

The ArtsPaper

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Art

POINTS BEYOND

Artist maps the infinite through painstaking silverpoint

By Jan Engoren
ArtsPaper Contributing Writer

What if Stephen Hawking had been an artist? What would his theories look like as physical representations of the universe and the cosmos?

Carol Prusa, a Boca Raton artist and professor of painting and drawing at FAU, just might have that answer.

In her new exhibit for the Boca Raton Museum of Art, *Carol Prusa: Dark Light*, curated by Kathleen Goncharov, the senior curator of the museum, Prusa invites viewers to honor the women astronomers who originally helped map the stars.

Following in the footsteps of American astronomer Maria Mitchell (the first woman elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 1848, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1850), Prusa traveled to the Atacama Desert in Chile to experience the totality of the eclipse in August 2017 — a life-changing experience.

"Seeing a total eclipse for the first time, I was blown away by a euphoric feeling of floating," Prusa remembers. "I was so moved that I literally fell backward."

"When the shadow of the eclipse passed over, the world changed in a way I had never experienced. The sun became a sharp black disc, Venus popped out and the sky to my right was night and to my left it was day."

It was this overwhelming feeling that compelled Prusa to create this body of work, and honor little-known women astronomers including Henrietta Swan Leavitt, Annie



Artist Carol Prusa works on a piece in her studio. Her works on display at the Boca Raton Museum of Art include *Cosmic Web*, 2018 (shown in 'Points' in this story's headline) and *Nebula*, 2019 (in 'Beyond'). Photos provided by the artist

See PRUSA on AT8

Arts

Cultural organizations look forward to bigger funding pie this year

By Christina Wood
ArtsPaper Contributing Writer

When Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the state budget earlier this year, nonprofit arts and cultural organizations across Florida breathed a sigh of relief.

Making sure the arts receive their fair share of the pie is always an uphill battle. The moneys provided in the budget for fiscal year 2019-2020 weren't particularly generous, but it was a big improvement compared to last year — when the Florida Legislature had slashed



Beryl

arts funding by some 90 percent.

"I think the cultural community really did a good job of making them understand that they needed to fund us and why it was so good — not only for the economy but for the health of the community," says Sae Ellen Beryl, managing director and a co-founder of Palm Beach Dramaworks in West Palm Beach.

They also did a good job of making legislators aware of the fact that because of the drastic cuts in 2018, Florida ranked 48th in the nation in terms of per capita arts spending, she says. Only Kansas and Georgia spent less.

Look at it this way: While Florida's economy grew, even South Dakota, Idaho and Mississippi managed to spend more on art and culture.

At the time, Scott Maxwell of the Orlando Sentinel put it in perspective: "Arts and cultural grants dropped to 0.003 percent of the state's \$88.7 billion

budget. That's three one-thousandths of a percent ... during a year of record spending."

State funding by the numbers

Theaters, museums, dance companies, orchestras, arts education programs and other arts and cultural organizations in Florida receive funding through the state's Division of Cultural Affairs (DCA), which offers several types of grants. The primary focus of

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ABOVE LEFT: Detail from Carol Prusa's *Dark Light (Elegy for Rebecca Elson)*, 2019, silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on wood panel. ABOVE RIGHT: *Luna (Guardian)*, 2017, silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on plexiglass circle. Photos courtesy of the artist

PRUSA

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Jump Cannon, Cecilia Payne-Caposchkin, Vera Rubin, and Jocelyn Bell Burnell.

Even as a young girl of 12, Prusa was consumed by eternal existential questions of who we are, why we are here and what our purpose is, she says. She remembers contemplating the Big Bang theory and wondering "how it could be that there was nothing before there was something."

These questions are what intrigue her.

"I like the questions, not the answers," she said in her studio on a recent rainy day.

Her studio is filled with large, dome-shaped globes and female-centric orbs reminiscent of eclipses, planets, black holes and eternity. Her work, like her studio, is composed entirely in grayscale.

