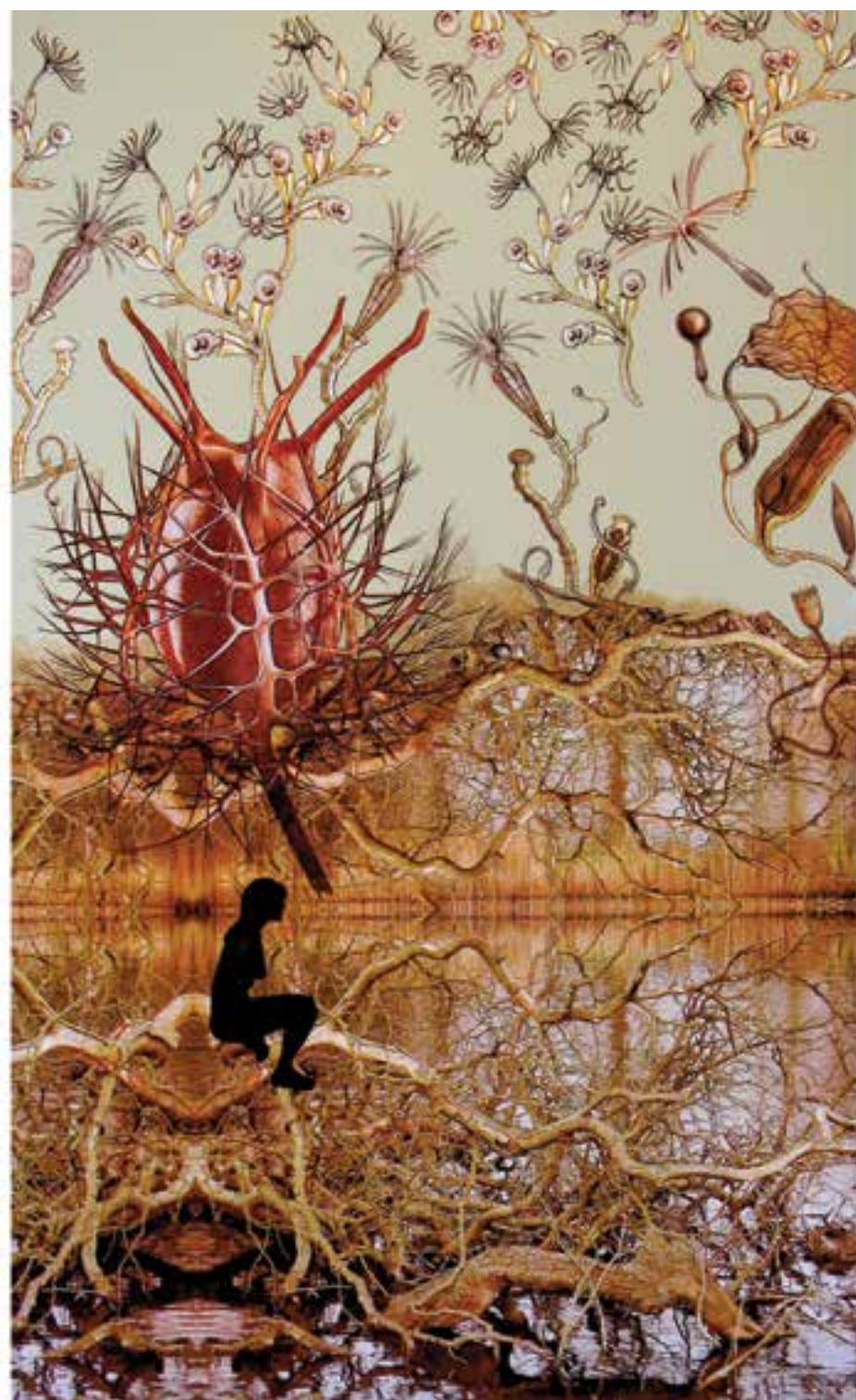


## The Works









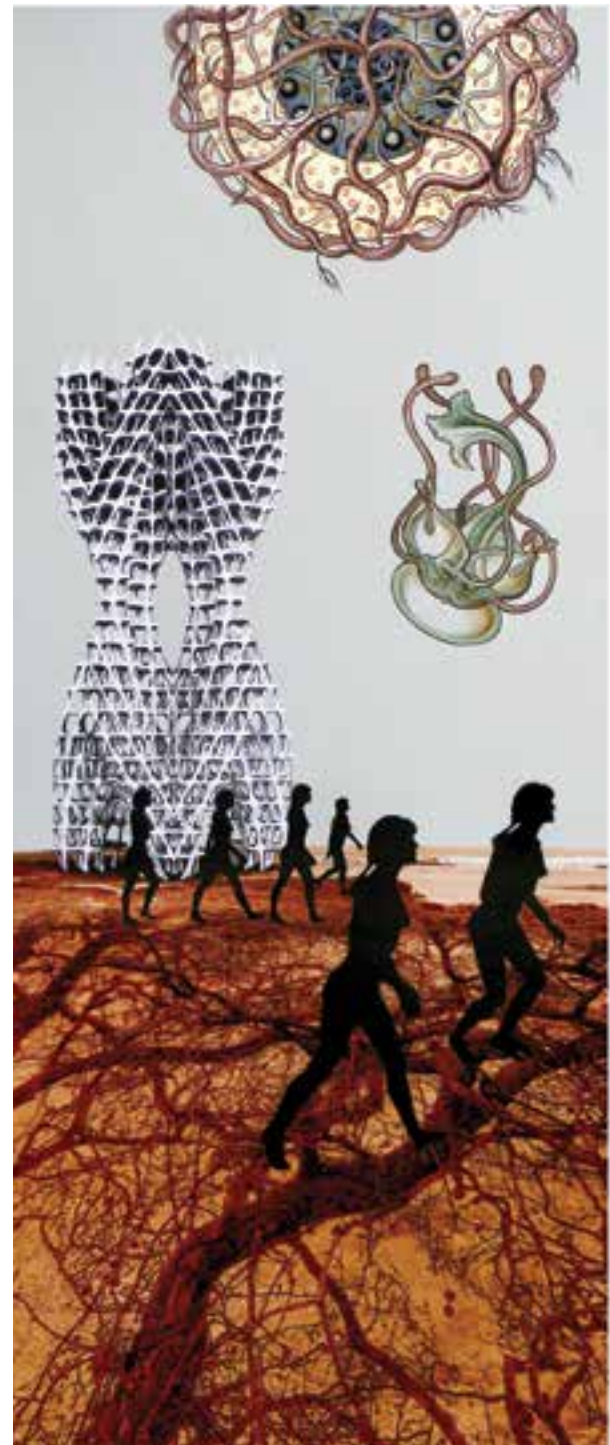


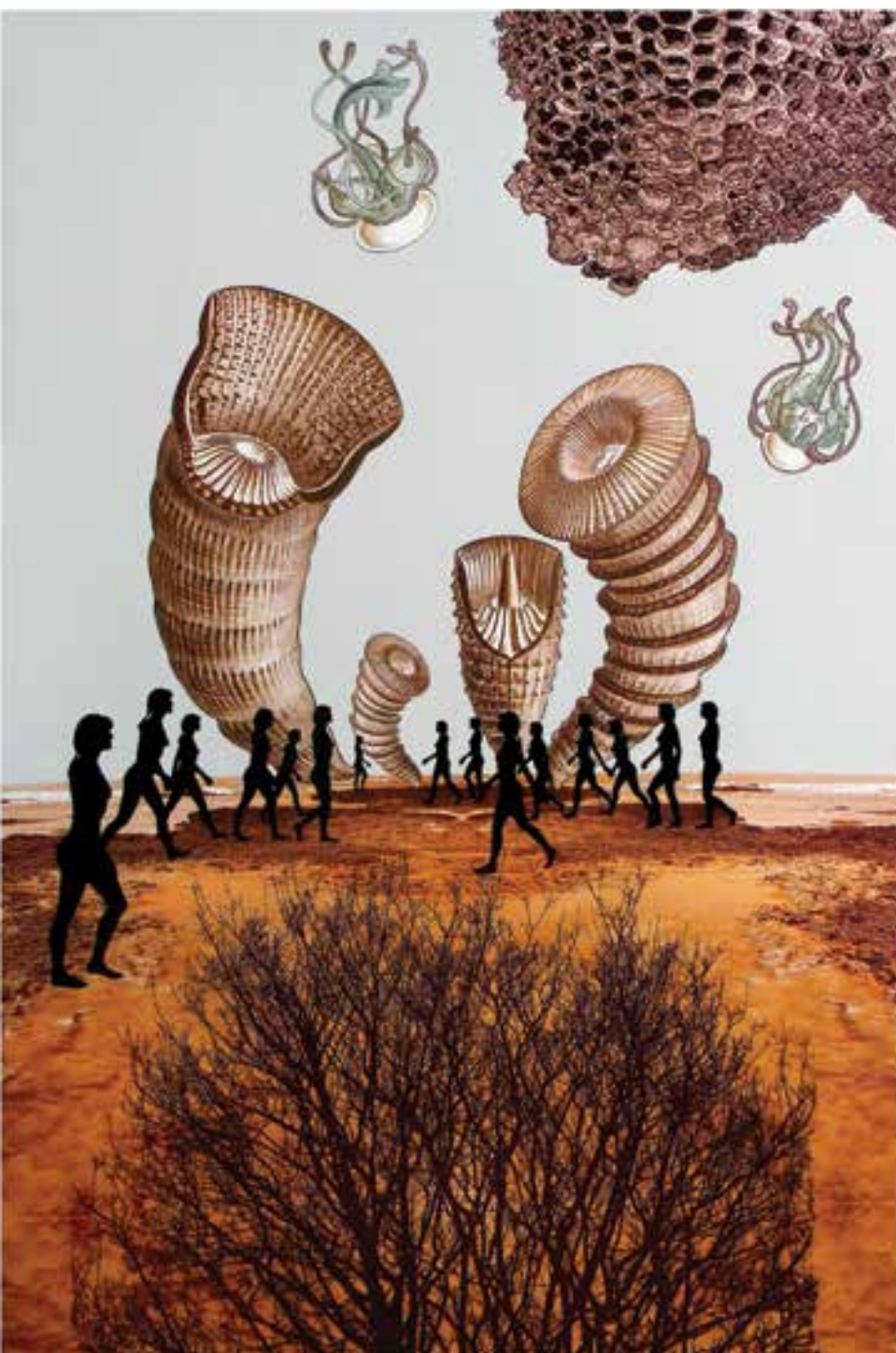












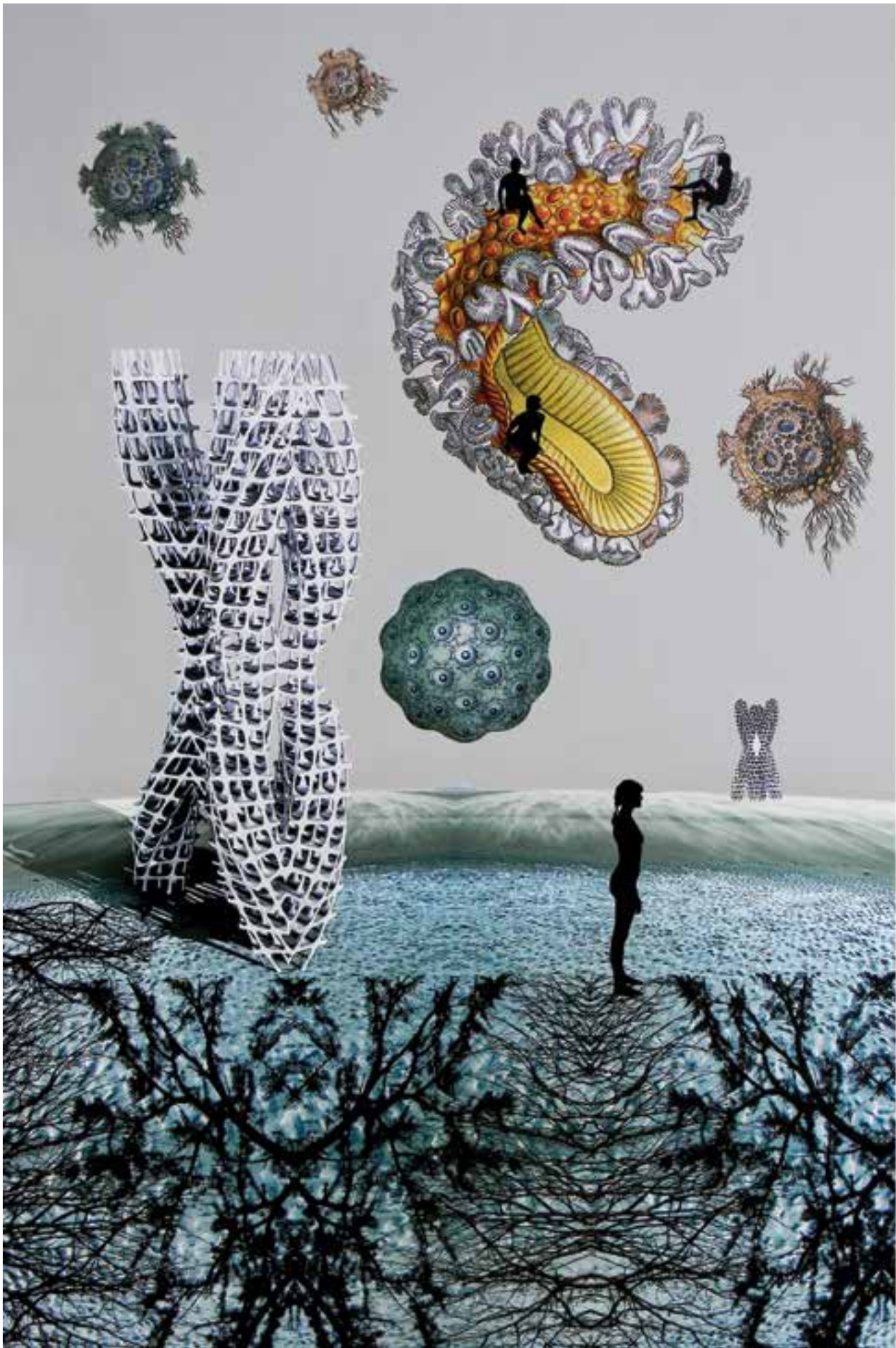




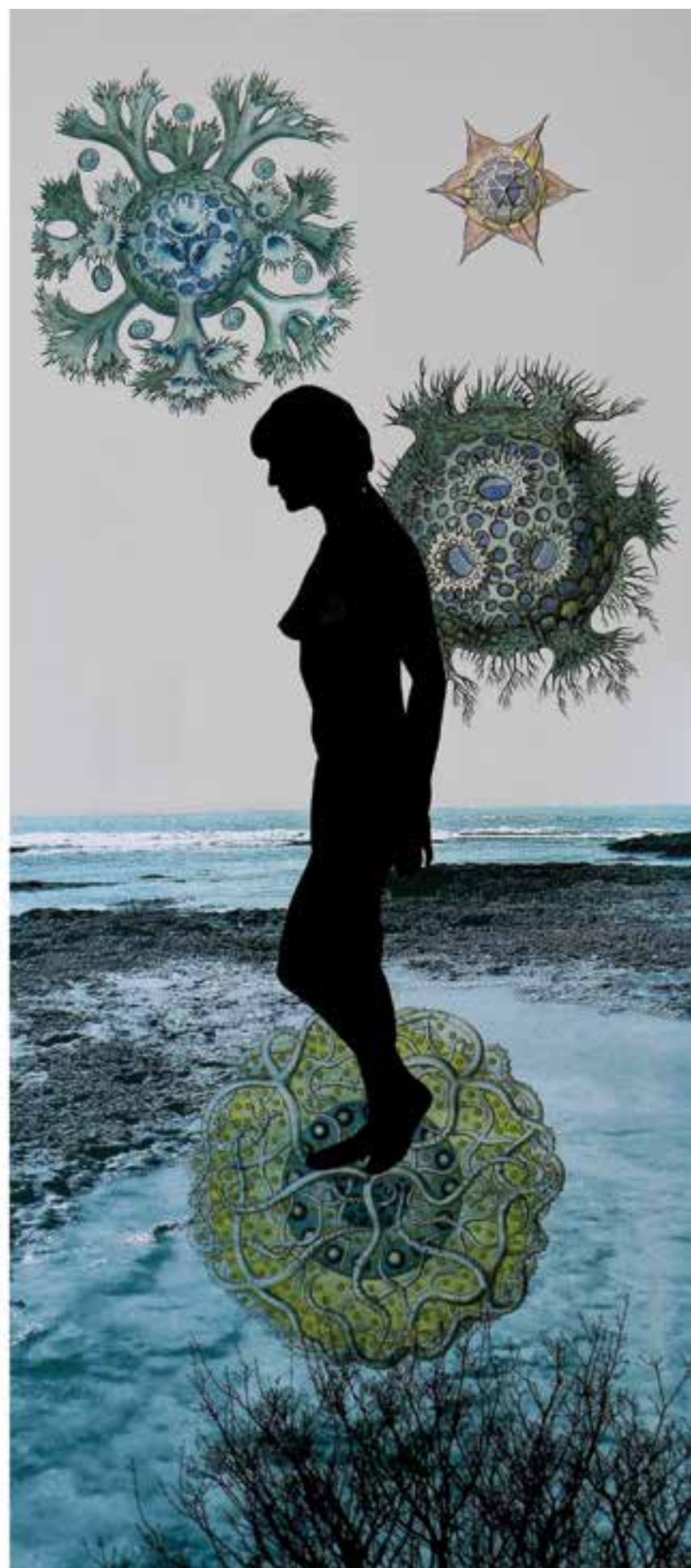




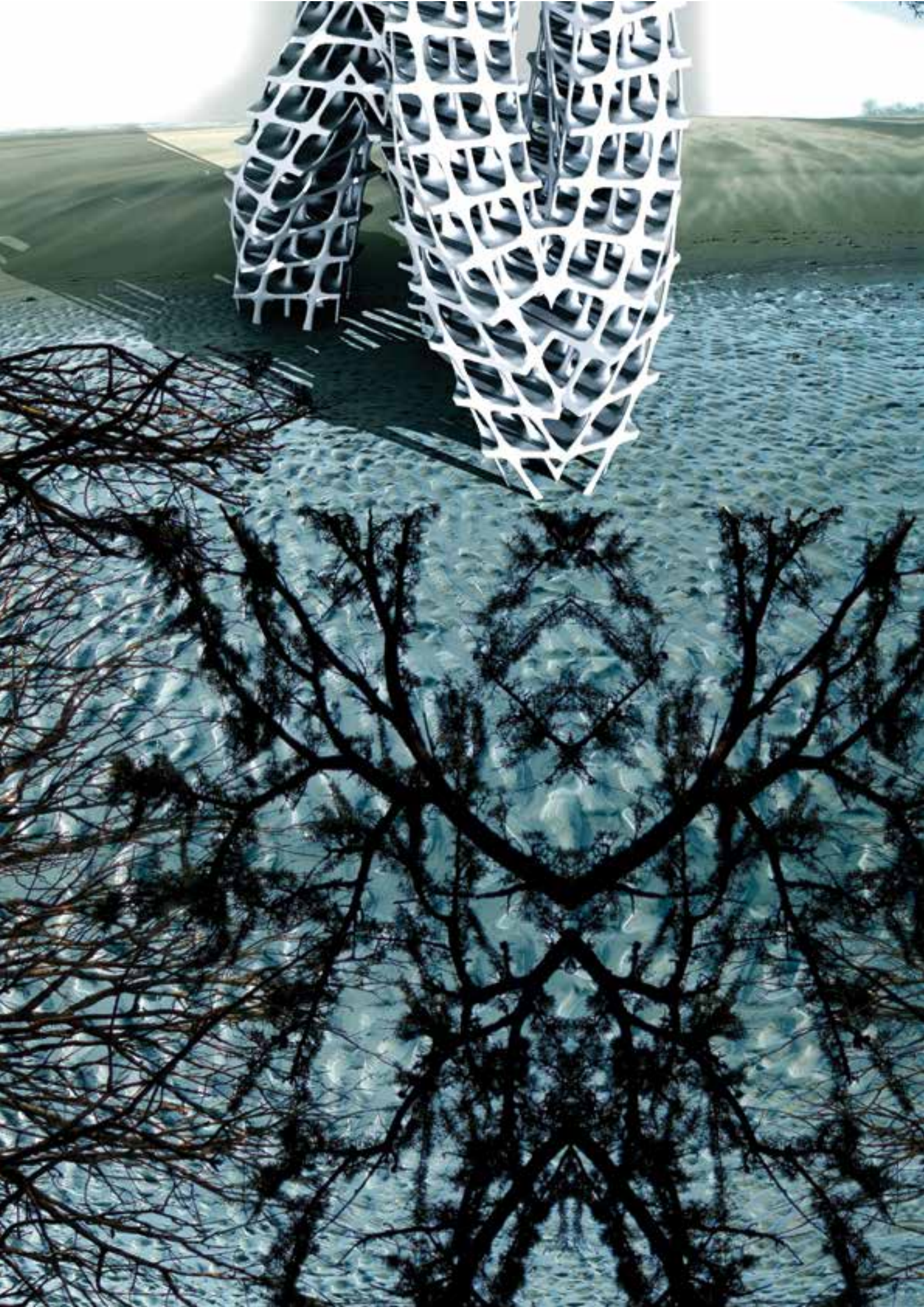








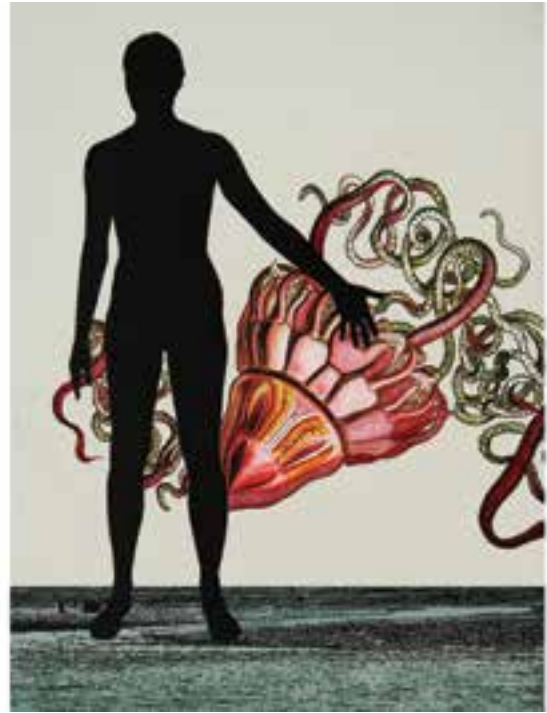








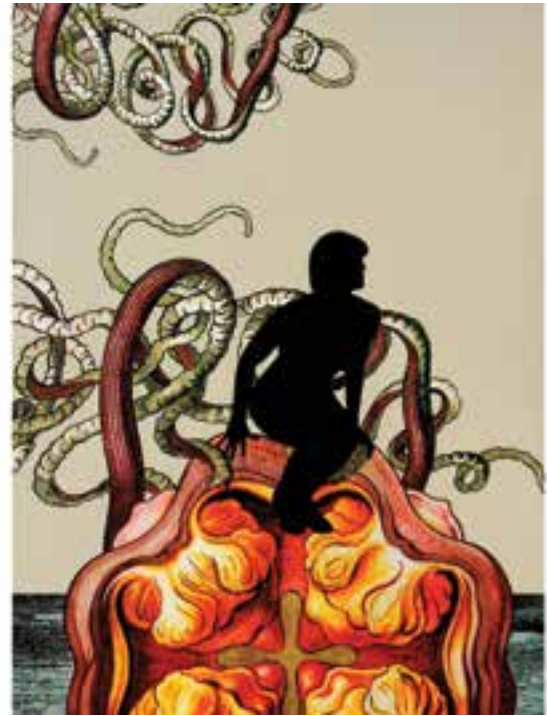




