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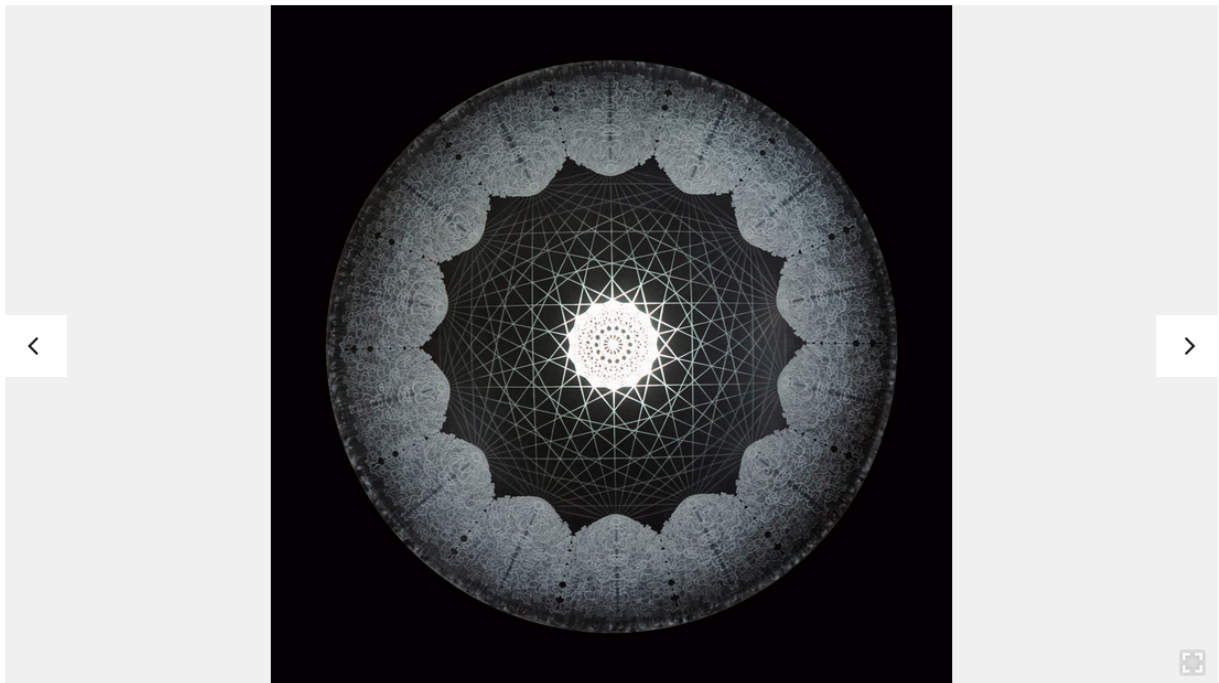
CNN style



Arts

Mesmerizing cosmic artworks honor history's unsung female astronomers

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1 / 7 - Carol Prusa's exhibition "Dark Light" explores phenomena like eclipses and dark matter, while celebrating the work of pioneering female astronomers. Scroll the through the gallery to see more images from the show. Carol Prusa

Written by
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Artist Carol Prusa remembers looking out of her window at the night sky as a child and feeling the "overwhelming immensity" of space. Decades later, that same feeling still informs her art -- absorbing paintings and sculptures that explore the boundary between light and dark.

Learning about the Big Bang in middle school was similarly influential, Prusa said, adding that she still meditates on the threshold between existing and not.

"I tried to envision what there was before there was something," she explained in an email interview. "Art, in its many forms, can... feel and express that vastness and the overwhelming fecundity of life. Looking at the night sky can leave one breathless by sheer scale and beauty and what we do not yet know."

Prusa's new show "Dark Light," which opens this week at Florida's Boca Raton Museum of Art, honors the pioneering -- yet often overlooked -- work of female astronomers. Coming just weeks after the 50th anniversary of the moon landing, the exhibition also aims to explore the broader mysteries of the universe.

The exhibition will feature a new collection of prints and other artworks by Prusa, including dome-shaped sculptures lit from inside by artificial lights.

Science, math and history are woven into Prusa's work. Her inspirations range from Russia's religious "icon" paintings to a Tibetan monk who ground azurite and malachite pigments into paint.

Prusa's signature technique, known as silverpoint, dates back to the medieval period. She places a stick of silver, or a silver wire, inside a wooden rod to make a pencil-like device for marking surfaces.



Prusa's silverpoint technique. Credit: Boca Raton Museum of Art

"I continued experimenting with making my own paints, grinding materials and combining them with different binders," Prusa said. "And (I) evolved a process that conceptually embodied my ideas and visually resulted in a sense of things coalescing and dissolving at the same time.

Silverpoint serves as the foundation of her work, which is then accentuated with ground pigments, metal leaf, fiber optics and even LED lights. Geometrical designs also feature prominently in each of her pieces.

Inspiring women

Prusa encountered female astronomers as she delved into books about dark matter and eclipses. In particular, she cites Vera Rubin, an astrophysicist credited with helping prove the existence of dark matter, and Maria Mitchell, the first American woman to work as a professional astronomer.

Mitchell's journals detailed her experience of taking a team of female astronomers to Denver, Colorado, to witness a rare total solar eclipse in 1878. This, along with astronomer's other accounts, informed the artworks in Prusa's new exhibition -- as did her own "other-worldly experience" of watching what she called the "eclipse of the century" in August 2017.

"Seeing a total eclipse for the first time, I was blown away by a euphoric feeling of floating. I was so moved that I literally fell backward," said Prusa, who watched the event from the banks of the North Platte River in Nebraska. "When the shadow of the eclipse passed over, the world changed in a way I had never experienced before.