Her use of the age-old technique of silverpoint and working in gradations of black and white creates juxtapositions between warm and cool and brings each piece to life. Prusa's work embodies the hidden realities of our universe. Her work is at once ethereal, cerebral and otherworldly.

Prusa employs materials such as sculpted resin, fiberglass, metal leaf, LED lights, black iron oxide, titanium, and powdered steel, in addition to the silverpoint, a technique she studied in Florence, Italy.

The silverpoint stylus is a small stick of silver inserted into a wooden rod, similar to a pencil. Silverpoint drawings are created by making a mark on a surface with this rod or wire made out of silver. Prusa's excruciatingly detailed patterns can require as much as 700 hours of work, and she credits her Calvinist upbringing for her strong work ethic and discipline.

Her works, many referencing Buddhist mandalas (Prusa studied Tibetan flower painting and Russian iconography), symbolize the relationship of human life to infinity.

Prusa began her artistic life after studying chemistry

and working as a medical illustrator. She realized that she didn't want to make what other people wanted, so she earned her MFA in painting and drawing, after meeting an artist who fortuitously changed the course of her life.

She says she was "charged up" and immersed herself in her new passion, setting out to master the skills and techniques of the art world. She earned a bachelor's in medical illustration from the University of Illinois, and a master of fine arts in painting and drawing from Drake University.

Fascinated by the world of physics, astronomy and the unknowability of the infinite, Prusa says her life's work is to explore the greatest of mysteries and to make the unknowable a little more knowable.

She references women in science and astronomy who came before her and is propelled by popular physics: the Big Bang theory, the theory of everything (TOE), the theory of multiple universes and string theory, popularized by Hawking.

She keeps books such as *Mapping the Heavens: The Radical Scientific Ideas That Reveal the Cosmos*, by Priyamvada Natarajan; *The Quantum Labyrinth: How Richard Feynman and John Wheeler Revolutionized Time and Reality*, by Paul Halpern; *The Glass Universe*, by Dava Sobel, and a stargazing guide in her studio for easy reference and perhaps, inspiration.

Prusa lives with her partner Joseph Prusa, an applied mathematician and engineer.

"It's possible you may be having a bad day in one universe, and a good day in another," she says, provocatively. "The concept of time moves across possibilities." And while her thoughts and spirit might be headed heavenward, her lifeline is a terrestrial radio in her studio eternally tuned to NPR to keep her grounded.

She counts visual artist Ann Hamilton, mystic painter Agnes Martin, poet William Blake and American artist James Turrell among her influences.

If You Go

Carol Prusa: Dark Light runs through Jan. 19 at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, 501 Plaza Real, Boca Raton. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon, Wed, Fri; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thu; noon-5 p.m. Sat & Sun. Admission: \$12; \$10 seniors, free to members and students. Info: 392-2500 or bocamuseum.org

Prusa also pays tribute to the women who served as human computers at the Harvard Observatory in the 19th century, painstakingly analyzing the many glass photographic plates from observatories around the world to map the stars. The earnings of these women were substantially less than men in their field, and their efforts largely lost to history.

Among her many honors, Prusa was nominated by Judy Pfaff and chosen by the American Academy of Arts and Letters as one of only 40 artists to exhibit in the 2015 Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts in New York City.

In 2018, Prusa was exhibited alongside Sanford Biggers, Cauleen Smith, Josh Sauter, and Lauren Kalman in *The Future of Craft* (curated by Shannon Stratton) at The Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

In addition to this year's exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, in 2020 she will have a solo exhibit at the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens in West Palm Beach.

Living a sustainable life (she drives a Prius), doing her civic duty, embracing friends and family and manifesting her best creative work, are all goals Prusa finds attainable in this universe.

Not didactic, she says, "People can take what they like from my work. It's not my job to do good. My job is to create a vision that connects us all and connects us to the larger meaning of life."

Stephen Hawking would approve.