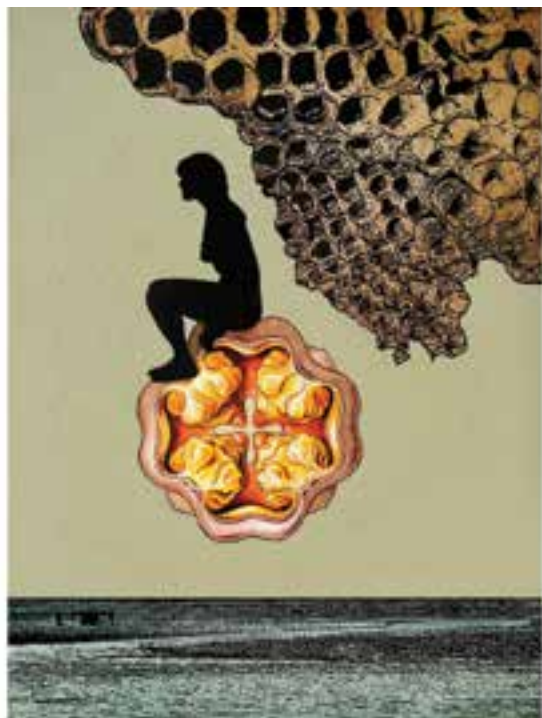




































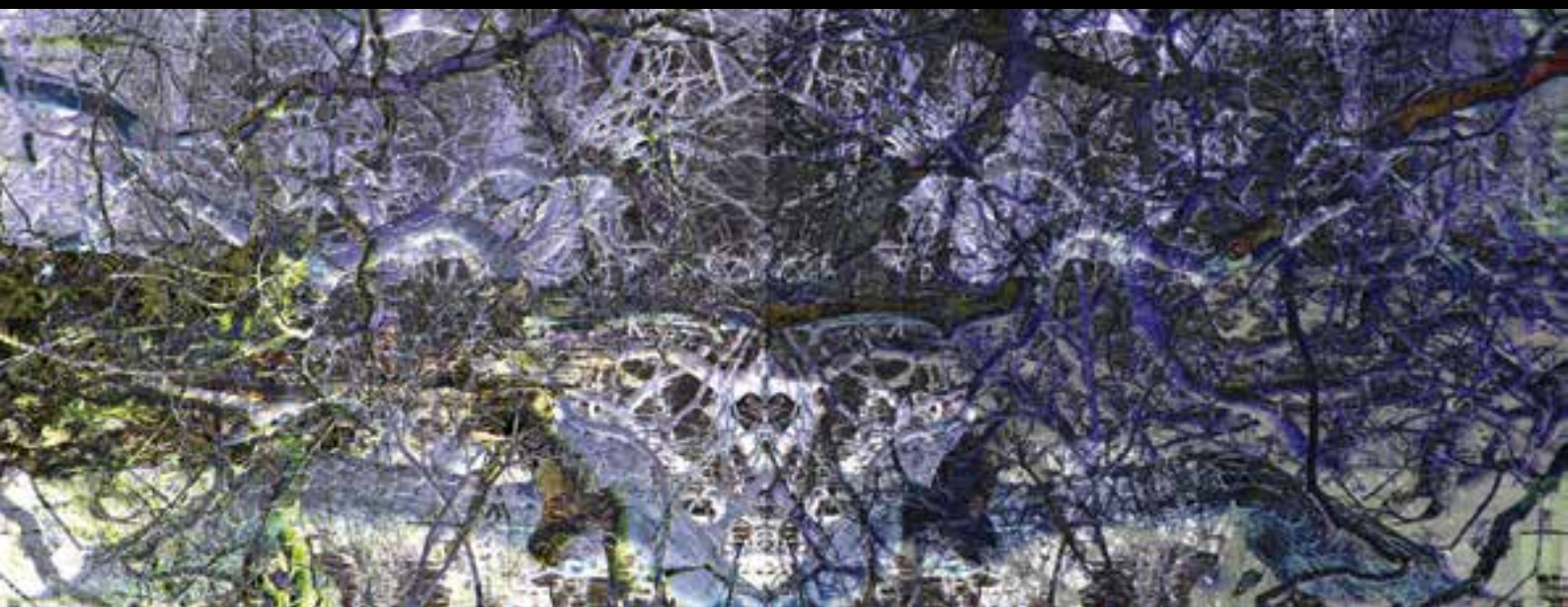


























# BIOMORPHIC CITY

## A SELF SUSTAINED LIVING ECOPOLIS

SONIA MEHRA CHAWLA

The series 'Biomorphic City' explores ideas of a self sustained visionary mega-city, an ecology related evolution connected to all natural phenomenon and existing organic systems. The works investigate futurist, technology driven solutions to imminent mega-city challenges such as energy management. Towering above most congested motorway intersections, the scheme attempts to portray a radical concept in high rise, high density urban living. A vision of a completely closed metabolic cycle in which traffic exhaust emissions are harnessed via CO2 collectors in order to feed algae grown in photo bio-reactors within the building's facade. Algae and natural by-products produced during algae cultivation are then refined to produce renewable energy sources. 'Biomorphic City' acts as an environmental filter, and bio-diesel produced using algae contains no sulfur, is non-toxic and highly biodegradable.

