

# *Dark Light*

CAROL PRUSA





Published on the occasion of the exhibition  
Carol Prusa: Dark Light

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# Dark Light

CAROL PRUSA

BOCA RATON MUSEUM OF ART

## FOREWORD

We sometimes get too distracted with the busyness and craziness of the trivial details in our daily lives. That is when we need artists like Carol Prusa to expand our horizons into the solar system, into the deeper unknown of dark space. As Carol explains, she has always been interested in science and cosmology. In the sixth grade she wondered about the Big Bang and “how it could be that there was nothing before there was something.”

Now that Carol is a Professor of Painting and Drawing at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, she has continued her discourse with the cosmos which results in the most beautiful and intricate of paintings. Her medium is silverpoint, which produces subtle lines and patterns that lead one into the deep recesses of the artwork. If, as she says, the making of each painting is a meditation, the result for the viewer is an artwork guaranteed to slow you down and capture your attention and imagination.

The exhibition and this accompanying publication were made possible by the generous support from our Leadership Fund, chaired by Jody H. and Martin Grass. The sixty donors to our Leadership Fund have proved to be the mainstay in our pursuit of excellence in programming at the Museum and the Art School.

Many thanks to Senior Curator Kathy Goncharov who closely worked with the artist in bringing this exhibition to fruition. We are grateful for the personal and insightful essay by contemporary art curator and writer Logan Royce Beitman, formerly the director of the Brintz Gallery in Palm Beach, which supported his research and writing. Joel Suissa designed this publication, and Publications Manager Austin Modine kept this process on track.

Although the works of art did not have far to travel from Carol’s studio in Boca Raton, the logistics of an exhibition are never uncomplicated; and, per usual, were put in order by the curatorial staff led by Director of Exhibitions and Chief Registrar Martin Hanahan, Associate Registrar Kelli Bodle, and Brendan Adams, Preparator. As always, the entire Museum staff deserves credit; and you will find a list of their names in this publication.



Carol Prusa’s artwork is not easy to reproduce, and we thank Michael Dillow for photographing the works in the installation and the paintings in Carol’s studio.

I join Carol in thanking Kim Spivey, assisted by Michelle A. M. Miller, who beautifully processed the copper plates and printed the editions for *Galaxias Kyklos*. The Dorothy E. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters, along with the School for the Arts at Florida Atlantic University, provided grant support towards the print project.

Finally, much appreciation goes to the artist’s partner Joseph Prusa, a fellow umbraphile who travels with Carol to experience solar eclipses. Carol describes watching an eclipse as “everything else drops away” — as happens to all of us when experiencing the artworks in this exhibition *Dark Light*.

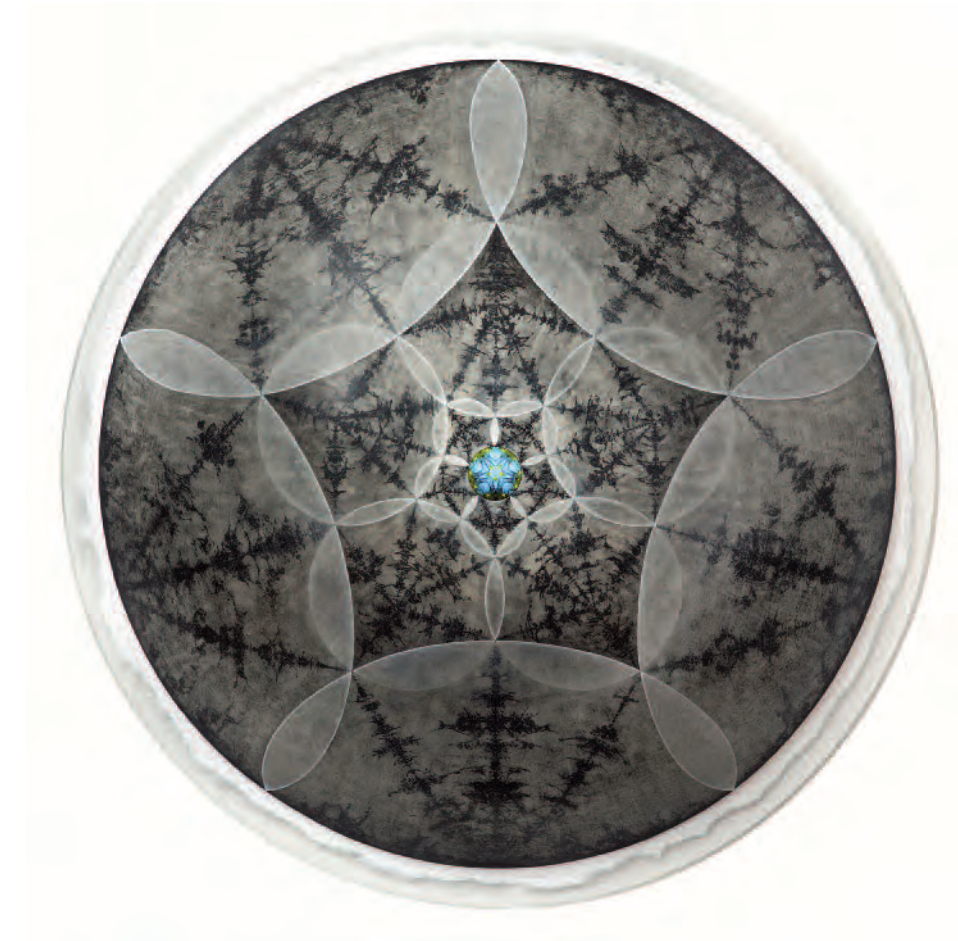
Irvin M. Lippman, *Executive Director*

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# THE MYSTERY AND WIZARDRY OF CAROL PRUSA'S DARK LIGHT

—  —  
*by Logan Royce Beitmen*

**CAROL PRUSA** is a visual alchemist whose work harnesses cosmic chaos and makes invisible forces materialize before our eyes. Drawing with actual silver and painting with powdered steel, Prusa's use of materials defies expectations.



Several of Carol Prusa's paintings and prints are dedicated to pioneering female astronomers with whom the artist feels a strong kinship. *Quintessence* (p. 6) contains an abstract video that conjures the otherworldly light and color effects the artist witnessed during a recent solar eclipse. Other artworks are internally lit, and many feature tightly controlled passages of geometric or representational precision that give way to beautifully nebulous, freeform space-dust patterns.

QUINTESSENCE, 2019  
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome with fiber optics and videos of the 2017 eclipse, 34 in. diameter x 9 in. deep

What is *Dark Light* about? *The mysteries of the cosmos* is the short answer, but it is an answer that probably obscures as much as it illuminates. The phrase “the mysteries of the cosmos” points the mind in one of two directions — science or spirituality. Depending on one’s personal feelings about those subjects, these ways of framing Prusa’s art could either instill a false sense of confidence that we “get it” without having to spend much time with the art; or, make us associate *Dark Light* with things we find baffling or inscrutable, causing us to tune it out completely. Either way, we would miss what is truly amazing about the work, which requires neither scientific knowledge nor spiritual commitment but only a willingness to look and see.

Prusa gets much of her inspiration from the sciences of astrophysics, meteorology, and optics; but she also incorporates art-making processes from her study of Russian Orthodox and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. As Prusa explains: “I need to stir myself up with thoughts that are bigger than me and read about things that are beyond me, and then reach for them in my work.” However the sense of certainty one sometimes encounters in religious discourse is anathema to Prusa, who consciously pushes herself and her artwork into the hazy shadow-lands between chaos and order, cultivating states of profound unknowing. The scientific method, which produces a perennially incomplete, provisionally constructed model of reality, may seem more in line with Prusa’s creative pursuit of uncertainty. However, the task of science is not to bask in cosmic mysteries, but to solve them. Greater knowledge is always the goal, no matter how provisional or incomplete that knowledge may be. Prusa underscores this way of thinking: “I don’t make work to accomplish anything or answer anything.” Prusa finds meaning in the nebulous, floating stardust of mystery itself.

Although I have been following her work for over a decade, Prusa still manages to surprise me, as she did when she told me recently that one of her favorite musical genres is atmospheric black metal. If “atmospheric black metal” were an actual, material substance — imagine glittering clouds of black powder — it would be an excellent way to describe many of the works in *Dark Light*. After all, Prusa uses literal heavy metals — black iron oxide, titanium, silver, and powdered steel — to create her predominantly black and grey-toned paintings, which shimmer like stardust and are full of “atmospheric” effects. Prusa’s metallic pigments are seductive, mysterious, otherworldly, and majestic. Unlike atmospheric black metal music, however, Prusa’s “atmospheric black metal” paintings are not gloomy or bleak. In fact, it is best to set aside all the usual Western notions of “darkness” as a symbol of sadness, hopelessness, death, evil, black magic, and so forth, if we wish to understand Prusa’s body of work on its own terms.

In *Dark Light*, Prusa explores two unrelated phenomena, both called “dark light” — neither of which has anything to do with doom or gloom. The first kind of “dark light,” from nineteenth century optics, is a visual illusion that occurs under low-light conditions, whereby people sometimes perceive non-existent particles of luminous “visual noise” glowing within the darkest of shadows. The second usage of the phrase “dark light,” from the world of contemporary astrophysics, refers to a theoretical force that interacts with dark matter. Neither dark light nor dark matter are dark in color; they are only “dark” in the sense of being imperceptible to humans. The “dark light” of optics is unreal, even though people believe they can see it, whereas the “dark light” of astrophysics is real (at least according to popular theory), although no one can see it.





LUNA (GUARDIAN), 2017

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on Plexiglas circle, 60 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

CAROL PRUSA

*Luna (Guardian)* (p. 9) offers a good entrée into the phenomenon of “dark light” in the optical illusion sense of the term. At face value, Prusa has drawn an image of a tree in silverpoint with Düreresque virtuosity; but the real subject of *Luna* is not the tree but the faint moonlight in which it is bathed (hence the title), as well as the illusory “dark light” we experience when trying to focus on subtle details among the soft, lunar shadows. There is no pure black in *Luna*, as there is in some of the solar eclipse paintings in the exhibition. Instead of black, *Luna* offers a low-contrast palette of charcoal greys, speckled with lighter particles of “visual noise.” These particles simulate the “dark light” illusion — also known as *Eigengrau*, or “intrinsic grey” — whereby shadowy objects perceived under low-light conditions appear to buzz with energetic fields of grey luminosity. Prusa juxtaposes an ornate, wreathlike border of bright titanium white patterns against the low-contrast metallic pigments of the central image, ensuring that her tree remains comparatively faint and dim no matter how many spotlights one might aim at the artwork.

