

Fearful Symmetry: A Conversation with Carol Prusa

Amy Broderick



Carol Prusa, winner of the 2013 SECAC Artist's Fellowship, earned her B.S from the University of Illinois and M.F.A. from Drake University. She currently teaches painting as a Professor of Art at Florida Atlantic University.

Figure 1. Carol Prusa, Fearful Symmetry, 36" diameter acrylic sphere, silverpoint with graphite and titanium white pigment and programmed internal LED array, 2013

Amy Broderick: *We are here in conversation in your studio today to commemorate your having won the 2013 SECAC Artists Fellowship.*

Carol Prusa: It so surprised me that I won the SECAC fellowship. I apply for things, as you well know, but I have learned how not to get them, and I have learned to continue to believe in my work. When I got this, I was so surprised and so gratified. There was something immensely invigorating about having a group like SECAC tell me, "We want you to do this. We believe in you." I have found the conference and the membership to be so loving to me. It has meant a lot. In general, I think that institutions play critical roles in supporting artists. People must understand that the money is very helpful, but it is the belief that truly matters. If someone believes that you can do it, then you do it. Other people are saying that it is important to do.

AB: *Can you please talk briefly about the proposal that you made for the SECAC Artists Fellowship?*

CP: When I write a proposal, I am utilizing it as a way to think forward about where I want to position my work, and I will do that in a big way. I had had the experience at the Kohler Arts/Industry Residency

during my sabbatical, and it was there that I learned that I was actually very good at 3-D work. I had always worked two-dimensionally. I am a drawer/painter. I was trained that way. This was the first time I was working in clay and then making molds. I began to think quite differently about my work. What I did appreciate, when I had to ship all that work home, and move it all myself, is that ceramic is really heavy. So then my mind got to thinking of whether there were other materials I could work in and how to move forward. Also, I was thinking that there were all these technologies that were coming to the forefront and being discussed. I was put on a committee at school on using digital technologies for making things. All these things were milling around in my mind. I thought I needed to put myself through some steep learning curve, because not only was I not conversant in those technologies, I had no idea what the potential for them was. I needed to really explore that. I figured that, if I set out a project proposal that referenced making much more intricate and complex organic three-dimensional forms, then I would have to do that if I got it. But it also made me realize that it was something I was really very interested in. So I wrote the proposal to do that.

AB: *Can you speak a little more about the process of developing proposals and what that means to you and your creative work?*

CP: Well, I think that when you write a proposal, for one thing, you know that there's a deadline for the proposal. Then they're going to decide it, and none of that goes fast. So, you have to think about what you really want to be doing in one year. How do you want to position yourself then? And you tend to think big, and you start to have this trajectory of where your work is developing. I think it's a really great way of being active and present in how your work develops, versus just letting it slide along. I write proposals because I like to think big. Even if a proposal wasn't funded—and often they aren't—it has pushed me in the exercise of aspiring for my work. I took a Creative Capital Professional Development Program workshop, and the one thing they said to me that really held with me is that I am responsible to my work. Nobody else is going to take care of my work. It's my job. And so, I have to think about what my work needs. What is my job to bring it to its fullest realization? Those are the things that I consider when I write a proposal, and that's what I write down. Even if I don't get funding, I'm putting out a vision. It's a sincere and significant vision. Ultimately, you figure out a way to do it regardless.

AB: *Can you talk about some of the tensions and interactions that developed with this body of work between the idea of being a drawer/painter and making three-dimensional objects?*

