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Resonance and the Dissolution of Space: A Conversation with Carol Prusa

BY MICHELLE A. M. MILLER AND JEANIE AMBROSIO

IMAGES COURTESY CAROL PRUSA AND THE AUTHORS

Carol Prusa creates labor-intensive and stunningly detailed works of art in her Boca Raton home studio. To view her work is to glimpse the breathtaking expanse of the cosmos, rendered in ethereal monochromatic silvers, grays, whites and blacks. Time slows when viewing Prusa's work where rhythmic silverpoint hatching gives way to vast, fluid expanses of space, ocean and intestine. Her work is an otherworldly siren that mesmerizes, seduces—even pulsates. Upon entering her studio, we encounter two large flat circular works hanging on a white wall opposite large sliding-glass doors. Pale gray light from an overcast sky saturates the space and a collection of in-progress panels, domes and spheres cluster about tables and the floor. We find older works stacked in crates and other delightful *wunderkarmmern*esque ephemera. Nearly everything is silver, gray, white, or black and beckons. Prusa's work is currently part of the *All Florida Invitational* on view until September 25th at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

Michelle A. M. Miller: People often think of science as being cool and calculating but your work is very warm to me, very human. Would you talk about the connection between art and science that we see in your work?

Carol Prusa: What I like about science, more accurately about cosmologists, is that they immerse themselves in their field. They create this total soup of their understanding of ideas, mathematics and models of the universe. (Artists are like this too, they make this soup and pull ideas out that are just crazy). Then they see if there's anything out there empirically that's going to support that. How else are you going get an idea like string theory? Or multiple universe theory? Or black holes, right? Which now they finally have empirical data that supports those theories.

MM: I just watched a television show where Stephen Hawking explained how to time travel forward using a black hole.

CP: I love that they'll allow themselves to stew in these ideas and then propose something and see if it works. I think artists do this too, they sense, absorb, observe, and then cull through it and mash it together. I always liken it to the *Close Encounters* pile of mashed potatoes. They try to give form to it and see if it resonates in some way. Artists as resonators are no different than physicists as resonators. They are very similar but the proof they are looking for might be different.

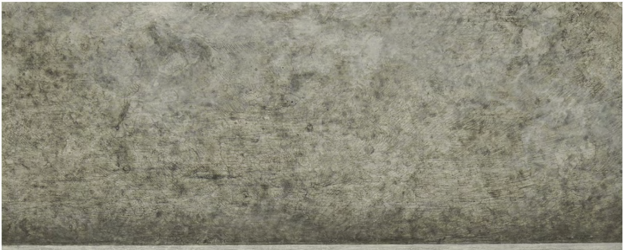
> "The idea to reduce to essentials at smaller and smaller scales flips at the quantum scale and becomes exponentially more complex."
>
> — CAROL PRUSA

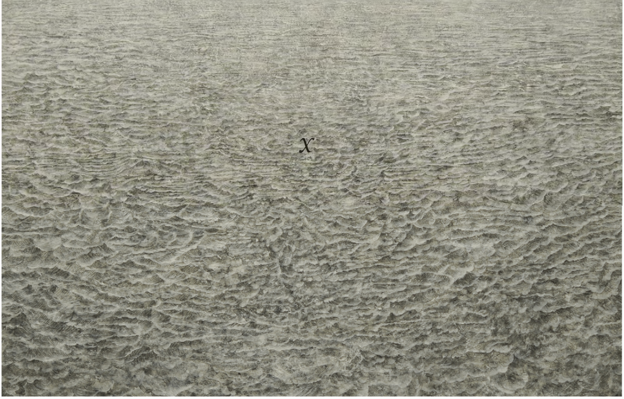
MM: In your own history, weren't you going be a medical illustrator?

CP: Right, I was always drawing from observation or dissections and all those forms are still in my work.

Jeanie Ambrosio: You seem so in-tune with yourself and with your work. Can you elaborate on how you got there and how you maintain the connection between knowing exactly what you want and knowing exactly what your work needs?