Prusa takes the *Eigengrau* illusion further in other Dark Light artworks. In *Umbra* and *Corona* (pp. 21, 22), for instance, Prusa dispenses with the central image entirely. *Umbra*’s ornate, wreathlike border opens to an otherwise empty field of darkness, a starless sky of speckled *Eigengrau*. *Umbra* is darker than *Luna* but still not pure black. When viewed up close, the slightly luminous speckles that float in the midst of the starless darkness resemble a delicate patina of water spots on a glass window, but seen from a standard viewing distance their faint outlines dissolve into a soft visual buzz. The effect is strong enough to make us aware that we are perceiving luminosity in the midst of darkness, but it is subtle enough not to draw undue attention to the surface of the artwork. *Corona* has a similar *Eigengrau* effect in its large circular dark center, but instead of the crisply delineated border that enwreathes *Umbra*, the border of *Corona* gradually fades into or out of the mysteriously luminous darkness. In these works, Prusa turns our attention away from the objects of visual perception and redirects it to the perceptual process itself. They are part of a tradition of artworks that toy with visual

perception and illusion, which would include works by Bridget Riley, Larry Bell, Anish Kapoor, and even Richard Artschwager’s use of rubberized horsehair to make solid sculptures that appear “blurry” from a distance.

Given her capacity to make magic from shadows, it is no surprise that Prusa identifies as an umbraphile, one who travels the world to experience solar eclipses. It is a passion that has taken the artist from Nebraska to Chile and inspired many of the works in the present exhibition. *Quintessence*, a kaleidoscope-patterned dome painting, contains a small, circular, kaleidoscope-patterned video art element in the oculus at the apex of the dome. Prusa created the video sequence for *Quintessence* from footage of a total solar eclipse she recorded in 2017, preserving the light and color effects she experienced during the course of the eclipse — effects she later described as “strangely dramatic and euphoric — like being surrounded by another energy, an energy never felt before.” The longer one spends gazing at the rapidly transforming star shapes at the center of *Quintessence*, the more colors one sees in the video, but also the less detail one sees in the surrounding dome, which starts to dissolve into a luminous grey mist. It is an optical illusion that captures the feeling of “everything else dropping away,” which Prusa experienced during the maximum stage of the total eclipse in a moment that umbraphiles like her call “totality.”

In all of Prusa’s works, order emerges slowly out of chaos, light from darkness, pattern from void. No matter how fine the detail or how seemingly perfect the symmetry of her final compositions, Prusa always begins with experimental, process-oriented methods that introduce elements of chaos or unpredictability into the work. In several of the recent *Dark Light* paintings, Prusa allows more of the initial “chaos” to remain in the finished works than she ever has in the past. At times, we may feel as if we are traveling to a point in time just a few milliseconds before or after the Big Bang, and we are witnessing the cosmos coming into being.

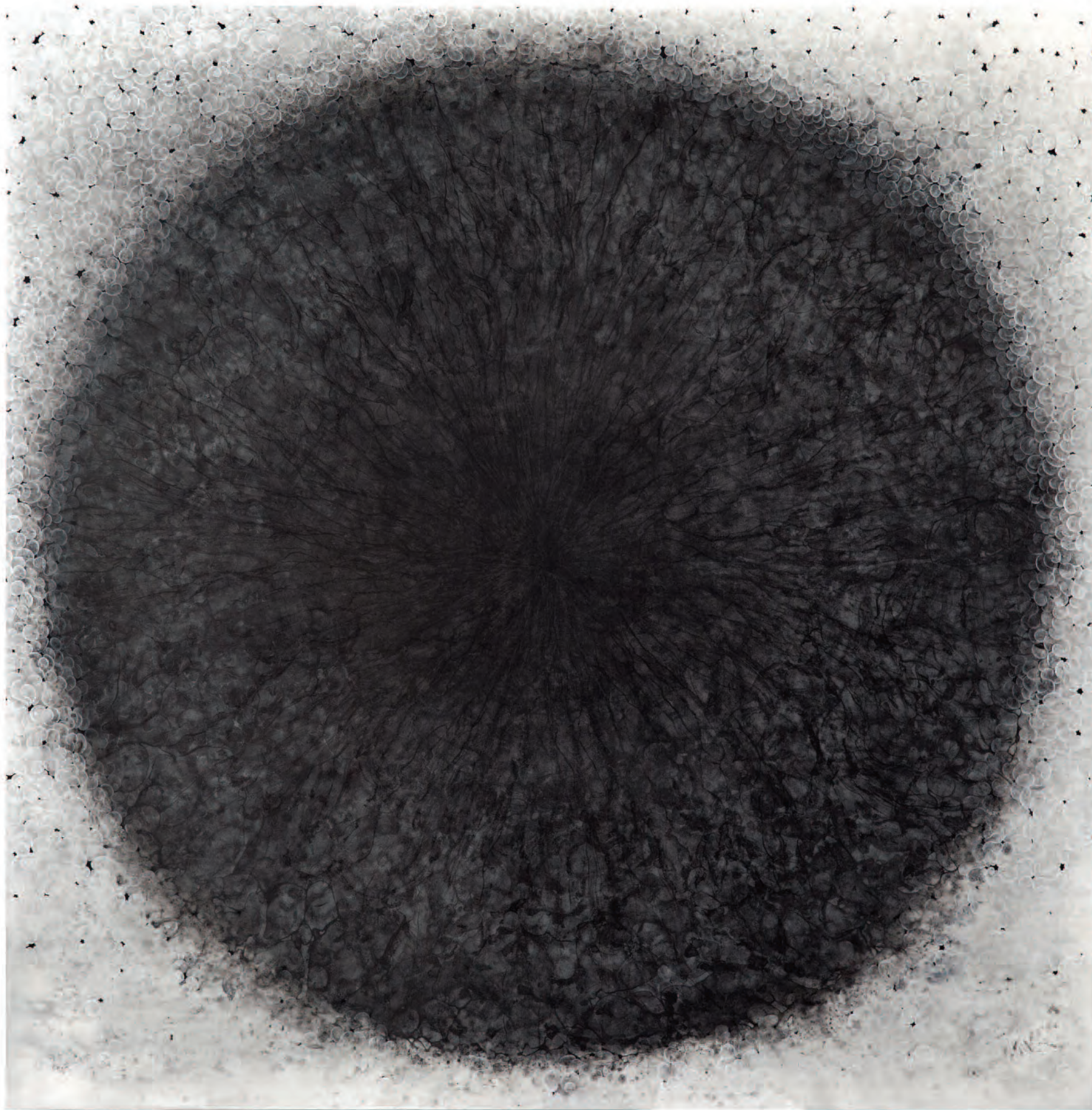
Prusa’s notion of art making as a process, where order composes itself from chaos, has surprising art-historical roots. In the early 90’s, Prusa studied fifteenth-century Russian

Orthodox icon painting techniques under a master icon painter at Naropa University. At the time, Prusa’s work tended to engage more directly in social commentary, so her primary interest in learning traditional icon painting was to make what she describes as “subversive, feminist” Madonna and Child paintings that would be a critique of religion and patriarchy. Unexpectedly, however, her earnest engagement with these late-medieval painting techniques led to a deep appreciation for the concepts that underpinned the icon-painting process, which forever altered the way Prusa thought about painting and continues to inform her working methods to this day.

Because fifteenth-century icon painters conceived of their process as an echo of divine creation, they began each of their paintings with what Prusa describes as an “open cosmological field” reflecting the original pre-creation state when “the world was without form, and void.” Before painting any images — which these early icon painters saw as an ego-driven process that could interfere with the creative will of God — they would first “float” unmixed pigments onto a wet substrate, allowing the materials to settle naturally according to their own intrinsic properties. Prusa’s connection to the fifteenth-century Russian icon painting lineage is instructive. As with the icon painters, she employs randomness to initiate a generative “cosmological field” from which order and symmetry emerge. The thought of order emerging in the universe after the Big Bang, or even star clusters being born from the dusty chaos of nebulae today, is as mind-boggling and as humbling for Prusa as the Christian creation story was for Russian icon painters six centuries ago.

Prusa begins many of her paintings with ground graphite washes, allowing the materials to flow and settle in unpredictable ways. Even in *Galaxias Kyklos* (pp. 29, 30), the suite of copperplate etchings (her first foray into etching), a smoky soap ground on copperplate was etched and printed to create an “open cosmological field” before printing the etched incised hard-ground plates on top. To make *Dark Light (Elegy for Rebecca Elson)* (p. 13), Prusa poured countless layers of acrylic resin containing powdered steel and black iron oxide onto the center of the canvas.





DARK LIGHT (ELEGY FOR REBECCA ELSON), 2019  
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on wood panel, 84 x 84 x 2 in.

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CAROL PRUSA

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This caused tendrils of pale metallic pigment to course through the surrounding blackness as streaks of lightning through storm clouds, as white veins through black marble, or — as the title suggests — as dark light through dark matter. Although Prusa later “filled in” the four edges of the canvas with a billowing pattern of stylized silver and white dust clouds, she kept most of the seven-foot painting in its more primordial state. The massive, circular void is interrupted only by the lightning-like veins that radiate outward from the central, unknowable darkness. Gazing into the void, I asked Prusa what she thought of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Circle* or Anish Kapoor’s *Black Hole*. “I wish I could make something that simple,” she replied, “but just keeping myself from filling in the center of this piece was difficult enough!”

Considering Prusa’s natural inclination to fill the “cosmic voids” of her paintings with meticulously detailed all-over patterns, *Dark Light (Elegy for Rebecca Elson)* displays remarkable restraint and vulnerability. By leaving the painting in a state she would have considered “unfinished” just a few years ago, she allows herself to teeter on the edge of chaos and control. It also gives the work a dramatic visual impact. Slightly larger than human size, the void, streaked with dark light, seems capable of subsuming us. We may feel what the French call *l’appel du vide* — the call of the void — and the urge to leap.

Rebecca Elson was a theoretical astrophysicist whose research focused on dark matter and who died of lymphoma in 1999 at the age of 39. Elson was also an accomplished poet. In “Dark Matter II,” Elson uses the concept of “dark light” from astrophysics as a metaphor for the many invisible ways that humans influence one another. “Each of us,” she writes, “point-like, luminous / Bends the path of those whose lives we touch.” Prusa said that in making *Dark Light*, she wanted to “give structure to something that can’t be seen” — namely, the movement of dark light through dark matter, which scientific illustrators tend to represent as luminous plasmatic or lightning-like filament patterns similar to the gracefully intertwining tendrils of luminous metallic pigments that radiate outward from the dark center of Prusa’s painting. Prusa’s dedicatory subtitle, *Elegy for Rebecca Elson*, encourages an interpretation of “dark light” beyond the