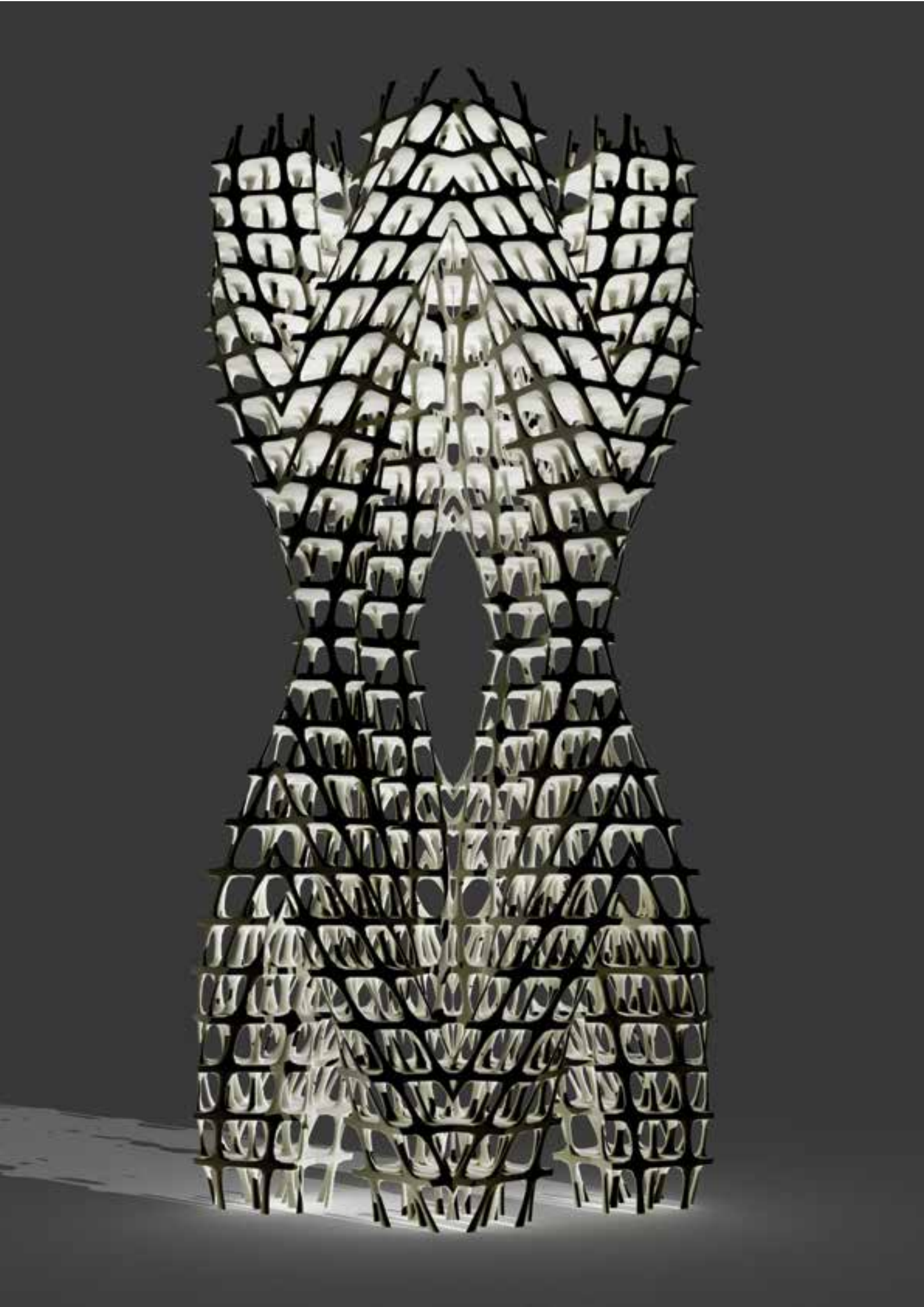
These 'spaces' are heterotopias, "a counter-arrangement of effectively realized utopias," in which "all the real arrangements (of space) that can be found in a society and within the culture are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned."

In the words of Michel Foucault, and I quote: "First, there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.

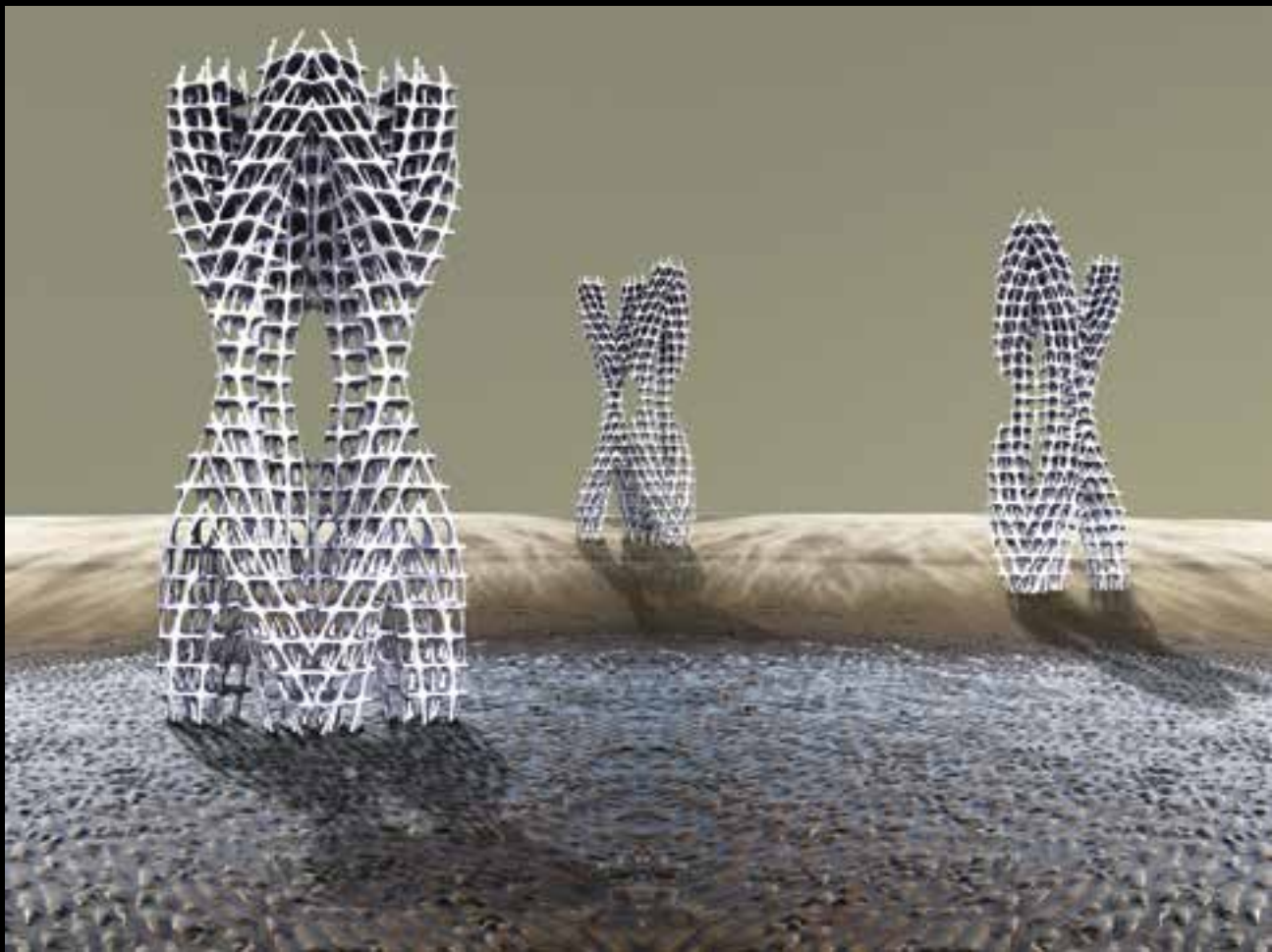
There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy."