CP: It's quite a journey. Even early on in drawing I would see hints of how I thought about things and that was in positive and negative shapes. I've always been a line person and so [I'm interested in] making those shapes breathe or have a certain kind of tension. I had a professor who called those dragon veins, and that sat with me. The idea that the lines would actually have life. So they had to have a certain kind of feeling to them. Then I learned to trust that I could recognize what my work needed to be and that I didn't need to know ahead of time. I learned to trust that I could jump into it and do it and that I would find it and that it would surprise me. Being open and not so controlling. It's so funny to hear people talk about becoming a mature artist, when does that happen? Well it does happen; it just takes a while. I'm struck by people who can do it early on.





Carol Prusa, *Unknowing* (detail), 2016, silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder on 1/4 inch plexiglas, 60 x 60 x 2 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

MM: In 2013, Amy Broderick interviewed you for the *SECAC Review*. You spoke about how in your youth you would gaze up at the nighttime sky and think about the universe. “The only way I could contemplate it was to slowly get rid of things. Get rid of the house. Get rid of the town. Get rid of the earth. Get rid of the planets. What would it feel like if there were nothing?” This is an intense and beautiful train of thought for a 10-year-old. Is your work autobiographical?

CP: I definitely think my work comes from a Calvinist upbringing. There’s a certain kind of rigor and also the abstraction of it. When you’re in 6th grade and you are being told to join the church and you don’t feel compelled to do that because you don’t believe it, then you really have to dig into why. My father was head elder, I had 43 cousins, they all joined the church and I was the only person who didn’t join the church. If you’re making that kind of active decision you have to find some source to provide the argument, or provide you with, “What do you believe in?” That’s when I started to think, “Who is God?” or “What is God?” and “What was there before there was something?” And further, “Okay, who can I read?” In 6th grade it’s hard to get hold of books but I started reading Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was more readable. So my first existential crisis was in 6th grade. Because I didn’t join the church I was treated differently than the rest of the family. I wasn’t allowed to go out. I wasn’t allowed to do a lot of things. I was not trusted to be on my own, so I was just kept. It some ways it’s not that bad, you spend a lot of time in your room reading and thinking. I started businesses—I had a sewing business and a catering business. That all informs my practice, I can spend so many hours just by myself.

MM: Was your family supportive of your decision to become an artist?

CP: My parents? No, no they never really addressed it. They couldn’t acknowledge that I had made things that were hanging up in my home.

MM: Was that disappointing?

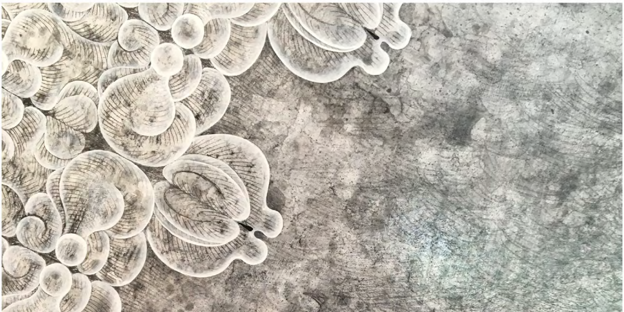
CP: Oh gosh no, I mean I think I wanted my parents’ approval but it was pretty clear I wasn’t going get it.

JA: You identified so early on that your views didn’t fit with theirs.

CP: I wasn’t going make them happy. I mean really it was a good thing, too. You learn work ethic in that upbringing.

JA: I suppose that experience is part of why you are so grounded as a person; your self-investigation began so early. Many people figure out who they are by drawing from their family but since you were so dissimilar to your family, you had to discover who you are on your own.

CP: Yes, it becomes clear. I remember reading Julia Kristeva’s work. She’s a wonderful French philosopher and she was writing about “the stray” and being on the outside and being the observer as artists often are—they’re never part of the group. They’re the people who don’t fit in; they hang around the borders, kind of peering in. They wish they could belong, but they don’t. [Kristeva] added a lot of clarity—sometimes you just read a few sentences somewhere and you understand.