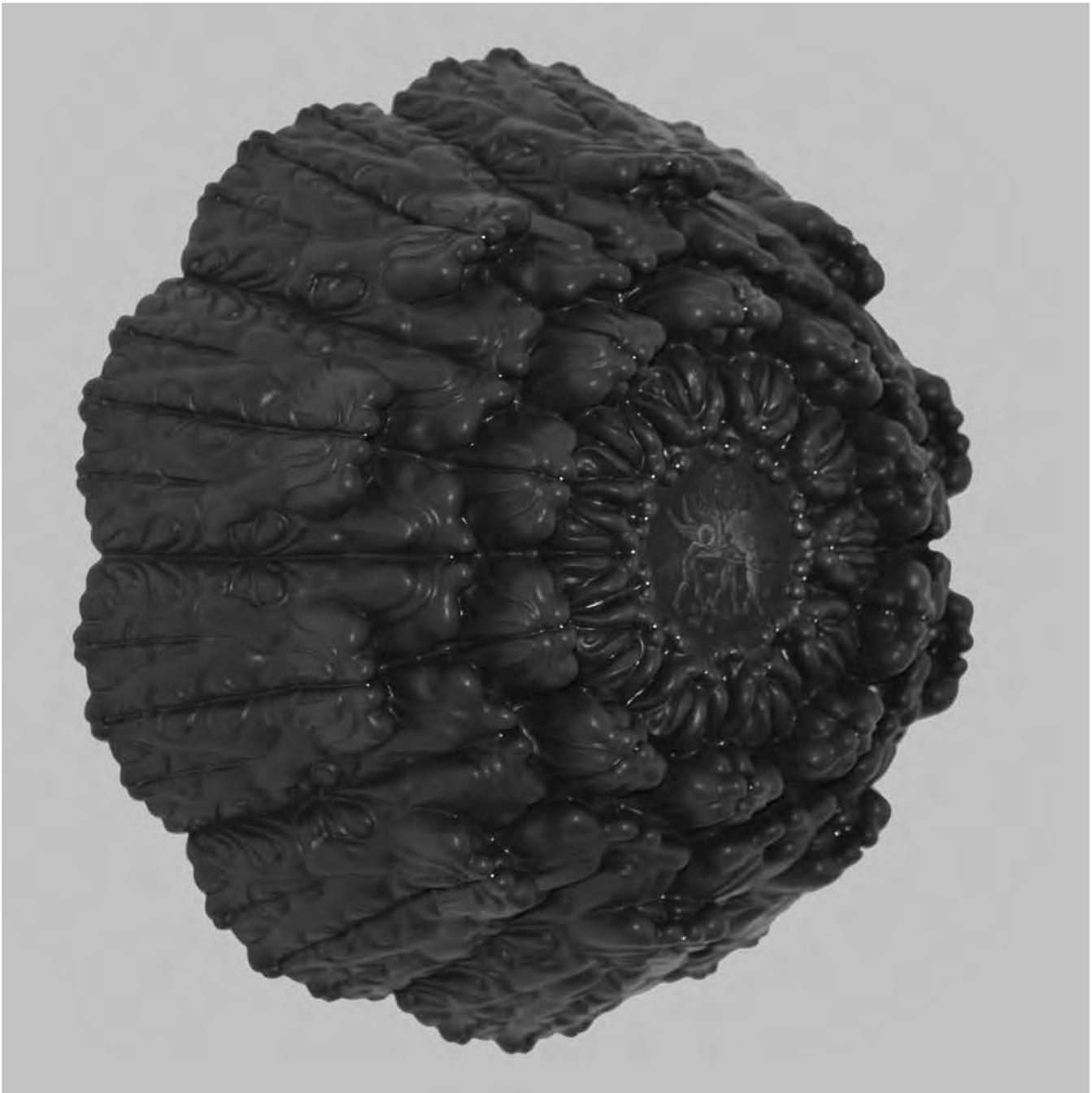
CP: I still think I'm working with a shallow illusion on a curved surface. My spatial concerns remain contained. I don't think I'm as much a sculptor as many sculptors are. And now I have a foot in the ceramics world, since I have work out there in ceramic, and I had a show at the Kohler. I am not a ceramicist. That's a deep knowledge I know nothing about; I only know Kohler factory methods. I am a good mold-maker. My work has evolved. I started flat, and I then I started to curve the surface, and then I started making the surface stick out more substantially. It intrudes into space, but up until recently, it was a smooth curved surface. Now, with the more complex forms, they are more hybrid, and people do call them sculptures. I think that with the

Figure 2, top. Carol Prusa, *Dream*, Silverpoint on black gesso on fiberglass with fiber optics, 32" x 32" x 10", 2014

Figure 3, center. Carol Prusa, *Swallow*, Silverpoint on black gesso on fiberglass with fiber optics, 32" x 32" x 10", 2014

Figure 4, right. Carol Prusa, *Creatrix*, Silverpoint on black gesso on fiberglass with fiber optics, 32" x 32" x 10", 2014





recent CNC routing I've done, the forms actually open up spatially, and they behave more sculpturally. With the SECAC grant, I have realized a potential for my work to integrate space more dramatically.