Right page: Architectural model for Biomorphic City

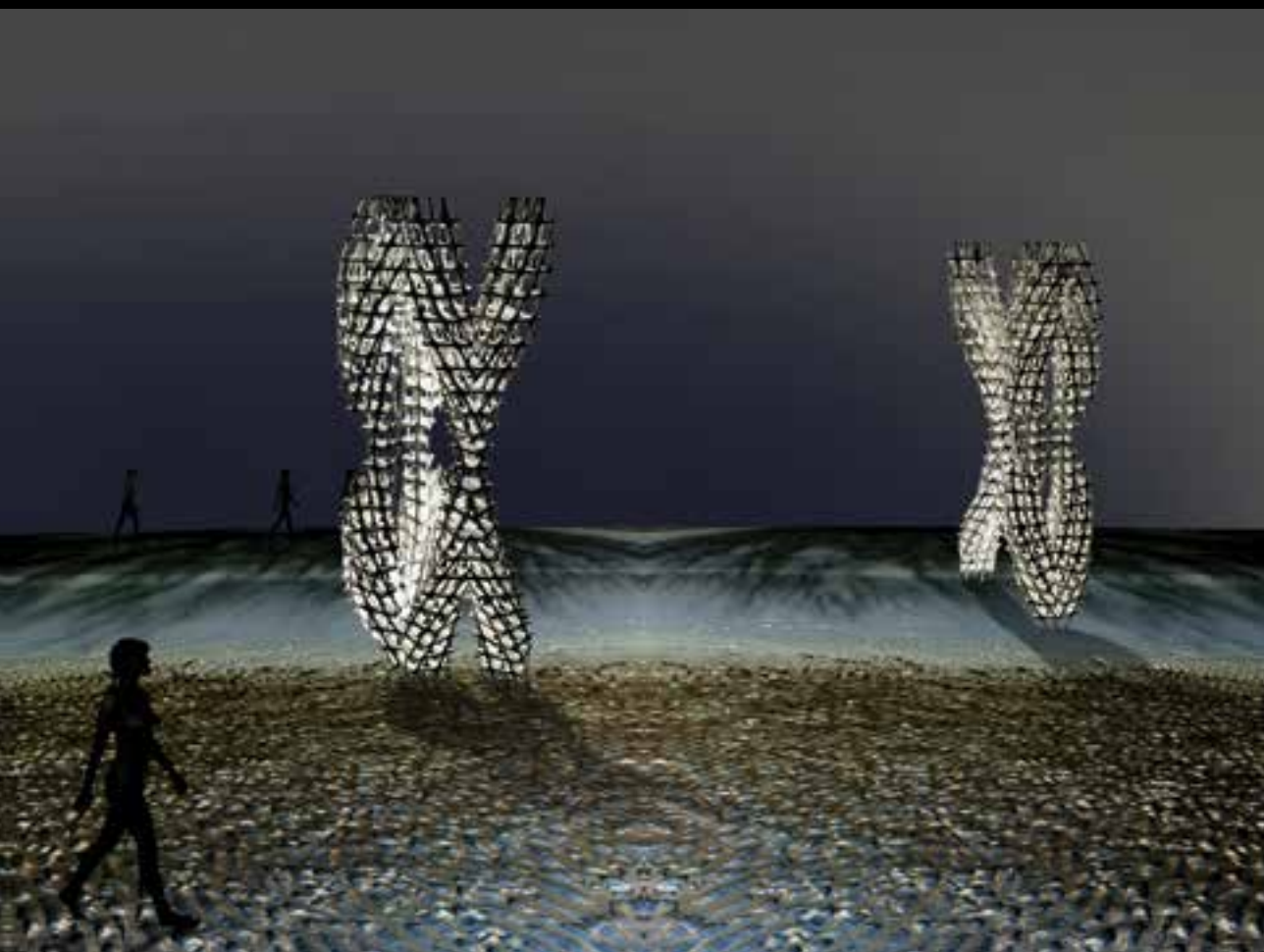
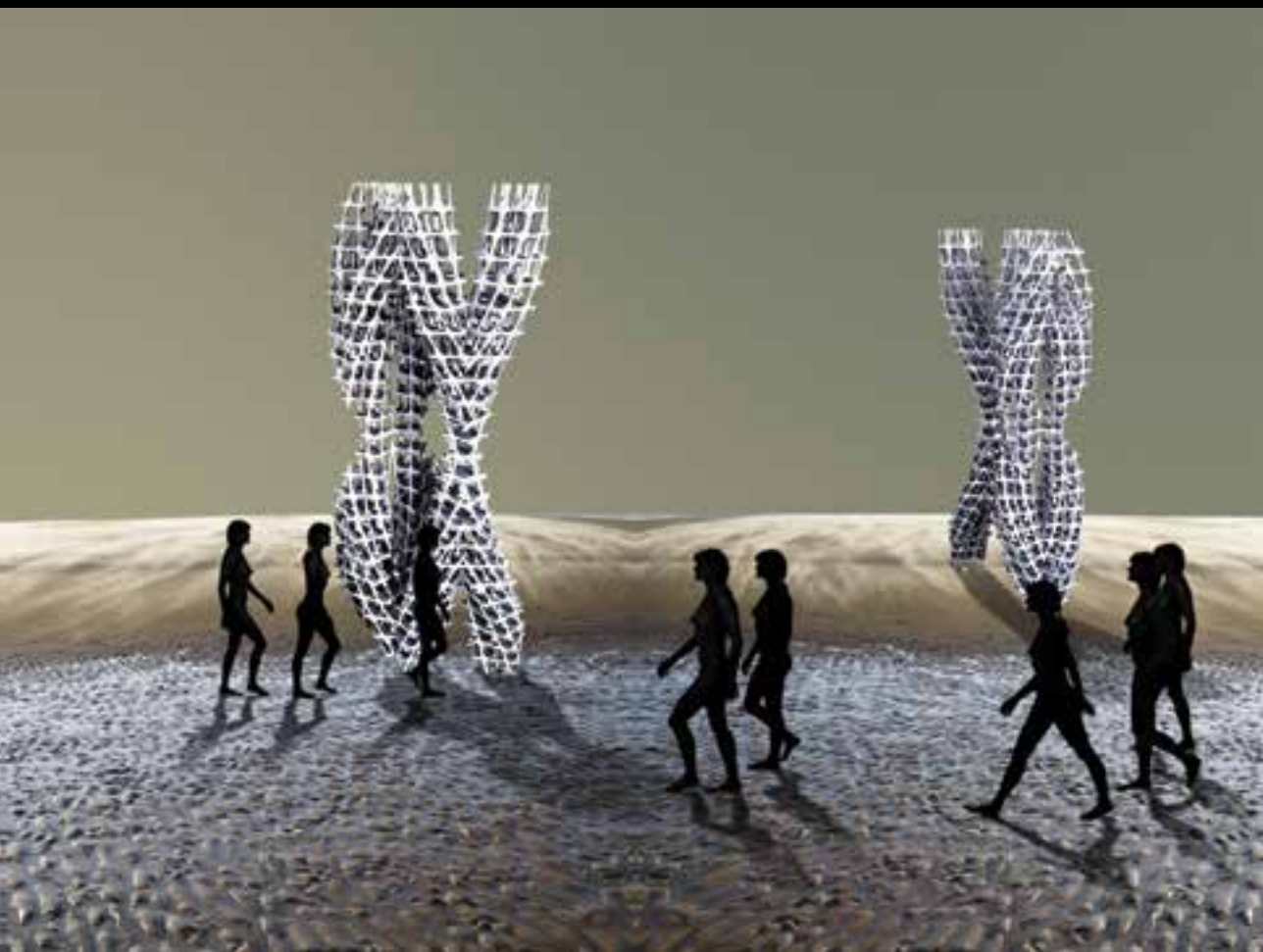