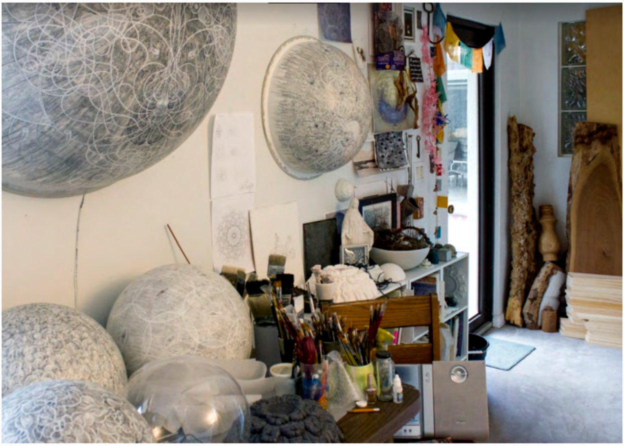
Carol Prusa, *Unknowing* (detail), 2016, silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder on 1/4 inch plexiglas, 60 x 60 x 2 inches.

JA: From that same SECAC interview, you speak about meditation and the way your breathing changes when you are near your work or producing it. Can you speak more to the role of your breath and what that change indicates for you in your working process?

CP: In large part it's like letting go. Sometimes as I'm doing the hatching with silverpoint, at first my hatching isn't all that good. I'll notice I'm kind of tense because I want to make it good and I have to tell myself to relax. Then there's this acceptance that I know what I need to do. It takes maybe half an hour then all of a sudden I'm in the rhythm and I can remember, "Oh, that's what that feels like." And I get into a state where all I am doing is marking time. Then my hatching is really beautiful because it has air in it, it doesn't get all cramped or uptight. It's brain memory. If I carry in too much stress [in the studio], I'll turn on NPR and that will help kind of distract me.

JA: Have you always experienced the sensation of meditation in your work?

CP: Yes. Always. When I was younger, I would arrange my dresser top. That was the first form I had, my own space in the house. It was just so satisfying to put things so that all of a sudden everything felt calm. I think everybody has that sensibility—it's like that resonance idea—you just put things the way they need to be for you to breathe. I learned I can't do that in my life, I can't control the household; but in my art, I can put that there and it doesn't interfere with anybody else's needs. I can put everything to right: how I think things should be, how I sense things are, and make them that way in the work.



Carol Prusa's studio.

JA: Have you ever felt this sense in terms of anyone else's work?

CP: Agnes Martin, maybe Mark Tobey, Ann Hamilton. The Rothko Chapel at the Menil Collection—the way it's installed in the space itself just has that effect. There's something about that museum collection.

MM: I can envision a Carol Prusa Chapel.

CP: I would love that. Bernice Steinbaum is putting an addition onto her home and she has commissioned me to do a dome, an inverse dome. So the dome itself is 50 inches.

MM: Your work appears in the catalogue for "Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns," which was a survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 2015. In the introduction, Bruce Weber quotes several critics who label silverpoint a feminine medium. How do you feel about that?

CP: That's so striking since the exhibition at the National Gallery had only one woman out of all those people.

MM: Are you the only one working dimensionally in silverpoint?

CP: I can't bring up anybody else. Most of them use it meticulously, you can detail something out. So a few people work non-objectively like Susan Schwalb. But I think where that show fell short is that it didn't show the next step. What would be 21st century? They need to do another show that questions how old ways of making things can become 21st century.

MM: What are you working on now?

CP: I am working on a sound piece, I wrote a little grant with Sammi McClean, a graduate student who is a musician. I always thought with the spheres, [there could be] the music of spheres.

MM: They should resonate.

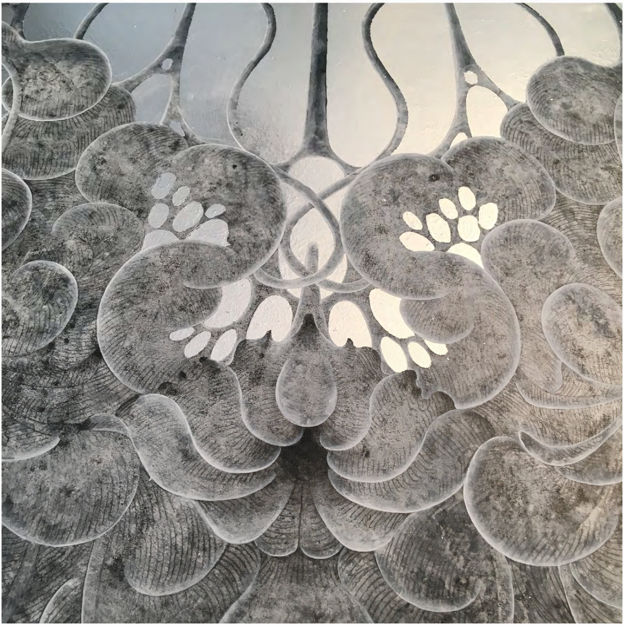
CP: They do. When I was taping silver wire on this sphere, you could hear it start to resonate. So each sphere would have its own resonance.