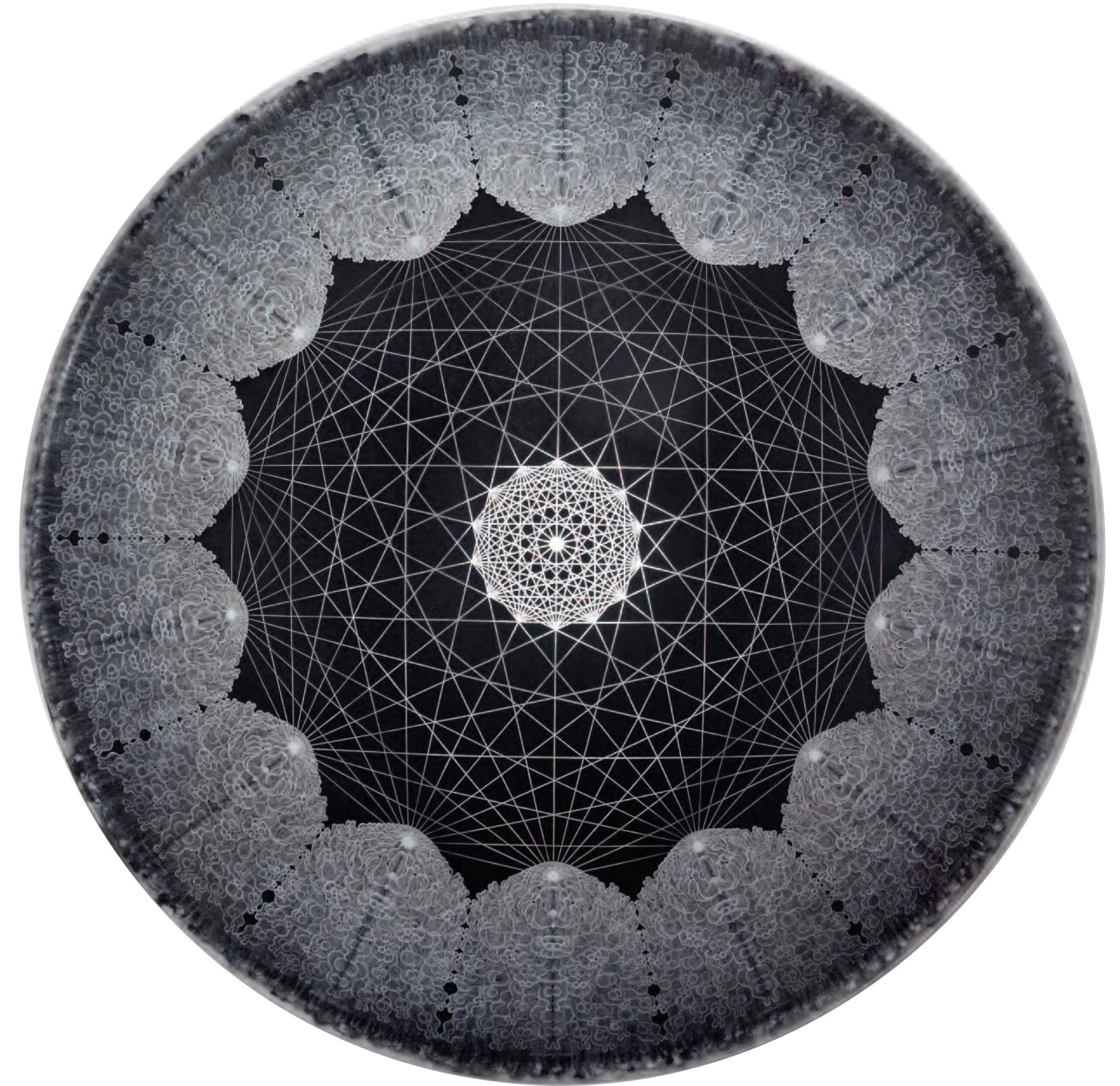


literalism of scientific illustration. Prusa's web of silvery electric plasma evokes Elson's own notion of human interconnectedness. The painting may first appear to be a black hole, an elegiac absence, but in fact it is a positive portrait of Elson as a confluence of thoughts and energies which continue to interact in many incalculable ways with the universe in which she moved. Traces of ourselves can "bend" or affect the memory of others and their life paths in subtle, or sometimes great ways.

*Cosmic Web (for the Harvard Computers)* (p. 16) is an internally-lit, dome-shaped artwork dedicated to fourteen of the pioneering female astronomers known as the Harvard Computers, whose discoveries at the Harvard Observatory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries greatly expanded human understanding of the cosmos. Prusa represents each scientist as a tower of translucent floral or cloudlike organic forms. Collectively, the fourteen translucent towers join to form a ring around the perimeter of the dome, similar to the rings of smoke, fire, or flower petals that often encircle the bodies of Tibetan Buddhist deities in traditional *thangka* paintings. (Prusa studied Tibetan painting in the mid-1990s, and the influence shows.) The top of each astronomer's tower contains an illuminated oculus, like the opening at the top of an observatory, and thin beams of light radiate upward and outward from each opening. The beams intersect with one another in the cosmic blackness at the center of the dome, coalescing as the "crossed streams" of proton accelerator beams do in the *Ghostbusters* movie.

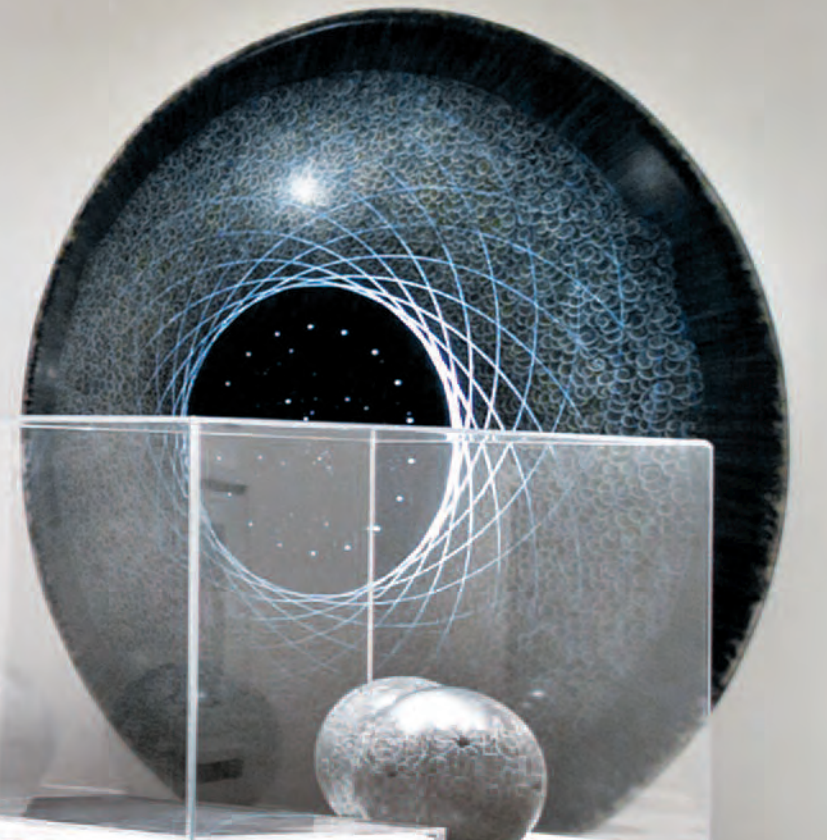
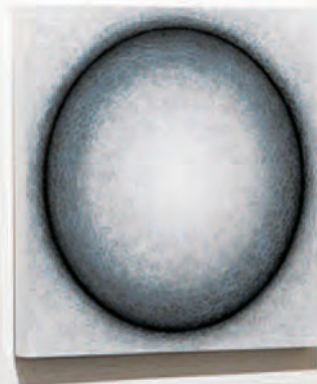
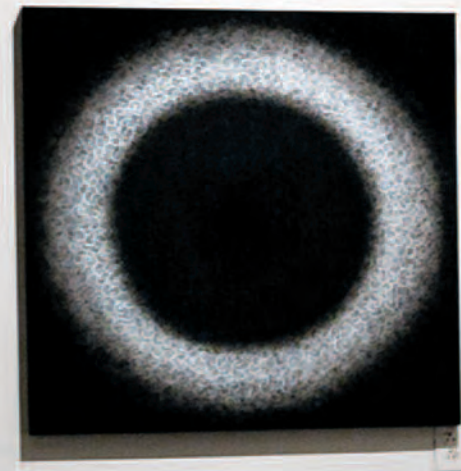
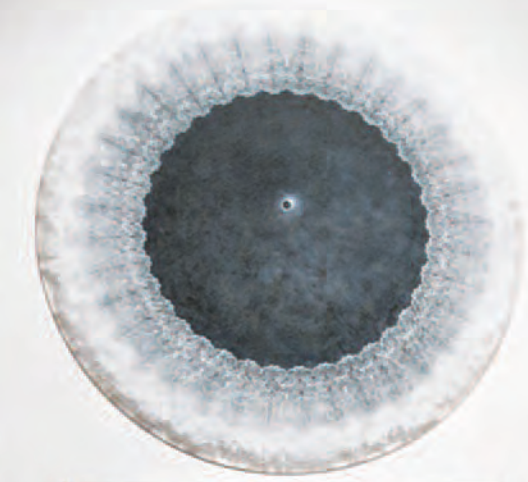
In Prusa's *Cosmic Web*, the intersecting beams form a mathematically perfect, kaleidoscopic pattern of concentric fourteen-pointed stars, which glow, literally, due to its internal light. If the individual beams represent each astronomer's quest to map the unknown, then the brilliant, kaleidoscopic star pattern at the center represents unity, synergy, and collective strength. Astronomy, like art, can be a lonely profession and the work of an astronomer — at least in the nineteenth century — was "as dull as that of a bookkeeper," as one of the early directors of the Harvard Observatory once confessed to a *Boston Herald* reporter. Fortunately, for the Harvard Computers, the hard work paid off; and it is because of their steady, diligent, solitary labor that we now know the universe is exponentially larger than anyone had ever dreamed possible.

Prusa's studio practice is equally steady, diligent, and solitary. Her art expands our perceptions and makes us feel more curious, and perhaps even a bit wiser, than we were before we encountered it. As works of visual art, the works in *Dark Light* disrupt our ordinary field of vision, transporting us to a space of profound unknowing. *Dark Light* reawakens our sense of wonder and sends glittering particles of cosmic mystery into the grey matter of our minds.