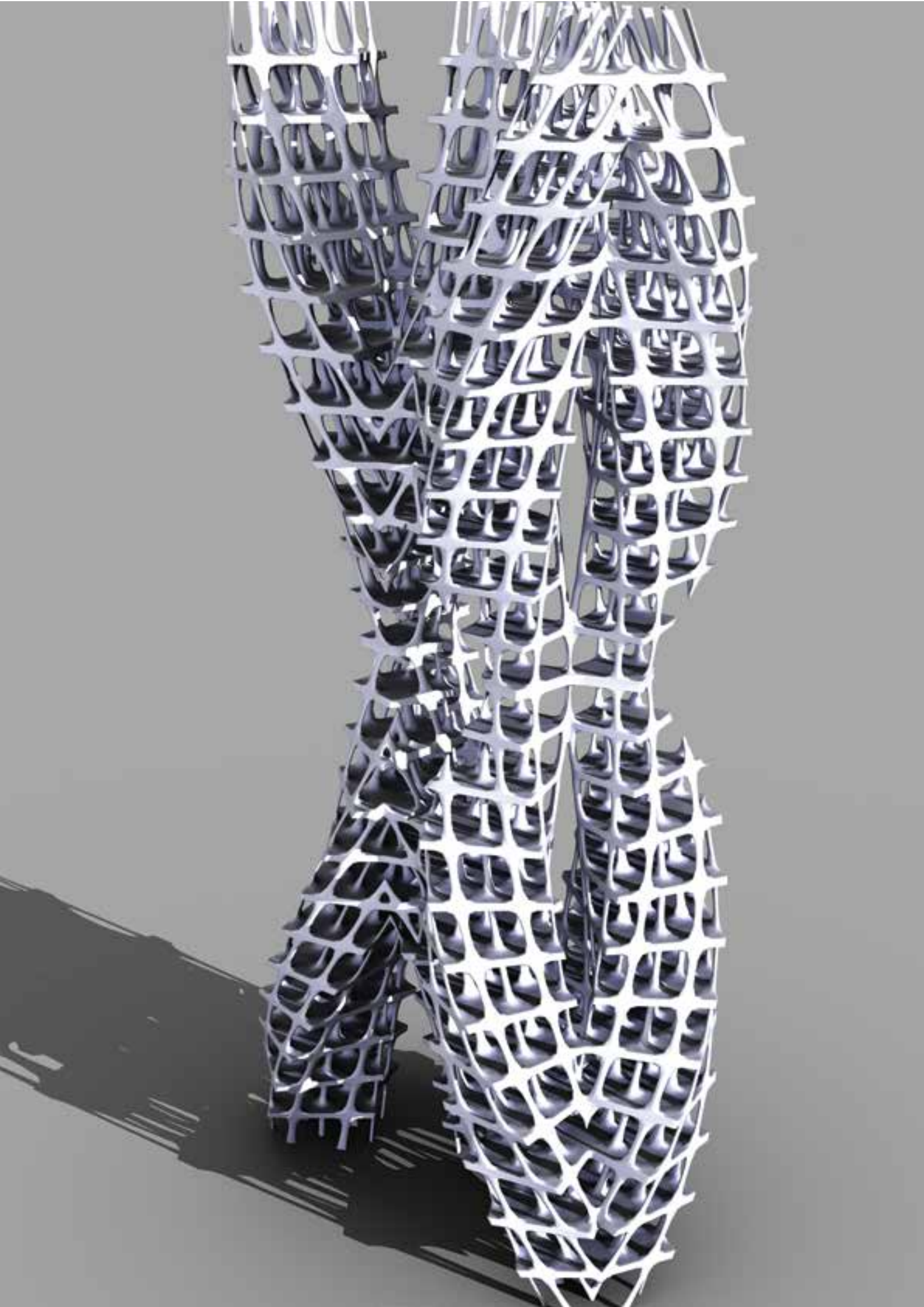




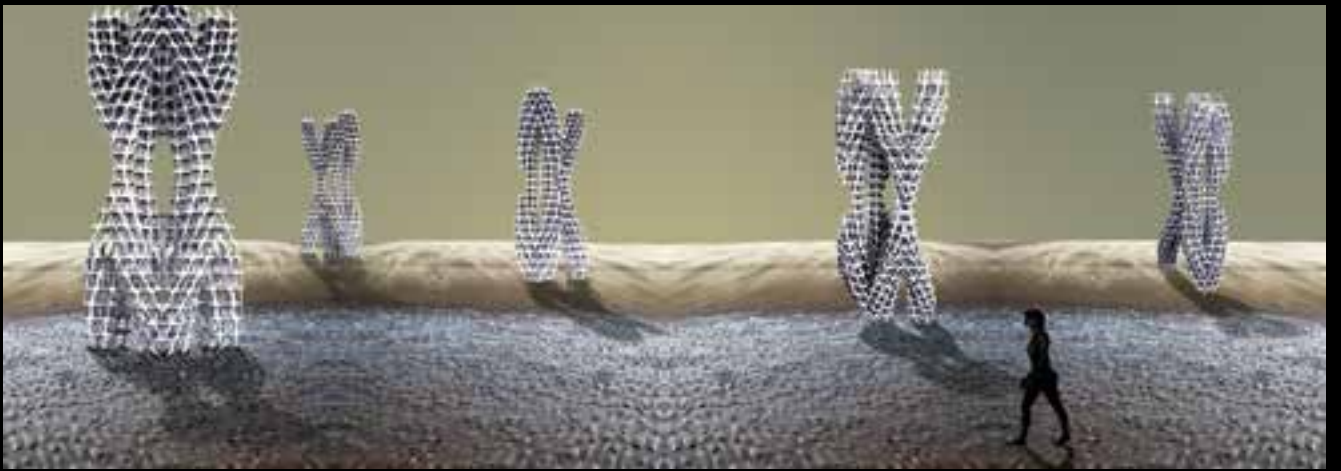
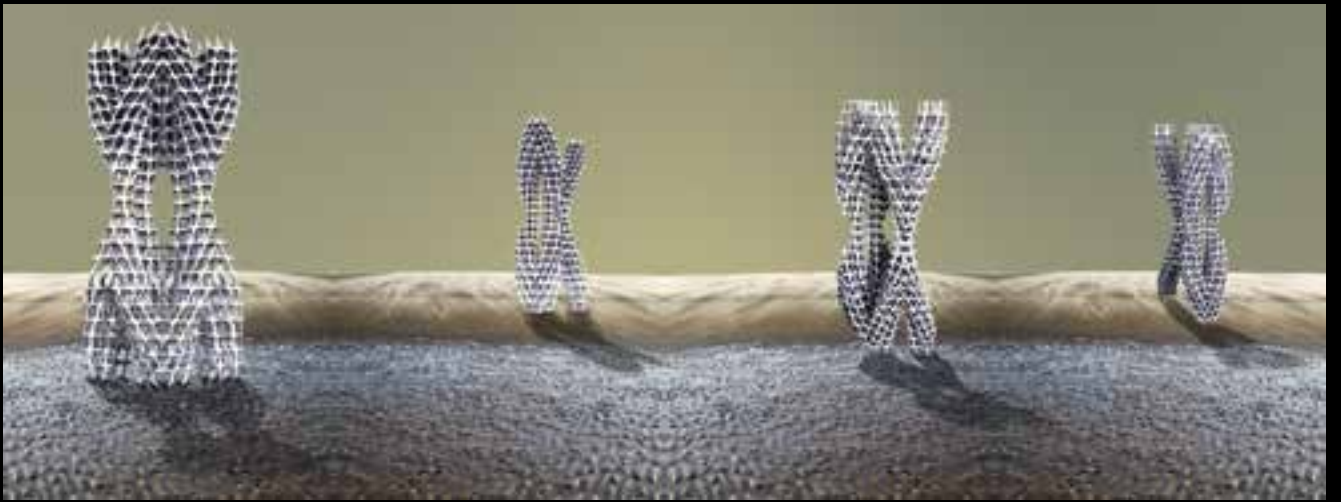
























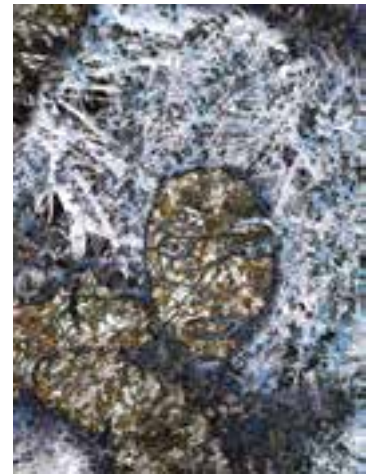














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2013

MIXED MEDIA ON ARCHIVAL CANVAS

198 X 264 CM (TRIPTYCH)

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## **TRANSITORY SHORES & BIOMORPHIC DAY-DREAMS**

2013

MIXED MEDIA ON ARCHIVAL CANVAS

183 X 259 CM (TRIPTYCH)

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2013

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182 X 204 CM (TRIPTYCH)

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2012

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61 X 48CM X 4 PANELS AND 2 METAL RELIEFS OF H.

61CM & W. 3.8CM EA.