MM: That feels logical for your work. Scientists have been researching the sounds of the universe.

CP: Like the cosmic background. I always think of my work tonally, I'm not a musician but I think of them tonally.

MM: I think one of the best pieces of advice you gave me was how to critique my own work. You said, "If I hum your work, what does it sound like?"

CP: I always go for one tone in my work. I think the music for this will have more variation to it. But in the end there will be an overall kind of resonance and feedback. You know people always ask me, do I get bored? Because I make the same thing over and over again. I am so perplexed by that, it doesn't feel like the same thing. But I have to throw myself some curves, hence doing the video, fiber optics and now sound and 3D printing. Because it shakes up your world and you can see your work in a fresh way and bring something new to it. It's subtle but every time I do a piece, I'm tricking up something.



Detail of a work in progress by Carol Prusa.

MM: Your work has a shimmery quality to it. It can be a challenge to see details or some of the passages depending on the lighting or where one stands when viewing your work. How important is this quality?

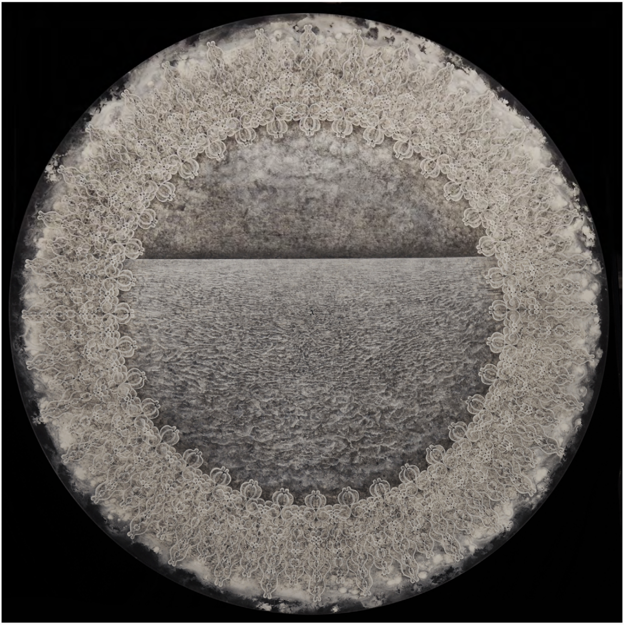
CP: I like that you use the word shimmer because I think of it as this liminal space between coalescence and dissolution. Earlier in my work I was definitely courting that kind of boundary where it would appear and it might disappear. Now I put more contrast in my work, so I think it has actually slightly less shimmer than it used to.

MM: Especially looking at these two new flat pieces on the wall, *Unknowing* and *Clouded*.

CP: They have more contrast. It's sort of intriguing. That was an achievement. That took me so long to draw that water! They'll be much nicer once they're varnished. Varnish allows the light to hit the peaks of the paint. Those are going to be in the Boca Museum [along with] two big spheres.

MM: What else can you tell us about these pieces? *Unknowing* has an X inscribed in the center and *Clouded* has a Y. What does it mean?

CP: X and Y are the unknown variables in a standard equation. I thought as I try to express my "theory of everything" that my model would have unknowns. I placed the X and Y in the center because they are what I am most interested in–mysteries while trying to make connections.



Carol Prusa, *Unknowing*, 2016, silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder on 1/4 inch plexiglas, 60 x 60 x 2 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

MM: What can you tell us about these worlds you depict? They feel like interior landscapes while simultaneously evoking the infinite. Would you talk about the connection in your work between human anatomy and the cosmos?