COSMIC WEB (FOR THE HARVARD COMPUTERS), 2018  
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome with internal light, 60 in. diameter x 10 in. deep









**BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT, 2015**  
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on Plexiglas circle, 60 in. diameter x 2 in. deep



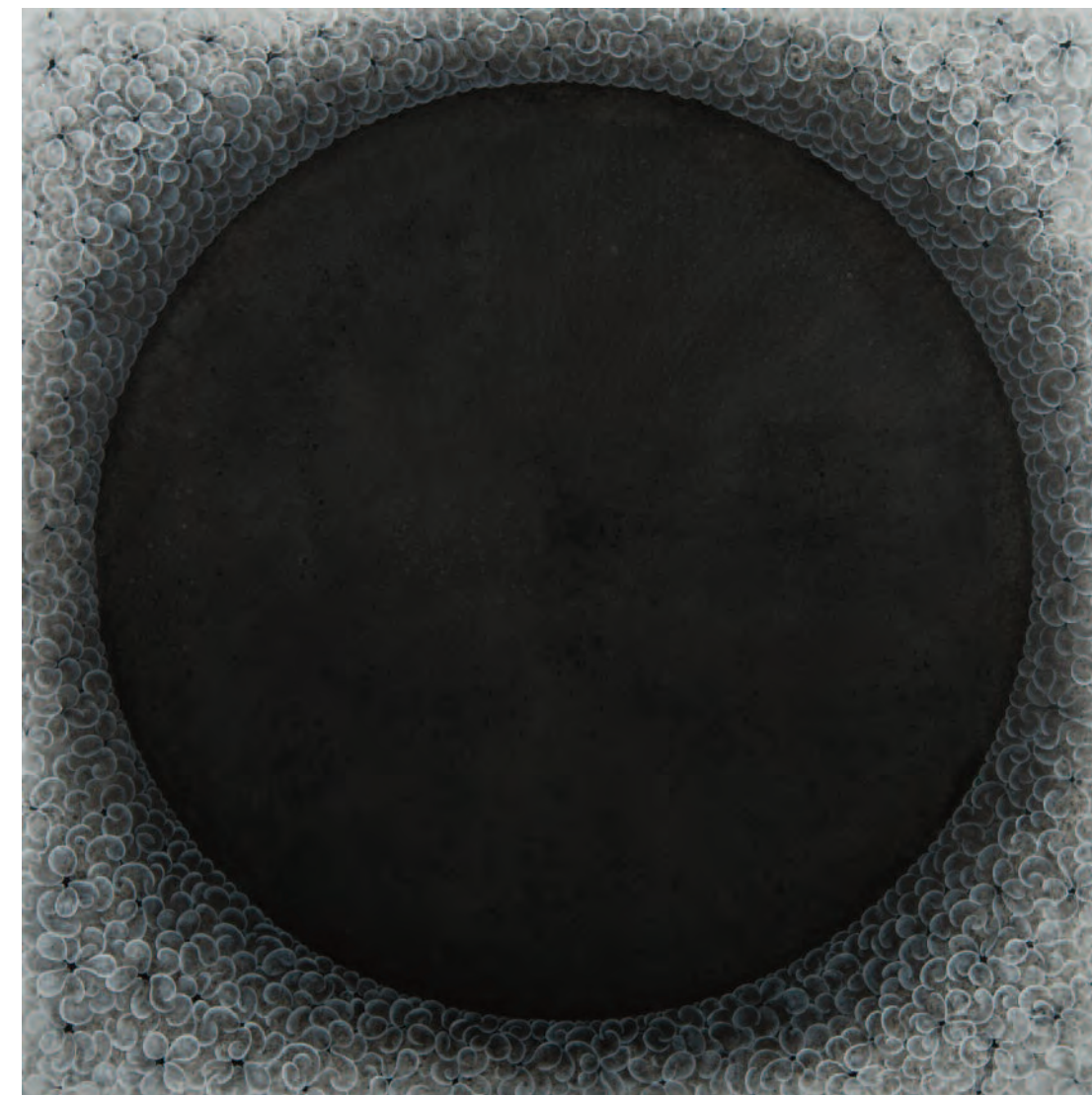
**EMERGENCE, 2017, LESSONS, 2015**  
Silverpoint and acrylic on acrylic sphere, 12 in. diameter





**UMBRA, 2018**

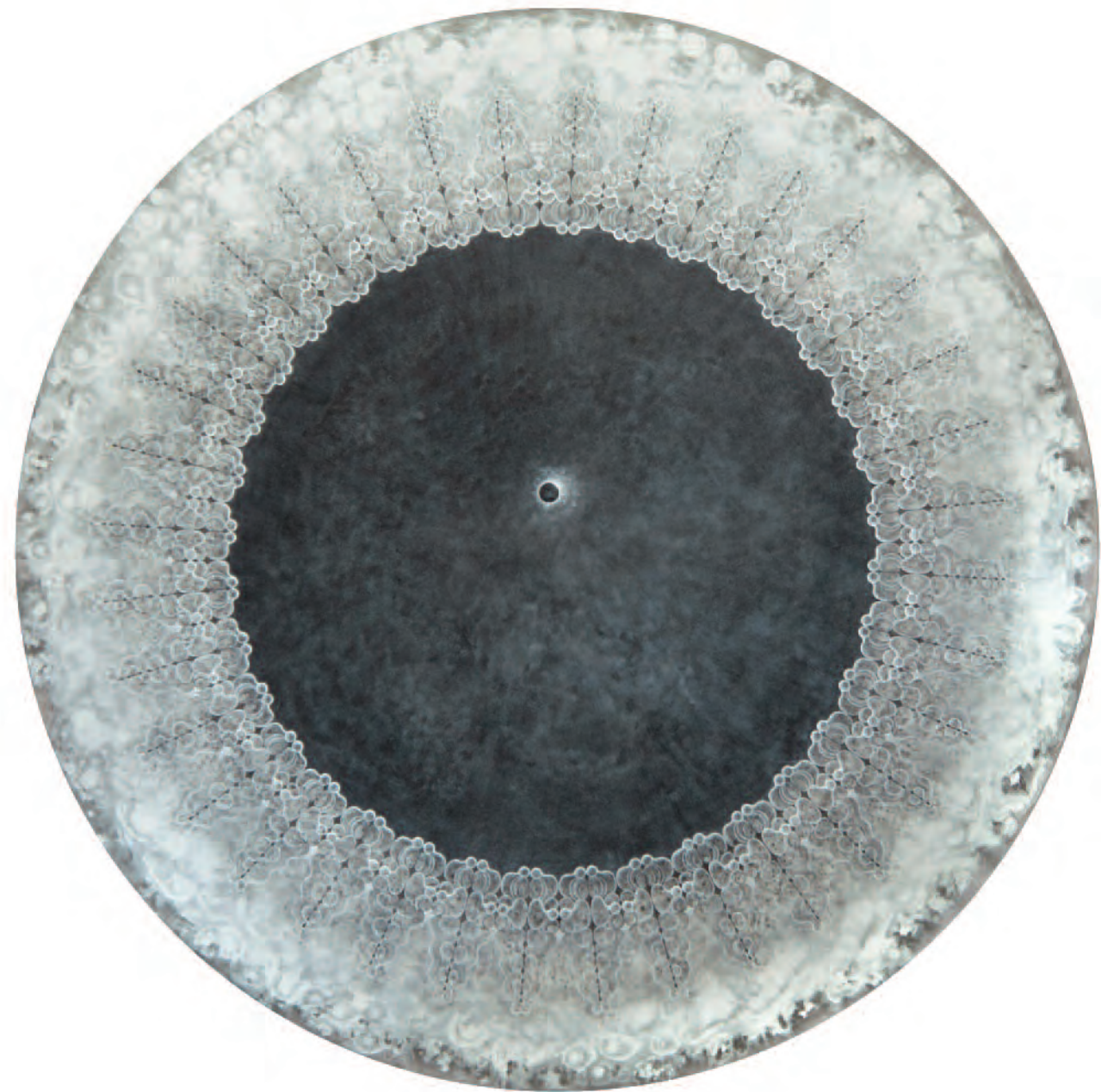
Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.



**CORONA, 2018**

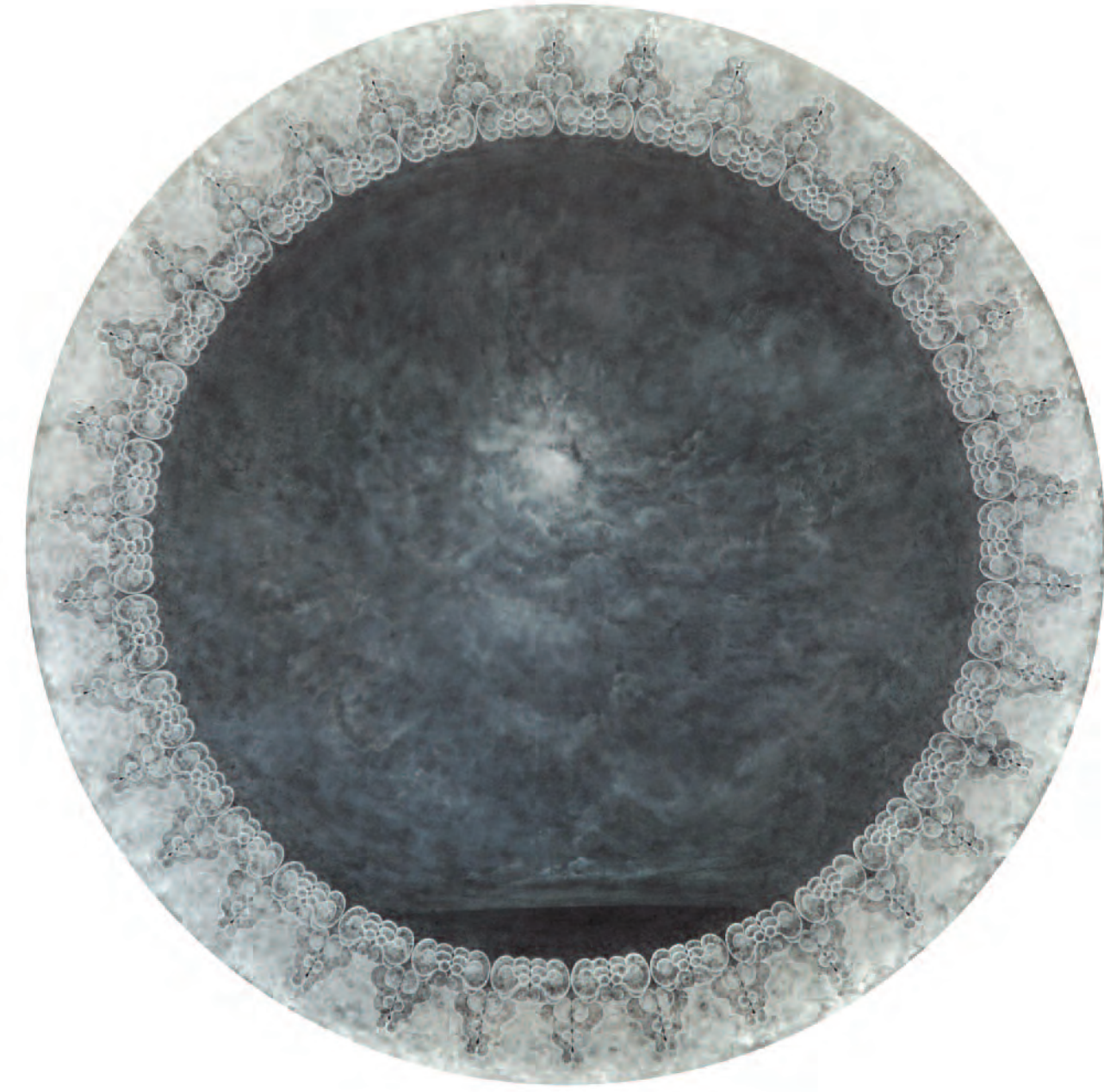
Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.





