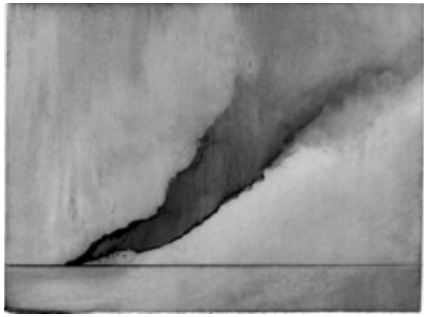
Shades of Gray



Four Artists of the Southeast

Shades of Gray: Four Artists of the Southeast

Kell Black
Sue Mulcahy
Jane Allen Nodine
Carol Prusa

Shades of Meaning

Whatever else it does, art lives in conversation, even argument, with other art. When works of art, or separate exhibitions, are placed side by side in a museum, their relationship creates a narrative that embraces and exceeds the contents of each. Consciously or not, we compare meanings, techniques, social contexts, and aesthetic perspectives stemming from such arrangements. All this to say there are significant points of connectivity and contrast between *Shades of Gray* and *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975*, two exhibitions concurrently on view at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. A consideration of their differences and similarities can lead to a deeper appreciation of both.

Color as Field presents works produced at a critical juncture in mid-twentieth-century American art, when painting was seen, at least in the highly influential formalist doctrine of Clement Greenberg, as a process of eliminating anything not intrinsic to its own definitive properties. To oversimplify, Greenberg suggested that painting should concentrate on what it did best—comprise a dynamic interaction of colors on a surface. To be true to itself, painting should avoid telling stories, conveying emotions, or illustrating the world's appearances. Instead it should be perfectly flat, since flatness is its unique characteristic. The painters in *Color as Field* approached their mediums, not as materials that undergo an illusionistic transformation when manipulated, but as a means of giving the viewer a compelling sensate experience derived solely from the optical interaction of paints with ground; no message is provided and no interpretation is required.

In comparing Color Field painting to the works in *Shades of Gray*, several ideas converge. The first relates to the awareness we have of the expressiveness of the physical properties of the media used—paint's relation to raw canvas is the subject of the Color Field artists. As for the drawings, we never lose sight of the way charcoal, for example (the medium used by two of the artists in *Shades of Gray*), reinforces the texture and weight of the paper to which it is applied, or of the way it reminds us that charcoal is primarily a granular material that responds plastically to the pressures of the fingers. The surfaces of both these paintings and drawings play down pictorial depth, and in each work, the picture plane can magically appear to be at once solid

ground and open space. Additionally, in both the paintings and drawings, there is no preliminary planning stage, no underpainting or cartoon, no adding on of opaque layers to fix mistakes or build up palpable surfaces. In the Color Field works, paint is applied with the immediacy of a drawing medium, effectively proclaiming the indivisibility of the two approaches.

Created during a time when the Modernist mission was to strive for absolutism in a relative world, the Color Field paintings have an existential clarity; they are simply there, and no amount of interpretation will make them more than what one sees. Their drive toward coherence, however, did not last long in an incoherent, multifaceted, shifting world. Today, while artists still engage the literal expressiveness of their mediums, and many consider the flat picture plane to be a useful resist upon which to explore spatial tensions, there is nothing binding them to a single theoretical objective. The artists in ***Shades of Gray***, for instance, have shifting layers of personal, social, and aesthetic business to attend to. Each is more interested in evoking the mysteries of life and creativity than in parlaying the poetry of emotionally detached form.

Morris Louis. *Floral V*, 1959–60. Acrylic and magna on canvas, 98 3/8 x 137 13/16 in. Private collection, Denver. Photograph courtesy of American Federation of Arts. © 1993 Marcella Louis Brenner

Of the artists in ***Shades of Gray***, Sue Mulcahy is most in line with the spirit of the Color Field painters. In creating her improvised drawings, she applies charcoal in ways she herself finds surprising by forgoing conscious control and allowing accident and chance to dictate the end results. Mulcahy begins by making marks or spreading granulated charcoal onto her surface. Just as Morris Louis poured paint onto the canvas and allowed it to channel,

Sue Mulcahy
Velvet Secrets

stain, and spread on its own in accordance with gravity and other natural laws, Mulcahy lets the charcoal take various forms, and uses her hands and tools in the same "thoughtless" way. Zoning out with the help of music or the TV, she smears the papers' surfaces with a rag or the palm of her hand, adding weight here, a rhythmic series of lines there, wiping clean one section while filling another with smoky forms or water-like ripples. She sometimes vacuums her drawings, using various attachments as drawing tools and never knowing in advance what the end results will be.