CP: The simple answer is that I want to make a piece that I want to see, sensed from what it feels like to be alive, and that the logic of it is contained within. Generally, I want to express the interconnectedness of everything as well as the flux. There's the possibility for it to be completely different or many other things. At the same time there's a searching for completeness. These "worlds" are imagined and don't represent something I have seen so the idea of an interior landscape works. I like that you think they evoke the infinite. That would connect with the sublime or something greater than ourselves. I also like the idea that the more you look in, the more you look out. The idea to reduce to essentials at smaller and smaller scales flips at the quantum scale and becomes exponentially more complex. I think the connection in my work of human/organic form at the macro scale with the cosmic comes from the location of my body being the locus for all that I know yet connecting to all that is beyond me. Generally, the organic forms create a portal or liminal opening to something else.

MM: What is it about the dissolution of space that is so compelling?

CP: I don't hold well to fixed truths. I am more comfortable asserting something, knowing it could dissolve and be something else. In a sense, everything is fluid.

MM: Is your work spiritual?

CP: My work doesn't relate to religion or religious belief but does reference the intangible, the ineffable. People might use that word if through my work they connect to something larger than themselves. But, I wouldn't say that I consider that word while making my work. I am interested in the mysterious, the unanswerable. When I feel it works, the unanswerable is embraced.

Carol Prusa's work table.

MM: I was going to ask about your materials, but we know that research, preparation and experimentation are important to your practice and already well documented.

CP: Yes, I Just switched all my materials last year, which was tough. Just to get a whiter white. And the paint reacted completely differently; I think it's a good idea for people to bring new materials into their studio all the time.

MM: What's your new white?

CP: It's Guerra white. It's much whiter. I have been using Golden gesso which works really great with silverpoint. I love Golden Gesso. But the Guerra is much whiter.

MM: Is it more opaque?

CP: No, it's actually more transparent. But it's whiter.

MM: And do you use powdered pigment? I imagine you grinding pigments and making your own paint.

CP: No, I have a big jug of white acrylic paint. I used to do all that but now it doesn't seem to be a good enough reason. I met a Tibetan monk and I was going to work with them and I was so disappointed that they pulled out Liquitex tubes of paint. And I'm like, "What? We're not going to grind the colors?" I thought we were going to start with the azurite. And they said, "Why would you do that when you can buy it?" Oh, that was a reality thing. You can kind of romanticize this. When you find a product that's pre-made that really works then that's pretty cool. And there's a real good pigment load in Guerra's white base. And I still grind my graphite.

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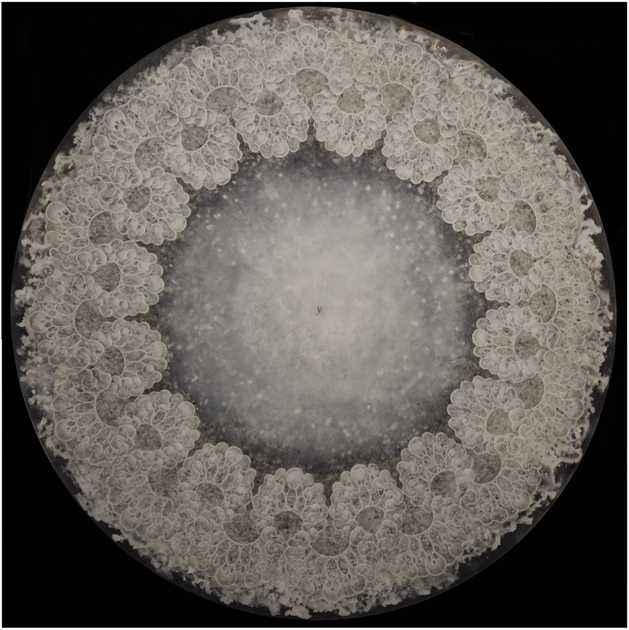
MM: We like to categorize things from an art historical perspective, but your work is not part of any movement I can think of.

CP: No, it absolutely doesn't fit in. People like to put my work in group exhibitions about visionary artists, the outsider artists, the surrealists. Some of that work is just great and some is just dreadful. But as a group, my work will fit in there. The whole idea is that I wish I could be as good as William Blake. I like what he writes. The advantage of my work is that it is so distinctively different; nobody makes anything like it. It really stands out and people recognize it. The negative is that it doesn't fit in. It's not going to be put in group shows so it's not going to be written about. People don't know how to write about it because they don't have that vocabulary. Especially if people are very uncomfortable talking about science because most art writers say, "Oh, I know nothing about science." It makes them very uncomfortable. It might be like this thing when they were growing up and they were studying art they were like "thank God, I don't have to do math!"