**DIAMONDRING, 2018**

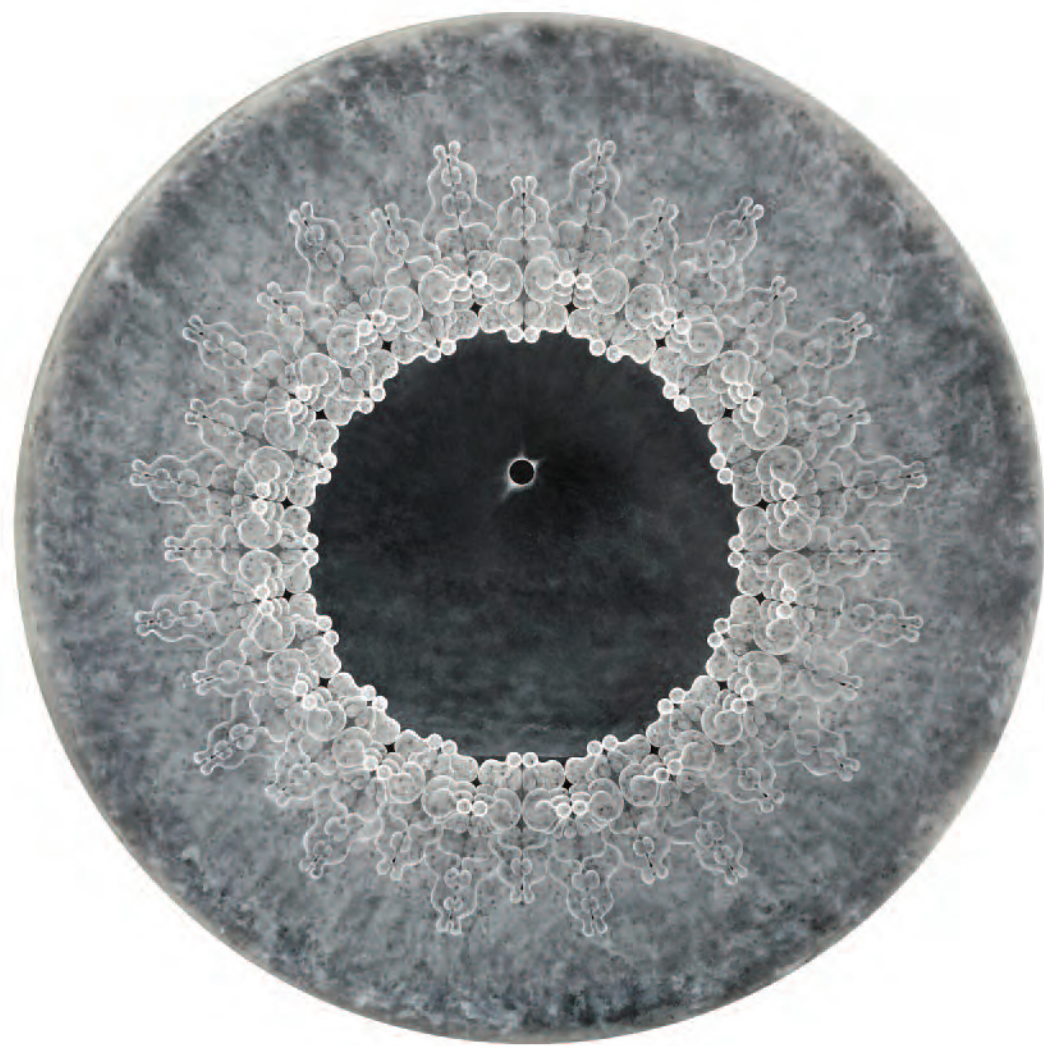
Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder on acrylic circle, 40 in. diameter x 2 in. deep



**CRESCENT, 2018**

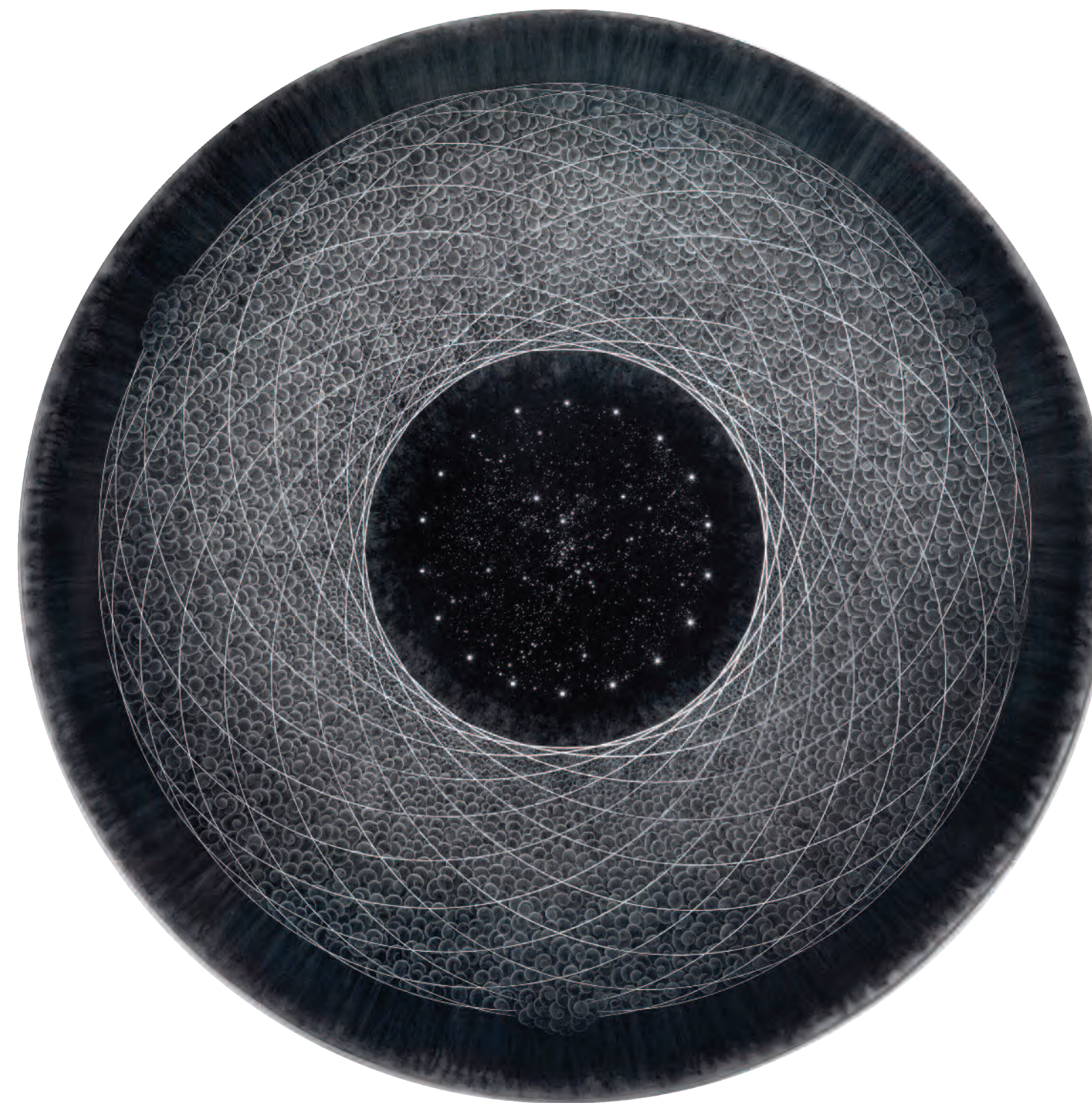
Silverpoint, graphite, white and black acrylic on Plexiglas circle, 40 in. diameter x 2 in. deep





**TOTALITY, 2018**

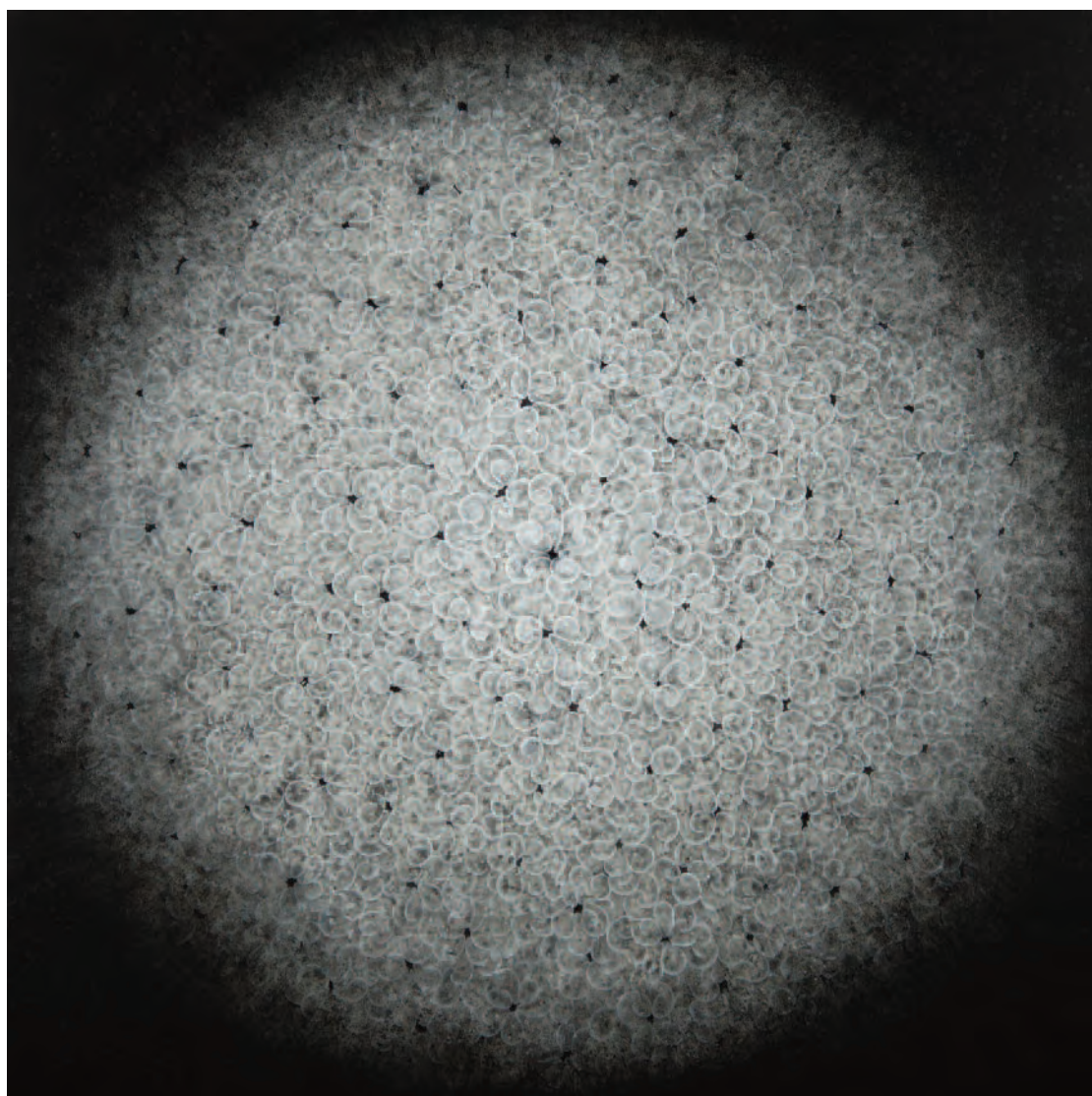
Silverpoint, graphite, and titanium white on Plexiglas circle, 30 in. diameter x 2 in. deep