AB: *Are these individual works of art, or elements in an installation or an environment?*

CP: When I put together a solo show, I consider myself an installation artist, because I make a body of work that belongs together, and there are relationships between the pieces that are important. As a pragmatist, I realize in the end that I'm never going to have that space again. So that show will reconfigure. And sometimes, I don't have control over how people will install the

Figure 5. Carol Prusa, *Expulsion*, Silverpoint on vitreous china with fiber optics and programmed light emitter, 16 x 16 x 7.5", 2014

show. Museums are pretty autonomous in how they want to do things. And individual pieces get purchased sometimes, and then they act by themselves. All my work functions autonomously. One piece can be its own world. But when all the pieces go together, it's much fuller. The understanding of what the work is all about is going to be greatly deepened by those relationships. When I have an installation is when I feel the most fulfilled and happiest. I'm not particularly happy about seeing one piece hanging somewhere. That doesn't do it



for me. It generates an energy when there are a number of my pieces in a space, and that's always my favorite situation. I love solo shows. I like museum shows when they build me my own room.

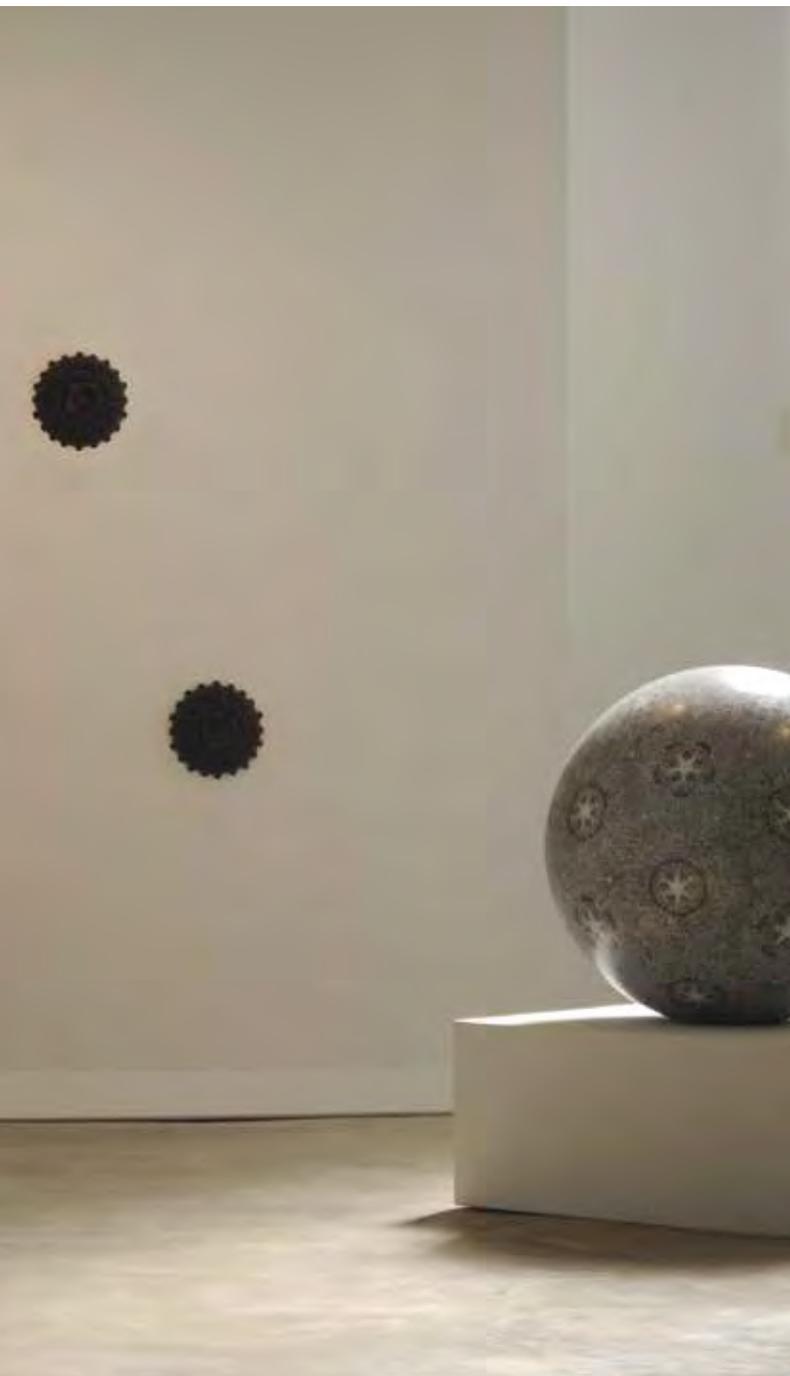
AB: *What is the energy your work creates? What is the understanding or the experience that you have or that you hope others would have?*

CP: When my work inhabits an environment or creates an environment, I find the work to have this vibration, this energy that is pretty quiet. My work is quiet. I feel a

sense of completeness and calm. My mind isn't agitated. The things that I make take that agitation from my mind. When I'm working on a piece, my mind is agitated until I complete it, and then I breathe. I breathe when I am with my work in a space. Or, more specifically, my breathing changes.