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## **SEED II (GENESIS/BLOOM)**

2012

MIXED MEDIA ON ARCHIVAL CANVAS & 2 ROSETTES

61 X 46CM X 4 PANELS AND 2 METAL RELIEFS OF H.

61CM & W. 3.8CM EA.

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## **HISTORY-MEMORY-TRANSFIGURATION: SIGNS OF SKIN 1-3, 5-6**

2012

MIXED MEDIA ON ARCHIVAL PAPER

51X 20.3CM (PAPER SIZE) X 5 WORKS

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## **HETEROTOPIC TRANSITIONS**

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2013

SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO IN HIGH DEFINITION WITH SOUND

DURATION: 5 MIN.

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2012

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DURATION: 1 MIN AND 50 SEC

P.52-53 (frames from video)

## **HYPERBLOOM TRANSITIONS I**

2012

SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO IN HIGH DEFINITION

DURATION: 2 MIN AND 20 SEC







# CURRICULUM VITAE

## EDUCATION

- 2004 Master of Fine Art, (Painting), College of Art, New Delhi, India
- 2002 Post Diploma in Photography, School of Fototecnik, New Delhi, India
- 2001 Bachelor of Fine Art, (Painting), College of Art, New Delhi, India

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *The Embryonic Plant and Otherworlds*, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong. Essays by Katie de Tilly and Veeranganakumari Solanki.
- 2011-12 *Metamorphosing Female: Roots Emerge Upwards*, Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi, India. Lead essay by Deeksha Nath.
- 2011 *Metamorphosing Female: Transition -Transfiguration*, Beck & Eggeling, International Fine Arts, Dusseldorf, Germany. Essays by Katja Ott, Gerard Goodrow.
- 2008 *Urban Biomorphic*, curated by Dr Alka Pande, Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. Lead essay by Dr. Alka Pande.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Sydney Contemporary 13: International Modern & Contemporary Art Fair*, Carriageworks, Sydney, Australia, represented by 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong. *The Wave Project*, curated by Klavs Weiss and Karen Havskov Jensen, ET4U Contemporary Visual Arts Projects, Vestjylland, Denmark, Scandinavia. *Spell of Spill: Utopia of Ecology*, curated by Veeranganakumari Solanki, Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi. *India Art Fair*, represented by Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- 2012 *The Secret Life of Plants, works from India, China & Iran*, curated project by Maya Kovskaya, Exhibit 320, Contemporary Art Space, New Delhi, India. *2+2=5: The Whole Is More Than The Sum Of Its Parts*, Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi, India. *Art Chennai 2012*, represented by Latitude 28, New Delhi. *India Art Fair*, represented by Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- 2011 *'WHAT RULES?'*, curated By Deeksha Nath, Galerie Nature Morte, Berlin, Germany. *'Project Stage Asia Pacific'*, curated section of *Art Stage Singapore 2011*, represented by Seven Art Limited, New Delhi. *Art Stage Singapore 2011*, represented by Seven Art

Limited, New Delhi.

*India Art Fair*, represented by Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi.

- 2010-11 *India Awakens, Under The Banyan Tree: Recent Positions In Contemporary Indian Art*, Essl Museum, Kunst Der Gegenwart, (Museum Of Contemporary Art), Klosterneuberg, Vienna, Austria.
- 2010 *Global/Local: Time And Space In Contemporary Indian Art*, Henn Galerie, Munchen, Germany.
- 2009 *Lo Real Maravilloso: Marvelous Reality*, curated by Sunil Mehra, Gallery Espace and Lalit Kala Akademi Galleries, New Delhi, India. *Re-Claim / Re-Cite / Re-Cycle*, curated by Bhavna Kakar, Bose Pacia. *Art Cologne: International Art Fair*, Cologne, Germany. *India Art Summit 2009*, represented by Galerie Beck & Eggeling, Germany and Latitude 28, New Delhi. *Labyrinths Urban- Organic: New Perspectives in Contemporary Indian Art*, 1x1 Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE. *ART HK 09: Hongkong International Art Fair 2009*, represented by Galerie Beck & Eggeling, Dusseldorf, Germany.
- 2008 *The Second Sex: India*, Sonia Mehra Chawla, Jignasha Doshi and Surekha, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong. *World One Minutes*, curated by Barbara Borcic and Dušan Dovic, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China. *SH Contemporary 08*, Asia Pacific Contemporary Art Fair, Shanghai 2008, China. *Trends and Trivia: An Indian Story*, curated by Bhavna Kakar, Visual Arts Centre, Hong Kong.
- 2007 *Identity and Masquerade: Staging the Self*, multimedia project, directed by Anne Braybone, Tate Modern, London, UK.
- 2006 *Imaging Materiality-Gesture of the City*, curated by Dr Alka Pande, Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India. *Khirkhee ki Khoj*, Public and Community Arts projects, Khoj International Artists Organization, New Delhi, India.
- 2005 *Path/Progression/Digressions*, Air Gallery, London, UK.
- 2004 *CC: Crossing Currents: Video Art & Cultural Identities*, curated by Yohan Pinajjel, Lalit Kala Galleries, New Delhi, India. (Video project in collaboration with Broersen and Lukacs) *Carry on Drawing: A Growing Exhibit of Marks*, curated by Avantika Bawa at Serpentine Gallery, London, Studio Art Gallery, San Diego, Royal College of Art, London,



- Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, Mumbai, India.
- 2002 *The Pedagogic Way*, curated by Veronique Boseret, Alliance Francaise, New Delhi, India.

#### ARTIST RESIDENCIES/ PROJECTS

- 2013 *'The Wave' and 'Art Epicenter'*, International contemporary public art events, with multiple projects in Humlum, Norre Snede, Sdr.Nissum, Nees-Skalstrup & Vorgod Barde, West Jutland, Denmark, ET4U Contemporary Visual arts Projects, Denmark, Scandinavia. Invited artist for *SCAD deFINE ART*, International Art Festival and Contemporary art event, SCAD University of Creative Careers, Hong Kong. Events in collaboration with 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.
- 2012 Art Chennai Artists Residency, Chennai, India.
- 2006 *Identity and Masquerade*, Tate Modern, London. Project Director, Anne Braybone.
- 2005-07 Community and Public Art projects, Khoj International Artists Organization, New Delhi. (ongoing project over 2 years)
- 2004 *Moving Image*, video project for CC: Crossing Currents: Video Art & Cultural Identities, Indo-Dutch video art exhibition, in collaboration with Royal Netherlands Embassy, Broersen and Luckacs.
- 2001 Printmaking residency and studio based practice, Atelier 2221 Print and Edition Studio, New Delhi, India.

#### AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- 2005 Gold Medalist College of Art (Delhi University) for MFA.
- 2004 National Award for Painting, Lalit Kala Akademi, National Academy of Art, India.
- 2004 National Scholarship, Ministry of Culture, India.

#### RECENT COLLECTIONS

Essl Museum, Kunst der Gegenwart, Museum of Contemporary Art, Vienna, Austria.

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

*The Embryonic Plant and Otherworlds*, published by 10 Chancery lane Gallery, Hong Kong in 2013 on the occasion of the artists' solo project. Essays by Katie de Tilly, Veeranganakumari Solanki & Deeksha Nath. Printed in Hong Kong.

*Metamorphosing Female: Roots Emerge Upwards*, published in 2011 on the occasion of the artists' solo project, by Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi. Essay by Deeksha Nath.

*Metamorphosing Female: Transition-Transfiguration*, published in 2011 on the occasion of the artists' solo project, by Galerie Beck

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International Art Festival & Contemporary Art Events

SCAD University of Creative Careers (Savannah, Hong Kong, Atlanta) & SCAD Museum of Art

Artist Talks: Sonia Mehra Chawla and Lam Wai Kit in conversation, with a foreword by Katie de Tilly (Director, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong) and Grant Preisser (Associate Vice President, SCAD University)

on February 22, 2013

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