**NEBULA, 2019**

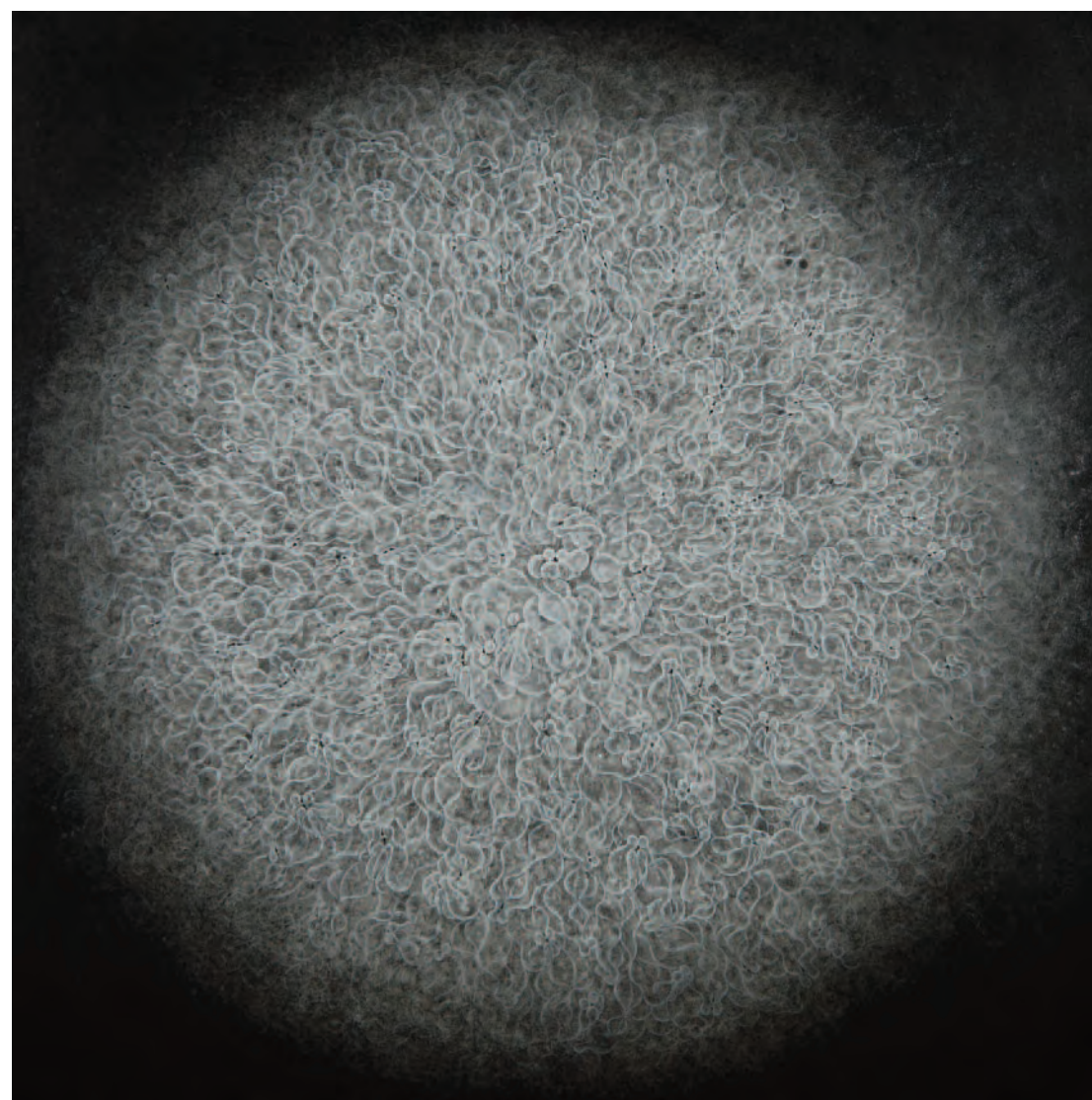
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome with internal light, 60 in. diameter x 10 in. deep





**INTERSTELLAR, 2018**

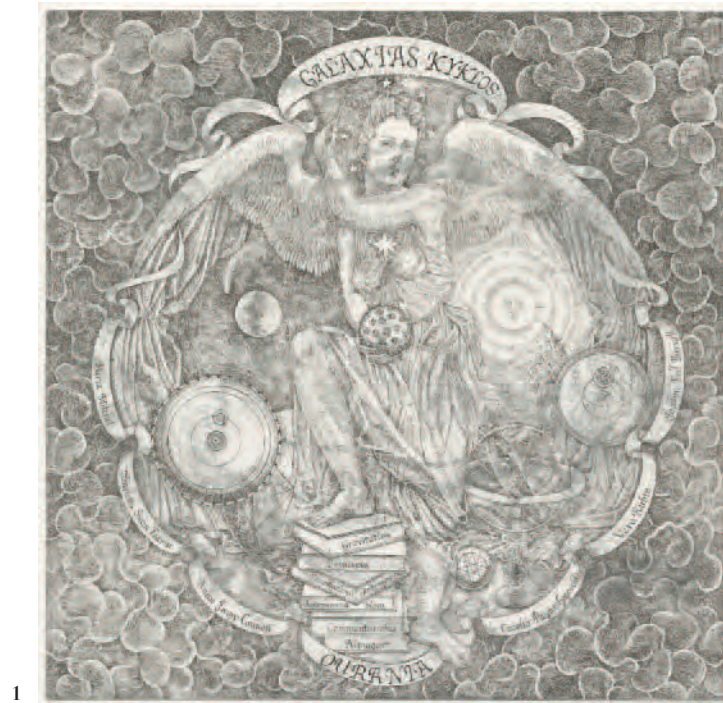
Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.



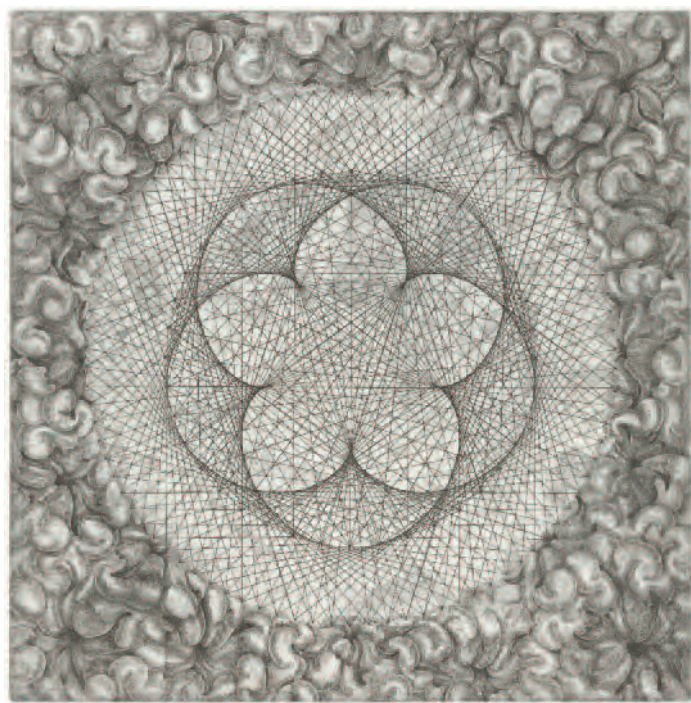
**COSMIC DUST, 2018**

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.