The imagery in Mulcahy's works is not directly recognizable. Titles such as ***Pop of Hot Ice*** and ***Scent of the Moon*** indicate that her intent is to evoke intangible experiences. According to Mulcahy, "My abstract images are spontaneous reflections exploring the spirit of nature; listening to nature in an attempt to tease out her textures, moods, rhythms, and compositions."[1] An important part of her drawing process involves stepping back, looking at shapes and spaces, trying to see forms that coalesce, perhaps into a suggestion of something such as a tree or a person, for example. When this happens, she goes back into the drawing, wipes away any such allusions and pushes them back into mystery; she seeks the tension between being and becoming, with becoming given the upper hand. "Fundamental to all my work," says Mulcahy, "is a philosophy that the process of art is analogous to living. It is an activity bound by time, molded by opportunity, choice, and experience, and marked by failure and success." She recognizes that the drive for control, so intrinsic to rationalist culture, limits one's capacity to participate in the flowing streams of life, both social and natural.

Questions of control—How much is needed? When can it be relaxed? When is it limiting?—also guide works by Kell Black in ***Shades of Gray.*** While he is best known for his exacting drawings and cut-paper sculptures, in his aviation series in this exhibition, Black has experimented with ways of circumventing the absolute coordination of eye with hand. In each drawing "the specifics announce themselves through the process of drawing."[2] His two large charcoal drawings, ***Drawings for Boys (Blimp)*** and ***Drawings for Boys (P-47)***, were begun in much the same way as Sue Mulcahy's, with a surface animated by the build up of medium, erasures, areas darkened by acetone, and even holes in the paper where Black placed the work on a pebble driveway and ran an electric sander over it.

Once the atmosphere of the field is established (both in terms of weather conditions and also as an emotional ambience), Black creates a narrative by suspending the zeppelin and airplane in the stormy surround, evincing a sense of impending threat or loss. The central point of reference for Black's aviation series is personal and cultural memory. He grew up near an airport, and as a boy loved to watch the planes land and take off. When his sons were young, they too took a similar delight in the wonders of air transportation, which accounts for the titles of his drawings.

Black also recalls spending many evenings of his childhood watching movies with his mother, a film historian. These were often preceded by newsreels from the forties and fifties. Shot in black and white, the documentary clips were typically in poor condition, featuring the graininess, scratches, and evidence of chemical degradation that give old films such an alluring patina of decay and mystery. Visual tension and a sense of multiple realities arise when one sees the illusion of images, such as airplanes in a World War II newsreel, as objects floating in a space that has been violated by scratches, affirming that the film or its negative is only a physical surface after all. Similar graphic devices—surfaces gouged and scratched and an atmosphere that fades into and out of patches of light or dark—make Black's images seem to come from another time, from memories more cultural than individual.

Kell Black. *Drawings for Boys (P-47)*

Black is particularly interested in the power of the film still and its ability to convey psychological tension by freezing an image at the moment just