AB: *Is your work for other people? Or is it primarily for you? Or is it both?*

CP: It's always both. I don't think about what other people are going to think. People perplex me. These



things are beautiful to me, and do they mean a lot to me, and I am really connected to them. I cannot fathom why that would matter to anyone else, but it seems to. Some people need to breathe in the way that they do in front of my work.

AB: *That makes it sound like your work is plugged into a human need for meditation or contemplation.*

CP: They are mandala-like. I hope that the forms are harmonic and that they resonate with people.

AB: *Can you speak about the connection of these works to geometry and physics and cosmology? Are these active forces in your work or are the seeds of inspiration where you begin?*

CP: I'm curious about physics. I love the way people come up with theories about why things do what they do, and they put things into forms that I think are metaphorical and beautiful. I like the bridging between different ways of understanding things. That's why I like the alchemists. That's why I like the intersection of math and art and science. Geometry is pretty critical. I like the symbolism. Intuitively, you find relationships, and you scribe over it, and you have mathematical relationships that are in you, and you put them there. That intrigues me. I definitely think in really minute relationships that have mathematical structure to them if I sort it out.

AB: *What are these intricate patterns metaphors for?*

CP: The interconnectedness of everything.

AB: *When you are in your work, it seems like a solitary act. Are you seeking your own personal feeling of connectedness to everything in doing it?*

CP: There are different levels in the work. Sometimes the work is really factory work that you have to do to get to the part where it really unfolds itself. I am so driven to get to that point of unfolding, that I will do the factory work to get there. Then I get to the point where it is really the final painting on top, where the thing is really going to manifest, where I will see what the thing is really going to be. It's always a question of whether it is going to be anything. It might not materialize. That point uses my sensibility so fully that everything else drops out. That is a state of meditation. The direct relationship between me and the work, where nothing else matters, and my brain is totally connected—that's my drug of choice.

AB: *You are using imagery that has origins in the visible world, and yet it speaks to things that are part of the nonvisible world.*

CP: I started out as a figurative artist. More recently, around 2001, my work really changed. That work had representational references but became really abstract. The abstraction seemed to have sources in both biology and the body. Conceptually, I was considering them representing much more cosmic kind of scales—a macro-micro scale collision. But the forms in my work have always been organic. I also look at a lot of wisdom traditions and symbol systems. I am interested in old mythologies and stories that explain why the world is

Figure 6. Installation, Fearful Symmetry, 2014, Zadok Gallery – Miami

the way it is. More recently, though, I have missed the figure. The whole art things started when I was in fifth or sixth grade, lying in bed and looking out the window at the neighbor's roof, thinking, "What the heck? Where did we come from?" There I was trying to understand this. 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? That would be like before the Big Bang. And this thought of how could there be something before there was anything? What could nothing be? That thought was so massively overwhelming.

AB: *Is that the moment that you are trying to render?*

CP: Yes! As a kid, that bothered me so much. I pursued so many avenues to try to understand what existed before there was something. Because when you were raised in the church—and my father was a head elder—you were told the answer. But even that is hard to wrap your mind around. If there was nothing, where did God come from? What is representable? There are these things that you feel or sense, but how would you represent them? I think artists are very concerned with that. I see that as a basic thing in art—representing the unknown, or representing what is not representable.

AB: *Do you find that people appreciate the intense labor involved in making these objects?*

CP: Some people do not believe someone made them. This is perplexing to me, because of course someone had to make them. We do live in an age where things are manufactured, and rather complexly so. Some people think silverpoint is a photographic process, which it is not. People think they are printed, or computer-generated. There is no value in the fact that it might take me hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours to make something. There is no intrinsic value in that. That does not make the work more important. Knowing that, and knowing that there are technologies out there that could deliver a lot of what I am interested in much more expediently, it makes for an interesting dilemma. That is what I am delving into—the idea of where I could go with that. Where could I turn to technology to deliver this level of complexity and symmetry and beauty? And where does the technology fall short? Where would I need to add to it? If I am not making something that I am a little unsure of whether or not it will work, then I am not interested.