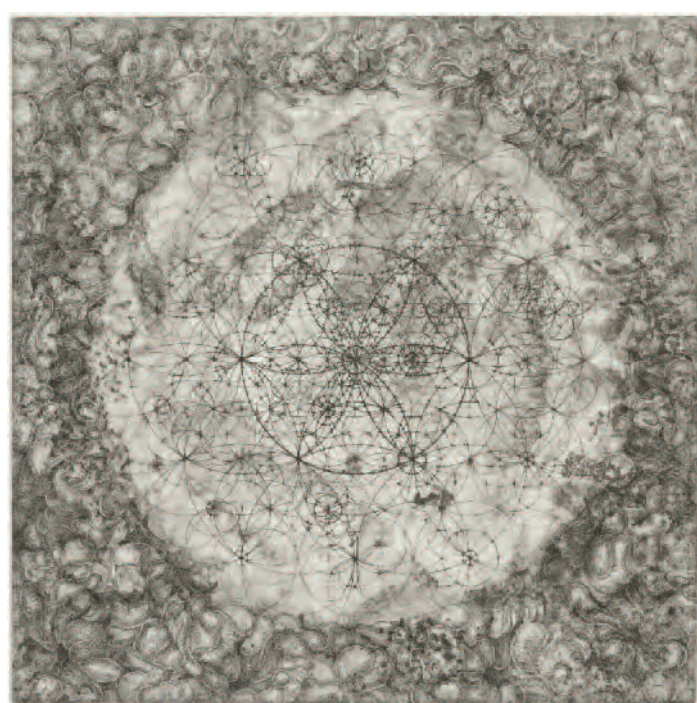




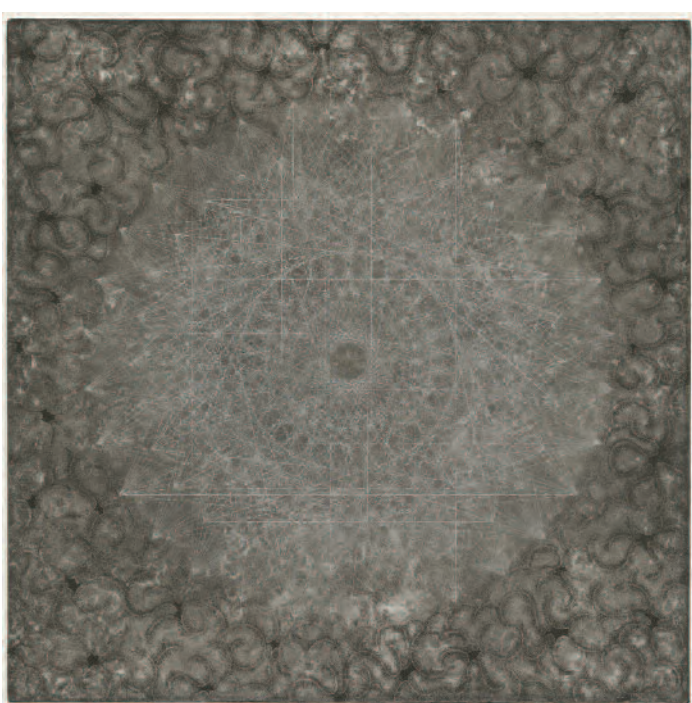
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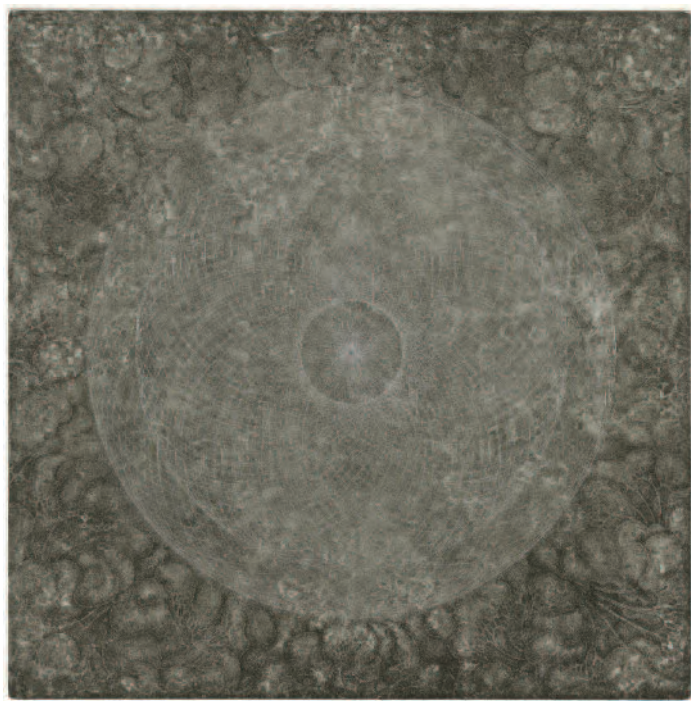
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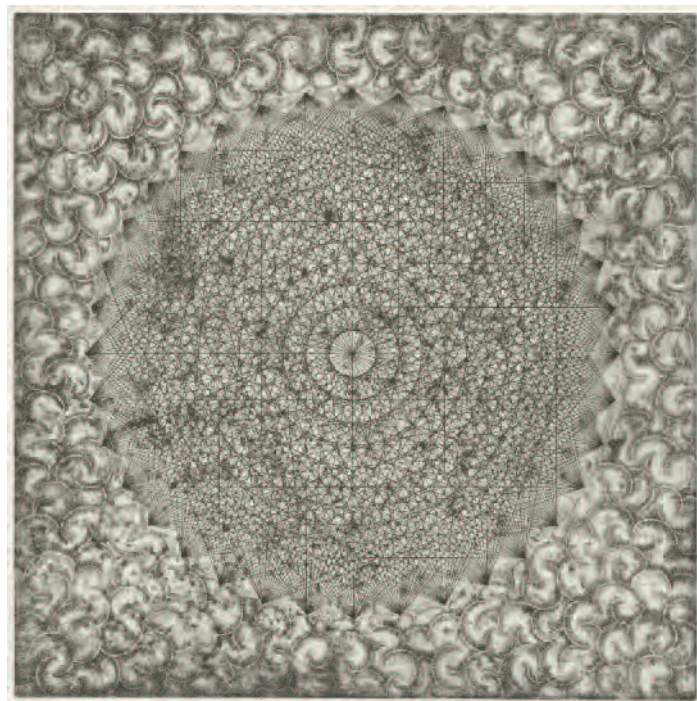
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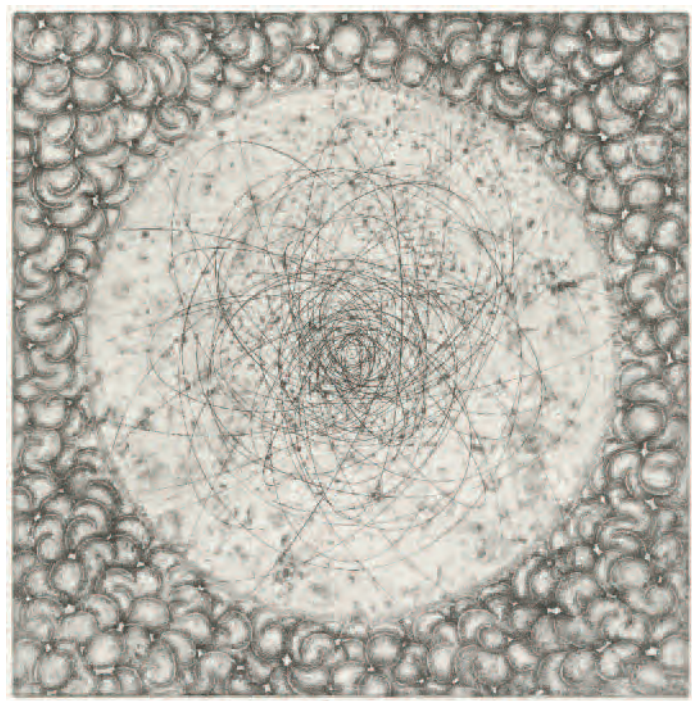
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CAROL PRUSA GALAXIAS KYKLOS 2019

Kim Spivey - printer Ground Printmaking - Palm Beach Gardens, Florida  
Edition assistant: Michelle A. M. Miller

*Dedicated to the women who take measure of the stars.*

Hard ground and soap ground etchings on 15 1/2 x 15 1/2 inch  
Magnani Pescia Paper

Seventeen 12 x 12 inch copper etching plates

Edition of 14 suites: Each suite contains 7 etchings and  
1 letterpress colophon

Acknowledgements:

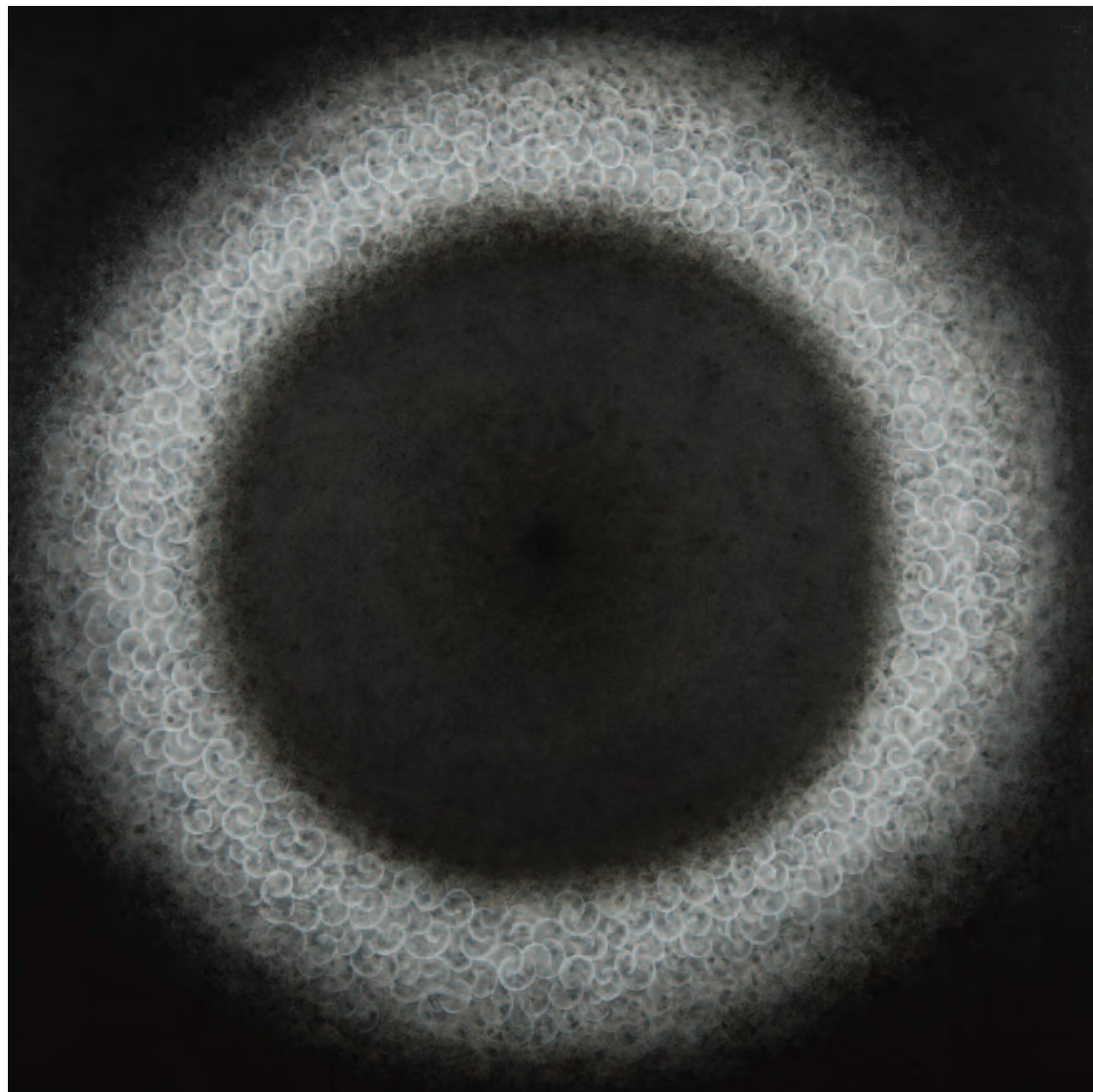
Grant support from the Department of Visual Arts and Art History.  
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Florida Atlantic University

GALAXIAS KYKLOS, 2019

Suite of etchings in laser etched Plexiglas box with letterpress colophon,  
each print: 12 x 12 in. image; 16 x 16 in. paper; 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. frame

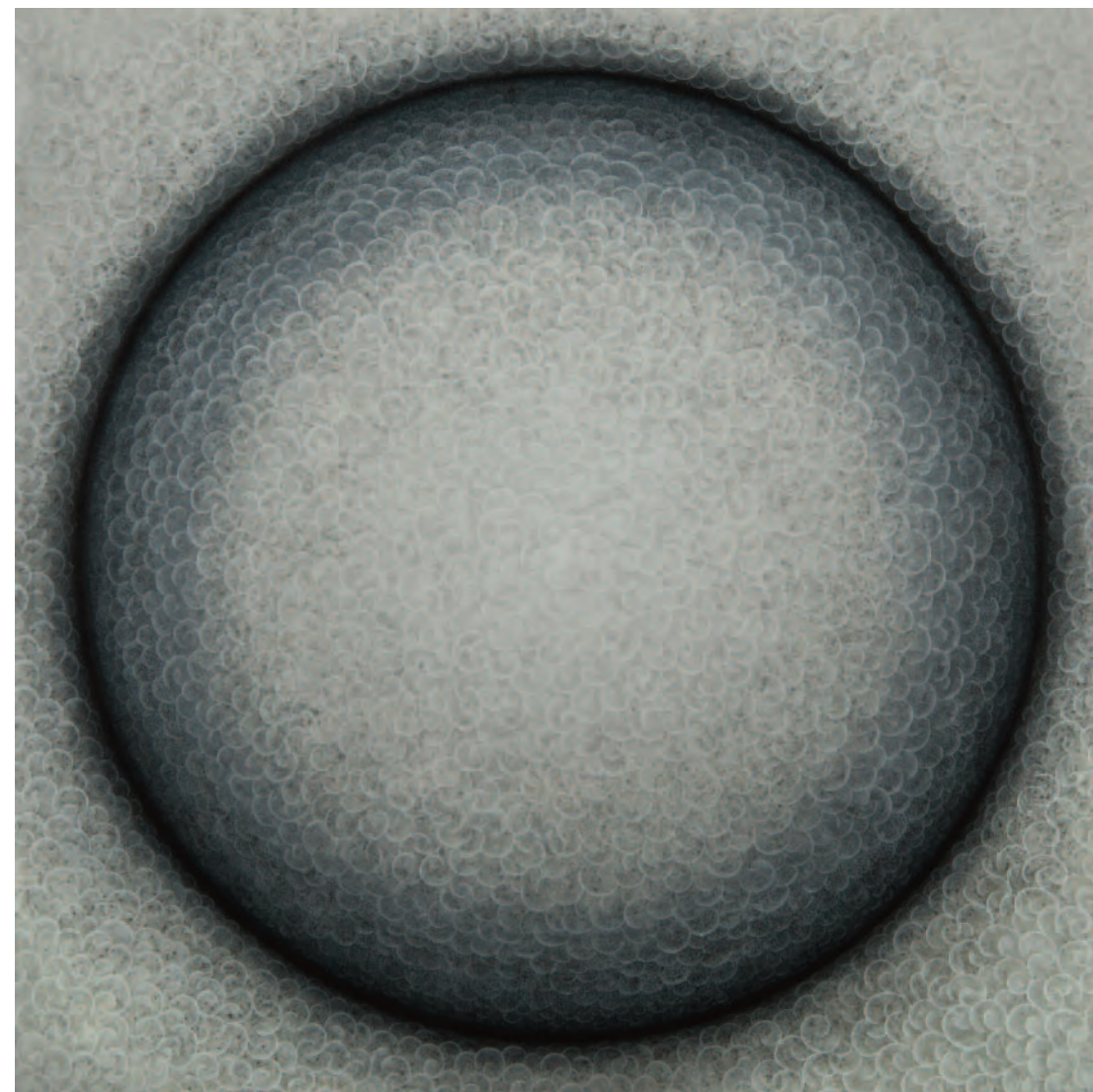
1. OURANIA 2. MARIA MITCHELL 3. HENRIETTA SWAN LEAVITT 4. ANNIE JUMP CANNON 5. VERA RUBIN 6. CECILIA PAYNE-GAPOSCHKIN 7. JOCELYN BELL BURNELL