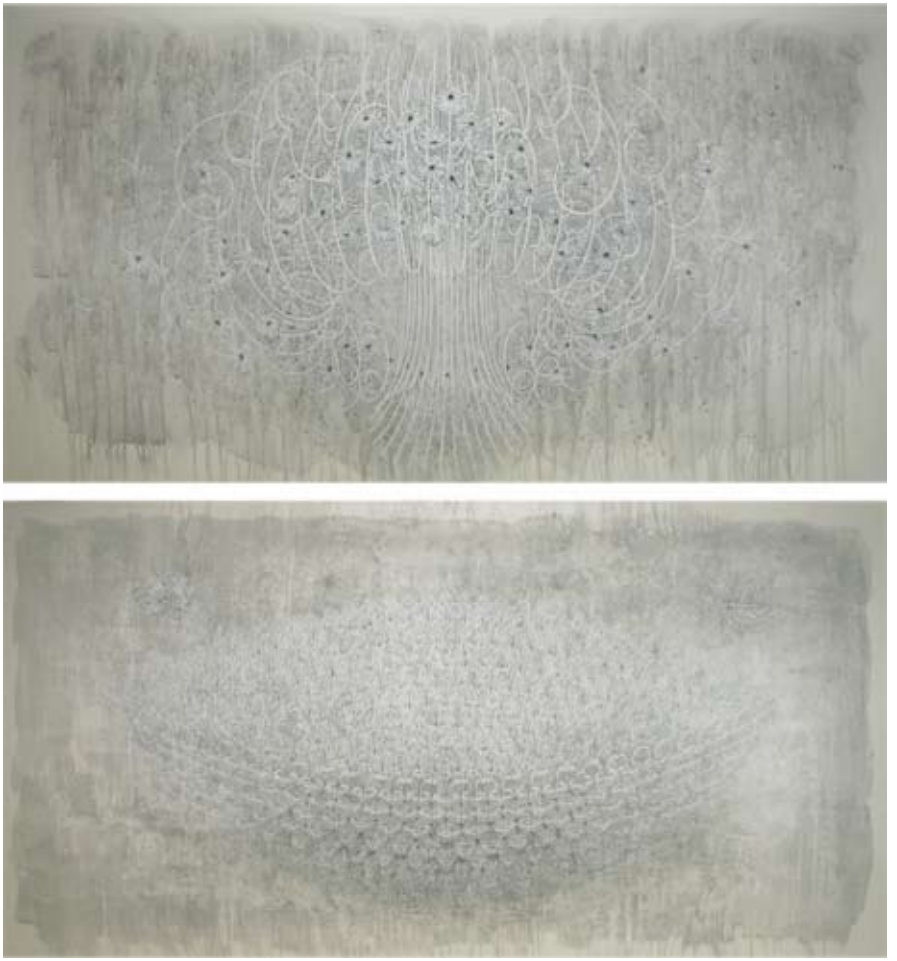
before a dramatic event occurs. His small charcoal and olive oil drawings are especially portentous. With minimal imagery, the works invite the viewer to contemplate the history of flight through the veil of time and atmosphere. Taken from various sources, including the Smithsonian archives, the works function as visual ghosts. Redolent of memory and dreams, they seem poised to fade forever from sight like an old or overexposed photograph from a Brownie camera, which happens to be the source of many of his images.

Although equally ghostly, the drawings of Carol Prusa have a different relationship with history. Their primary medium is silverpoint (the same drawing tool used by old masters such as Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer), which produces a faint metallic line of great subtlety. They evoke other historical precedents as well, from botanical and anatomical drawings (she earned a B.S. in medical illustration before moving into fine arts) and cosmological diagrams to Baroque furniture design and Celtic knots.

In the dome-shaped ***Threshold***, Prusa combines allusions to astronomy, geography, and cartography with a topographical surface teeming with densely interlocking organic forms that evoke nothing so much as a planet crowded with coupled fungi, moss, or mysterious microbial forms. The work is one of many she has done in the tondo or hemispheric format that emphasize the integration of the microcosm and macrocosm. Their circularity connects them to the tradition of the mandala, which in Hinduism and Buddhism is a circular diagramming of the cosmos and all that it contains. Just as the mandala is thought to increase one's awareness of the relationship between the inner self and the world, Prusa's drawings invite the viewer to delve into layers of meaning and allusion, leading to a sense of mystical unity with things larger than oneself, even when they are smaller, such as objects viewed under a microscope that seemingly manifest the integrated operations of the universe.

There is a trace of New Ageism in Prusa's work, especially in her images suggesting mushrooms or Celtic knots. Mysticism, or at least mystification, also comes through in her use of a wan and vaporous light, which surrounds and embeds dense patterns in an ambiguous, floating space. For their part, the repetitive, complexly structured, and sequenced organic patterns seem to reflect exponentially expanding systems in mathematics, a field of study

Prusa views as a means of explaining the universe's ultimate coherence. She is particularly interested in string theory, a speculative attempt to solve the incompatibility of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity by creating a "theory of everything."[3] I will leave it to the interested reader to research this fascinating and confounding branch of physics, which suggests that all matter is composed of looped strings too tiny for even the most sophisticated equipment to detect, the vibrations of which are thought to influence the behavior of all energy and matter. Suffice it to remember that the utopian branch of modernists who predate the Color Field painters—Theosophists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian—saw mystical truth in mathematics' universal language, and it is this impulse that seems to carry through in Prusa's work.