JA: What's so great about contemporary art is the ability to learn about subjects you might not otherwise encounter through artists' research and then experience it within their own visual language.

CP: It's really curious when you read art writers. Roberta Smith will write about her emotional response. She doesn't resort to saying what this person's work is about. Which I think a lot of art writers feel more secure with. What was the intention of the artist? What kind of good are they trying to do with this work? Or what kind of problem are they trying to solve or what issue are they addressing? It becomes really clear what can be said or written about or how you can be grouped. There's sensibleness to it, but when you make work that doesn't really operate that way–I would respect that it would be really hard for people to put it in those terms. It's the most common thing said to me. If I have work in an art fair, people will say "Oh, I've never seen anything like this before." So it is hard for people, it's unsettling to them. For work that's pretty calm.



Carol Prusa, *Clouded*, 2016, silverpoint, graphite, titanium white pigment with acrylic binder and aluminum leaf on 1/4 inch plexiglas, 60 x 60 x 2 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

MM: What have you sacrificed to be an artist?

CP: That's a great question. Vacation, hiking. I'm not resentful or regretful but I acknowledge that I'm diligent with my work. I sometimes think I would like to go for a hike. Or to spend more time making a nice meal, though maybe that's really not in me. Maybe I'm romanticizing that. Getting out more. I would actually like to go to see more art and see more openings but I can't get my work done. My work takes an inordinate amount of time so if I want to make it and get it done I just have to give that time to it. But I love making my work so much. I call the studio my sugar. I can hardly wait to get into my studio and I just love being here.

MM: Do you feel angry when you're taken away from it?

CP: Oh yeah, that is definitely the hard part. I really would just exist here endlessly, and it's very blissful and wonderful and frustrating. It's not like it doesn't have that part to it, too. I wish I was reading more novels that would give me more ideas. I think that because of the time my work takes to make, that maybe I need to fuel more into my work by reading more and seeing more and getting out more. So there's maybe the dilemma. I've been making the decision to do the work. I think soon I need to make the decision to step back and say I need to get a little outside of this. And if I'm here, near my studio, my house and the demands of it–this work has to get done. These two pieces have to go to Dubai. They have to get done.

MM: Dubai?

CP: I like the idea that they're going to go there. It's for a very high-end hotel. I love my life. I'm getting older and I think, "What will I have regretted? Putting all this time into the work? What will I have wished I had done?"

Carol Prusa and Michelle A. M. Miller in Carol Prusa's studio.

MM: We've talked about this before, but how do you navigate the art world in South Florida?

CP: I used to try. First, I wanted a gallery in Miami and then I was in Bernice Steinbaum Gallery. Now I'm not in a gallery in Miami but I'm in Palm Beach.

MM: Where do you see your work in 10 years? What's your dream work or exhibition venue?

CP: The Perez Art Museum, it's such a beautiful building. There is a space that Edouard Duval-Carrié had his show in and they often put darkened exhibitions in it that are mysteriously lit. I just really love that space. That would be a dream kind of thing. I would love to show my work in Miami because I think if people really actually saw my work, then maybe my community would recognize me. So that would be pretty great. I guess I would like to do that because of community, it's my community. I would really like to work at a much larger scale. And [what are] the logistics of that? What can fit through the door? I put in a bigger front door just to get this sphere through. I have a Prius, so what can I move? So I think it requires getting a level of recognition that would support me in making something big so that if I made something big I wouldn't have to store it in perpetuity because storage is a big issue. That somebody would want it.

MM: Like a dome. Somebody needs to build a large dome and hire you to paint it.

CP: I say that at the end of every talk, "Ok, any architects out there?" It's hard to get Plexiglas bigger than these circles. You can get it longer but not wider.

MM: So it becomes a scale that is more enveloping for the viewer. That appeals to you?

CP: Yes, I think it's the challenge of it.

To see more of Prusa's work:

www.carolprusa.com

www.bocamuseum.org

www.oldschoolsquare.org

www.brintzgalleries.com

Featured image of Carol Prusa's studio by Jeanie Ambrosio.

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