**DARK ENERGY, 2018**

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.



**TWILIGHT, 2019**

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel, 36 x 36 x 2 in.



# A CONVERSATION

**Kathy Goncharov, Senior Curator, Boca Raton Museum of Art:** *I understand that all of the work in the exhibition is about the phenomenon of the eclipse. How did you first become interested in the subject?*

**Carol Prusa:** I've always been interested in science and cosmology. I was raised in a strict Christian religion in which the universe is only 6,000 years old. I began to question these teachings in the sixth grade when I learned about the Big Bang and wondered about how it could be that there was nothing before there was something. It confounded me then and now. The fact that we exist at all is shocking when you think about it.

Physicists have found the subatomic Higgs boson “God” particle whose interaction with other subatomic particles causes them to have mass. The Higgs is metastable rather than stable, implying our current universe may be “temporary.” There is also the theory of the Multi- Universe in which new universes constantly “bud” from one another, opening up infinite possibilities. I am especially drawn to ideas and experiences that are unsettling and they coalesce in my art.

I started thinking about eclipses after reading about Maria Mitchell, (1818-1889), who led an all-female expedition to Colorado to observe the total eclipse of the sun in 1878. She was an astronomy professor at Vassar College.

**KG:** *So you decided to follow in her footsteps and become what you call a Shadow Seeker.*

**CP:** Yes, in 2017 I traveled to the North Platte River in Nebraska to experience a total eclipse for myself. The video I took can be seen in *Quintessence*, one of the works included in the exhibition. Seeing a total eclipse for the first time, I was blown away by a euphoric feeling of floating. I could hardly believe it, but I fell backward. The quality of the light was so strange; the sky was a metallic Palladium color. When the shadow passed over, the world changed in a way I had never experienced before. 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.

**KG:** *This July you made a second excursion to a total eclipse in Coquimbo, Chile.*

**CP:** Yes, I traveled to Coquimbo, Chile, for the July 2 eclipse. I needed to experience another one to not only confirm my memory of the first, but to try and better understand why it gripped me so much that I produced a large body of work to come to terms with it. Fortunately, it was clear weather and I stood on the beach along the Pacific Ocean and watched again as the moon occluded the sun, turning day to night. This time I didn't lose grounding. On this trip I also visited the Valle de Luna — noted as other worldly, in the Atacama Desert, and I submitted Cerro Toco at 18,400 feet. Seeking liminal spaces, something outside my experience, taps a well of ideas steeping in me that I then precipitate into art. While my work initiates in reading and research, it resolves more in a feeling that sums up the strange beauty of being alive.

**KG:** *In addition to Maria Mitchell, there are the other women who you honor for their contributions to astronomy.*

**CP:** For my new suite of prints I selected six women astronomers to honor out of the many from which to choose. They are Maria Mitchell, Henrietta Swan Leavitt, Annie Jump Cannon, Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin, Vera Rubin, and Jocelyn Bell Burnell. The title page of the suite depicts Ourania, the muse of astronomy in Greek mythology, and the entire portfolio is titled



*Galaxias Kyklos* or Greek for Milky Circle (or Milky Way), a term that evokes the feminine. Maria Mitchell said that “we seize only a little bit of the curtain that hides the infinite from us.” That reminded me of my experience of the eclipse, so I started thinking about the idea of the curtain and used it as a motif around the perimeter of the prints.

**KG:** *Talk about the images embedded in the curtain.*

**CP:** To me they are the earth, they are my body, they’re organic and biological, but they’re lacy and decorative as well. They surround an opening or void which to me is the unknown. I also insert geometric elements which for me, represent our effort to map and measure the heavens and grasp the unknown.

Although I chose to honor just six women with the prints, another work in the exhibition, *Cosmic Web*, is dedicated to other women in the field, including the “computers” of the Harvard Observatory of the late 19th-century, (hired because they were cheaper than men) to analyze the many glass photographic plates arriving from observatories around the world.

**KG:** *Talk about the theme of the show and its title Dark Light. How can light be dark? Isn’t that an oxymoron?*

**CP:** There isn’t dark without light or light without dark. An eclipse is dark light. When I started to make this body of work I worked from my memory. I wanted to see if I could communicate the quality of light I had experienced, so I started adding different black and metallic pigments into my materials. Black, no matter how dark, still reflects light. I wanted to make black have depth and structure and be infinite. I want a black that one can almost walk into. My past work seems to me more about twilight but now I have moved on to work that is much darker. The eclipse has influenced me in this respect, but it could also be my age and the times we live in.

I enjoy riding my bike at night with no lights on. You don’t see the same way as you do in the daytime. Depth perception is skewed, and you are not quite sure what you see. The technical term is scotopic vision where the eye uses only the rod cells. I enjoy it because it’s unsettling and my mind fills in what it thinks my eye is seeing.

**KG:** *That leads to the question of how you actually make the work. It looks very labor intensive.*

**CP:** Yes, it is. It can take months and hundreds or thousands of hours to make a piece depending on its complexity and size. But I don’t think of it as labor, but rather as a meditation that leads to a kind of bliss, almost like a Buddhist prayer. I don’t get bored because there is always a challenge because the work is so difficult to make.

**KG:** *When you start do you know what the final product will be? What is your process?*

**CP:** It might seem that way but no, I can’t fully envision an end result and the work must take its journey. I begin by doing research — reading quite a bit, writing down ideas, and making sketches, refining them and then tracing what I want to draw to begin the work. I use silver-point, an ancient medium I learned when teaching in Florence. I use a stylus containing metal rather than graphite, to make thousands of pale subtle hatch marks on whatever ground (wood, acrylic) I have chosen; but once that task is complete, I give up control by pouring a graphite wash that obscures the delicate drawing in the work. I then go in and heighten the forms that need to emerge with white paint. When making work with light, I have to paint with black where I don’t want the light to shine through. All of this takes a level of skill that has taken me years to develop.



*KG: It seems that there is a circular motif in your use of domes and spheres as well as your flat work.*

*CP:* Circles imply infinity, like the snake that swallows its tail. I like spheres and domes because I want to imply that there's a bigger space inside than outside. Sometimes I include an oculus through which one can glimpse deep space through a video. I think of the surface as a liminal skin or "thin space" between the known and unknown. Circles are orifices and I think about how we access the world. We all have pores, ears, noses, etc. So, when does my boundary interrupt the boundary of another? When do I leak into somebody else's space?

*KG: It seems there is a feminism implicit in your work.*

*CP:* Circles and openings conventionally imply the feminine and my forms are organic and biological. My embryonic forms, however, are pure potential, not yet male or female. I studied embryology as part of my training to become a medical illustrator, a profession I abandoned when I became an artist. Domes can also be metaphors for the omphalos, or pregnant belly. My work is also about the alchemical or transformative nature of art. Silver point is reminiscent of mercury, a liquid, and all my processes always involve water. I feel the work is deeply female in that sense.

*KG: How would you like viewers to approach your work?*

*CP:* I'd like to think that they will find them beautiful and well done, but more, I would like them to slow down, pause, breathe, and consider the overwhelming fecundity of life — how everything is interconnected. I would also hope that it will inspire some to read more about the women scientists I have honored.



Top: Prusa summiting Cerro Toco, a stratovolcano in the Atacama desert of Chile, Left: Prusa's studio. Right: Prusa drawing in silverpoint



CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

LUNA (GUARDIAN), 2017

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic  
on Plexiglas circle  
60 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic  
on Plexiglas circle  
60 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

DIAMOND RING, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment  
with acrylic binder on acrylic circle  
40 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

CRESCENT, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, white and black acrylic  
on Plexiglas circle  
40 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

TOTALITY, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, and titanium white on Plexi-  
glas circle  
30 in. diameter x 2 in. deep

EMERGENCE, 2017

Silverpoint and acrylic on acrylic sphere  
12 in. diameter

LESSONS, 2018

Silverpoint and acrylic on acrylic sphere  
12 in. diameter

COSMIC WEB  
(FOR THE HARVARD COMPUTERS), 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome  
with internal light  
60 in. diameter x 10 in. deep

NEBULA, 2019

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome  
with internal light  
60 in. diameter x 10 in. deep

QUINTESSENCE, 2019

34 x 34 x 9 in.  
Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on acrylic dome  
with fiber optics and videos of the 2017 eclipse  
34 in. diameter x 9 in. deep

DARK LIGHT  
(ELEGY FOR REBECCA ELSON), 2019

Silverpoint, graphite, acrylic on wood panel  
84 x 84 x 2 in.

TWILIGHT, 2019

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

COSMIC DUST, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

UMBRA, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

DARK ENERGY, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

INTERSTELLAR, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

CORONA, 2018

Silverpoint, graphite, titanium white, mars black  
pigment with acrylic binder on wood panel  
36 x 36 x 2 in.

GALAXIAS KYKLOS, 2019

Suite of etchings in laser etched Plexiglas box  
with letterpress colophon  
each print: 12 x 12 in. image; 16 x 16 in. paper;  
19 ½ x 19 ½ in. frame

1. OURANIA  
2. MARIA MITCHELL  
3. HENRIETTA SWAN LEAVITT  
4. ANNIE JUMP CANNON  
5. VERA RUBIN  
6. CECELIA PAYNE-GAPOSCHKIN  
7. JOCELYN BELL BURNELL

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Prusa drawing with silverpoint in studio