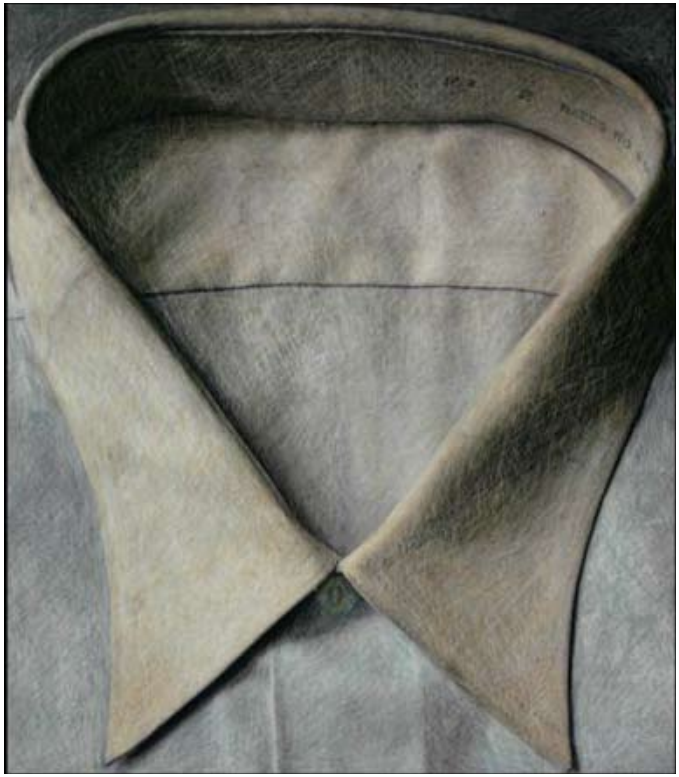


Carol Prusa. *An Awful Rowing, Atomic Sublime*

Yet, unlike the utopians, she does not necessarily deduce an ordered human destiny based on mathematical logic or an explanation of "everything." Beyond the bounds of reason lies mystery. And with their sense of fading and distressed surfaces, her drawings are elegiac in quality; they are a vision of vulnerability and a portent of loss. Some

works, such as ***An Awful Rowing, Atomic Sublime***, even have an underlying hint of apocalypse that confirms the unsettling nature of Prusa's worldview. Here, clustered organisms take the shape of a rowboat under a Baroque arrangement of lilies formed to resemble a mushroom cloud, a ship of fools heading toward oblivion.

Spatial ambiguity in works by Prusa, as well as Black and Mulcahy, is a principle source of optical tension. This is also true in the Color Field paintings where the "ground" on which this spatial play occurs is the raw canvas itself, a material that seems neutral, a tabula rasa upon which the natural action of paint is free to revel in its own beauty. But there is no absolutely blank slate; canvas is an inheritance of Western art history and automatically reflects that history regardless of whether or not anything is applied to it. In fact, every material that one draws or paints onto—paper, fabric, plywood, bark—conveys information about the resources and manufacturing processes of a culture, and often holds a clue about whether something is considered high art (canvas) or low art (newsprint) and worthy of being kept or meant to be discarded.



Jane Allen Nodine. *Vesture Series 0115*

The cultural significance of the picture plane is more complex in the works of South Carolina artist Jane Allen Nodine, who creates surfaces comprised of digitally manipulated images of closely cropped shirtfronts. The images of shirts seem not to be located on the picture surface but embedded in it, as if the flatness of the shirt and the flatness of the paper have bonded into a single inviolable plane.

As emotionally neutral as a piece of plywood or canvas, these tightly

cropped images of shirts are icons of domesticity and commerce, evoking both the people who wear them and those who manufacture, sell, clean, and fold them. They represent the artist's desire to find truths, or at least explanations, through modest observations. "In the ***Vesture*** works, I attempt to evoke memories associated with specific activities or events related to such items of apparel," writes Nodine. "The ephemeral qualities of fabric, such as staining, tearing, and wrinkling, must constantly be managed through washing, cleaning, ironing, and folding. The cycle of ***attempted*** control over the fabric, garment shapes, and wear-ability, seems to serve as a metaphor for daily struggles that seem repetitive and cyclical." Though perhaps only a person who regularly folds laundry would conceive such a metaphor, it is not uncommon—especially among artists and poets who pay attention to the small things (think of Emily Dickinson)—to project transcendent meaning onto everyday rituals.