Prusa at work in her studio. A single piece can take a thousand hours to complete. Credit: Boca Raton Museum of Art

"The sun became a sharp black disc, Venus popped out -- the sky to my right was night and to my left it was day. I was compelled to create this body of work to come to terms with this overwhelming feeling."

Immediately after the eclipse, Prusa began working on the artworks featured in "Dark Light." The series took two years to complete, and a single piece could take hundreds of hours. She ended the collection with a creation called "Dark Light (Elegy for Rebecca Elson)," in honor of the Canadian theoretical astrophysicist who died of lymphoma in 1999 at the age of just 39.

The power of eclipses

While Prusa's earlier work played with similar shades of gray, her new series -- rooted in the eclipse -- focuses on the contrast between light and dark tones. She created her striking palette by grinding stainless steel, iron oxide and graphite into painting materials. The end result is multiple domes and circular artworks representing various stages of a total solar eclipse.

"Black, no matter how dark, still reflects light. I wanted to make black have depth and structure, and to be infinite," Prusa said. "The eclipses influenced me in this respect, but this could also be a reflection on the times we live in. There isn't dark without light -- or light without dark."

Last month, Prusa bookended the project by visiting Chile to see another total solar eclipse. She needed to know more about why she had been so gripped by the 2017 eclipse.

For Irvin Lippman, executive director at the Florida museum where Prusa's work is showing, the exhibition is "about being drawn into the work, much as we are drawn to witness the eclipse of the sun; and everything else for those few minutes becomes secondary."

The artist hopes that her work invites a sense of wonder among those who see it.

"I hope people will find the work quietly compelling and beautiful, and perhaps slows their breathing and they pause to consider how amazing it is to be alive and how interconnected everything is," Prusa said, adding: "I hope the work will shift our understanding of our universe and our place in it in some small way."

"Dark Light" is showing at the Boca Raton Museum of Art in Florida until Jan. 19, 2020.



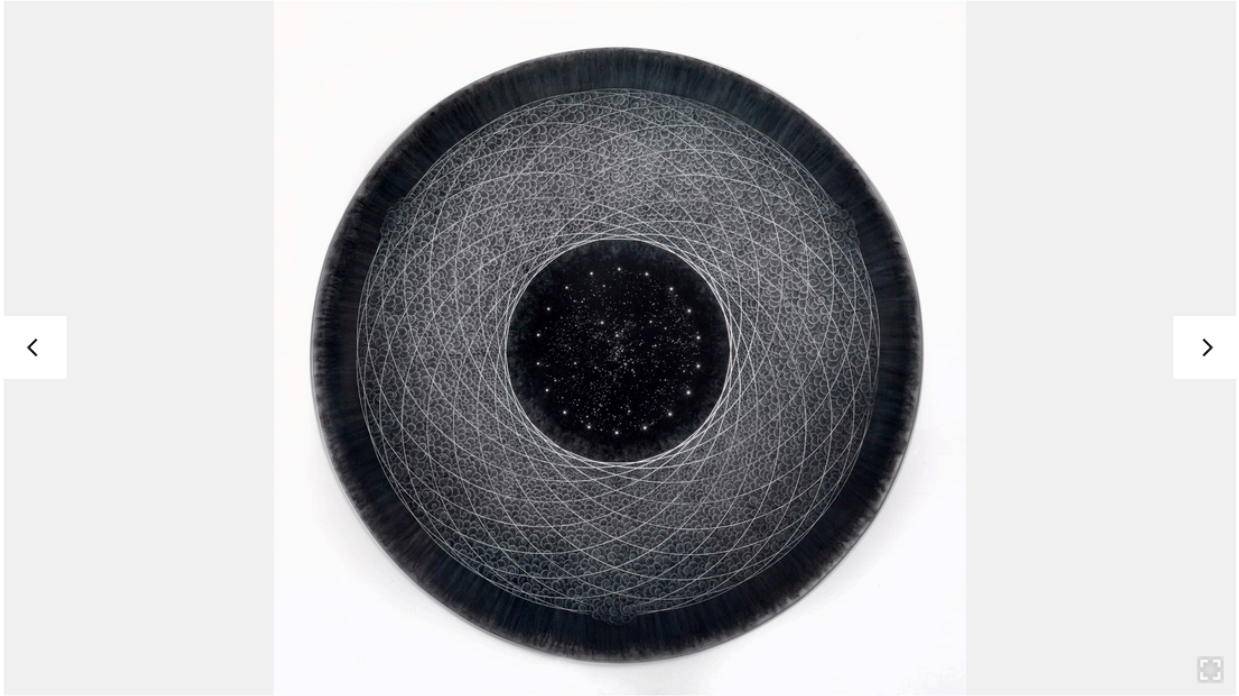
217 - Prusa's new portfolio of prints, "Galaxias Kyklos," is named after the Greek term for the Milky Way. The title page, pictured, showcases Ourania, the muse of astronomy in Greek mythology. Boca Raton Museum of Art



6 / 7 - Prusa's silverpoint technique, which dates back to the medieval period, sees places a stick of silver, or a silver wire, inside a wooden rod to make a pencil-like device. "Luna (guardian)" features the use of silverpoint and graphite on a plexiglass circle. Carol Prusa



4 / 7 - Prusa wanted to evoke the experience she had seeing a total solar eclipse for the first time. Carol Prusa



7/7 - While Prusa's earlier work played with similar shades of gray, her new series focuses on the contrast between light and dark tones. Carol Prusa



5/7 - "Dark Light (Elegy for Rebecca Elson)," was named in honor of the Canadian theoretical astrophysicist who died of lymphoma in 1999 at the age of just 39. Carol Prusa