AB: *You have hired fabricators for parts of this project. Has that been a difficult step for you to take?*

CP: When I work with the architecture students, they are the software experts. I pay them to expedite my ideas. It's good for both of us. We meet in person,

and we really communicate, and we are very direct. I have learned a lot, and they have learned a lot. And everything I have learned is really benefiting my students. They think more about what is possible. They stretch more. So many people have benefited from this SECAC grant.

AB: *What role does failure play for you? How do you deal with it?*

CP: It's hard, because with my work, it's not until the final layer that I know whether or not it's going to happen. When it fails, it is really disturbing. I will try so many different solutions to try to bring it back or make it into something, and I have learned that you can only go so far. Some things just do not work. But in the process of trying to bring them back, I do learn a lot. And I will try risks and problem solving that I might not otherwise have done. I always learn a great deal from failed pieces, but they are crushing. I do mourn them, because they are an investment. They are a piece of me. Sometimes, I get a little intimidated, and I have to remind myself I can just gesso over it. When I tell myself that, I do not get uptight.

AB: *Are you a resilient person when things fail?*

CP: It's hard to let go of what I thought anything was going to be. But the minute I paint over it is such a relief, because then it is done and I can move on. I should learn to do that more readily.

AB: *It seems like risk is one of the things you build into your proposal process. What other risks have you taken with this award in particular?*

CP: Yes, that is absolutely the reason to have a big vision. That is the reason to write a proposal. To move your work forward, you have to go to a place where you don't know, which is always risky. You put out there this possibility of really expanding what the work can be. I like problem solving. I like learning new things. The digital learning curve was so steep and intense. To get it where it was useful to me, and to where I could translate it from a file into a physical object, it was daunting. It was especially daunting given the timetable, but it was good to be pushed so hard. You can always find other things to do if you are not pushed. I have absolutely become a different artist. The Kohler Arts/Industry Residency started it, and this grant propelled me to work more deeply on the things that Kohler stirred up.

AB: *What are some of the key ways in which you are different?*

CP: I have more in me than I knew. I am more capable than I realized. I can be more ambitious for my work than I thought was possible. I have a skill set that I have



Figure 7. Carol Prusa at work on *Fearful Symmetry*

barely unearthed. I am getting older, and in order to realize now what I think my work can be, I need to get the help of experts around me, and I need to embrace that help. Asking for help can be hard.

AB: *SECAC's members are balancing a lot of the same things you balance—careers in the arts and within academe. What tactics can you share with other people trying to balance the same responsibilities you balance?*

CP: Sometimes I do it more effectively than other times. That is another reason for writing proposals: to think about the big picture. What do I need to do to make sure my work manifests the way it needs to? I am learning

to say no to things when they do not serve the bigger picture of the work. My goal is museum shows, so I stay focused on that. I am honest with everyone about what I can provide or not, what I will do for them or not.

AB: *I know you are a generous teacher, and you have spoken about how this grant will benefit your students. Can you expand on that?*

CP: I have learned that when I am on campus, I am on campus. I am fully there and fully accessible. When I am

in my studio, I have learned to tell my students that I am fully in the studio. Fridays are meetings. I am very clear and clean about what it is I do and when. I also expect my students to be responsible for their own work, just as I am responsible for mine. I think that is healthy. Students generally do well with this freedom. I am still learning a lot about teaching. I want to give my students the freedom to be the artists they need to be, and I want to facilitate that. They are very disciplined, and so am I.

AB: *When you are with your own students, what are you trying to impress upon them? If you are an art student, what is the thing you need to know the most?*

CP: What I try to communicate to my students is that, as an artist, you have everything that you are inside you already. In order for that to find significant form, you really have to dig at it. That requires immense discipline and rigor. To expedite that requires attempting things in a variety of ways. That is why classes are useful. It also requires going to see a lot of art, to see other solutions, and to determine your relationship to them.

AB: *What is your best definition of success in the work, or success as an artist?*

CP: Success in the simplest terms is to continue making art. In more expanded terms, it would be to be able to manifest as fully as possible what's in you with the requisite skills and rigor. That you can pull all these things together to make the best of what you are... Or maybe better than you are.

AB: *What is a successful work of art?*

CP: It is one that is more expansive than you are, and its boundaries are beyond yours. If you are putting the best of what you know into the artwork, then you allow it to surprise you and do things that you couldn't predict, or perform, or explain, or understand. So you always learn from it. And if it's a really great piece, it functions in a way beyond your knowing. So you can't remake it, you can't perform it, and you don't know why it's functioning like that. You can come close to knowing why. You can dissect it and get 90% of the way there most of the time. But the ones that really make it... wow!