Mark Rothko. *Number* 18, 1951. Oil on canvas, 81 ½ x 69 7/8 in. Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY, 53.216. Photograph courtesy of American Ferderation of Arts. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Artists such as Mark Rothko wished to suggest that his forms and planes would extend outward to infinity, that the viewer was seeing only a portion of something too large (physically or conceptually) to contain within the boundaries of a canvas. This is seen in Nodine's works as well, but with an implication of a different kind of expansiveness. Her cropping implies that the shirts would go beyond their own frame, not just as individual shirts but as typological signs for the genus "shirt," lined endlessly on a shelf at Wal-Mart. Instead of the expansiveness of a Rothko, which appears to broaden into the borderless mind, Nodine's cropping and repetitive imagery suggests the endlessness of factory production and shelf stocking.

Nodine's works also make reference to other artistic precedents, particularly Dadaist and Pop art in which everyday objects are used or reproduced to uncannily stand in for the person who would use the object. One thinks of Marcel Duchamp's snow shovel, which, when he titled it ***In Advance of the Broken Arm***, was redefined as evidence of a slapstick narrative involving a slipping snow-shoveler. Or of Jim Dine's iconic paintings of empty bathrobes, standing sleeve-on-hip as if worn by indignant invisible people. Dine often applied gestural marks and other signs of expressiveness, giving the robes

a superficial sense of personality, even while evoking individuals who have been vacated by the alienating forces of economic culture.

Nodine's shirts impute a similar kind of ghostly human presence, which is amplified by the marks she places onto them. The quotidian surfaces of several of the works in the ***Vesture*** series are covered in densely layered marks that look like a network or mesh of intertwined filament. These fabric-like lines are independent of the threads in the shirt itself, but follow along the planes and edges of the host shirt as if it is a substructure for her to follow or play against. The effect is of an impressionist painting, in which uniform marks form a shimmering tapestry of light covering the entire surface. Formally, these drawn elements offset the illusion of the photograph, in that they are physical traces of the artist's hand.

The shirts appear to be for men, and the artist's response to these male surrogates may be deduced from the nature of the marks. In the ***Vesture*** series marks are built up carefully in a time-consuming technique that suggests a more thoughtful and reflective relationship between the artist and the male surrogate. In her series of encaustic and mixed media drawings, the marks are more improvised, graffiti-like, and free form, implying an independence from the atmosphere of domesticity established by the carefully folded shirts.

In different ways, and without necessarily intending to, Nodine, as well as Mulcahy, Black, and Prusa, demonstrate that innovations of preceding generations—not only the luminous paintings of the Color Field artists, but Pop art, Dadaism, Impressionism, and many other styles—are absorbed and transformed in response to the personal and cultural proclivities of the moment. Whatever their sources of inspiration may be, the works in ***Shades of Gray*** share an appreciation for the poetic mystery that arises from ambiguities in space and form, an emphasis on process and discovery, and a willingness to let the artist's raw material speak for itself.

Mark Scala, *Chief Curator*

Notes

1. Sue Mulcahy, e-mail message to author, January 26, 2008
2. Kell Black, artist's statement, n.d.
3. Interview with Carol Prusa, December 7, 2006.

Shades of Gray

Checklist of the Exhibition

Dimensions are given in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

1. **Kell Black**
   Drawings for Boys (Blimp), ca. 2002
   Charcoal and acetone on paper, 48 x 36
   Courtesy of the artist

2. **Kell Black**
   Drawing for Boys (Bombing Run), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 10 ¾ x 8 ¼
   Courtesy of the artist

3. **Kell Black**
   Drawing for Boys (Crash), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 8 ¼ x 10 ¾
   Courtesy of the artist

4. **Kell Black**
   Drawing for Boys (Dog Fight), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 10 ¾ x 8 ¼
   Courtesy of the artist

5. **Kell Black**
   Drawings for Boys (Henri Farman), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 8 ¼ x 10 ¾.
   Courtesy of the artist

6. **Kell Black**
   Drawing for Boys (Henri Griffard), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 10 ¾ x 8 ¼
   Courtesy of the artist

7. **Kell Black**
   Drawing for Boys (P-40 Warhawk), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 8 ¼ x 10 ¾
   Courtesy of the artist

8. **Kell Black**
   Drawings for Boys (P-47), ca. 2002
   Charcoal and acetone on paper, 36 x 48
   Courtesy of the artist

9. **Kell Black**
   Drawings for Boys (Santos Dumont), ca. 2002
   Charcoal, graphite, and olive oil on paper, 8 ¼ x 10 ¾
   Courtesy of the artist

10. **Sue Mulcahy**
    Magical Excesses, 2008
    Charcoal on paper, 39 x 53
    Courtesy of the artist

11. **Sue Mulcahy**
    once, 2007
    Charcoal on paper, 36 x 53
    Courtesy of the artist

12. **Sue Mulcahy**
    Pop of Hot Ice, 2008
    Charcoal on paper, 53 x 36
    Courtesy of the artist

13. **Sue Mulcahy**
    Scent of the Moon, 2007
    Charcoal on paper, 53 x 34
    Courtesy of the artist

14. **Sue Mulcahy**
Velvet Secrets, 2007
Charcoal on paper,
53 x 36
Courtesy of the artist

15. **Jane Allen Nodine**
La Camicia del Graffiti 01, 2007
Digital print, encaustic,
oil, and graphite on panel,
11 x 10 ¼ x 3
Courtesy of the artist

16. **Jane Allen Nodine**
La Camicia del Graffiti 02, 2007
Digital print, encaustic,
oil, graphite, and
prismacolour on panel,
12 ¼ x 12 ½ x 3
Courtesy of the artist

17. **Jane Allen Nodine**
La Camicia del Graffiti 03, 2007
Digital print, encaustic,
oil, graphite, and
prismacolour on panel,
11 ¼ x 11 x 3
Courtesy of the artist

18. **Jane Allen Nodine**
Vesture Revealed, 2004
Digital image print on paper,
24 x 24
Courtesy of the artist

19. **Jane Allen Nodine**
Vesture Series 0110, 2006
Digital print, graphite, acrylic,
and prismacolour on paper,
22 x 22
Courtesy of the artist

20. **Jane Allen Nodine**
Vesture Series 0114, 2006
Digital print, graphite,
acrylic, and prismacolour
on paper, 20 x 20 ¾
Courtesy of the artist

21. **Jane Allen Nodine**
Vesture Series 0115, 2006
Digital print, graphite,
acrylic, and prismacolour
on paper, 20 x 17
Courtesy of the artist

22. **Carol Prusa**
An Awful Rowing, Atomic Sublime,
2006–07
Silverpoint, graphite,
titanium white pigment,
and cut glass with acrylic binder
on wood panels,
48 x 96 each
Courtesy of the artist

23. **Carol Prusa**
Babel, 2007
Silverpoint, graphite,
titanium white pigment,
and sulfur with acrylic binder
on wood panel, 80 x 44
Courtesy of the artist

24. **Carol Prusa**
Multiverses, 2007
Silverpoint, graphite,
and titanium white
pigment with acrylic
binder on wood panel,
39 x 39
Courtesy of the artist

25. **Carol Prusa**
Optic Nerve, 2007
Silverpoint, graphite, aluminum
leaf, and titanium white pigment
with acrylic binder on acrylic
hemisphere with fiber optics,
36 x 36 x 18
Courtesy of the artist and
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

26. **Carol Prusa**
Threshold, 2007
Silverpoint, graphite,
aluminum leaf, and
titanium white pigment with
acrylic binder on acrylic
hemisphere with fiber optics,
36 x 36 x 18
Courtesy of the artist and
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

27. **Carol Prusa**
Tomb, 2004–07
Silverpoint, graphite, titanium
white pigment, and cut glass with
acrylic binder on wood panel,
80 x 44
Courtesy of the artist

28. **Carol Prusa**
Wreath, 2007
Silverpoint, graphite, and
titanium white and mars black
pigment with acrylic binder on
wood panel, 80 x 44
Courtesy of the artist

Front Cover Images:
(Clockwise)
Kell Black. *Drawings for Boys (Crash)*
Carol Prusa. *Threshold*
Sue Mulcahy. *Scent of the Moon*
Jane Allen Nodine. *Vesture Revealed*

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The Morris Louis and Mark Rothko images are from the exhibition *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975*. The exhibition is organized by the American Federation of Arts and made possible, in part, by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts as part of American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius.