



### **Polymer Art: Recent Acquisitions**

January 28 – June 24, 2018

In 2011, the Racine Art Museum organized ***Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads***, an exhibition featuring over 200 works made of polymer, a plastic-based compound used to make modeling clays, such as FIMO® or Sculpey®. Primarily comprised of works that had been gifted to RAM, ***Terra Nova*** emphasized the development of polymer as an expressive medium for artwork in recent decades. In addition, RAM produced a book of the same name and hosted a symposium so that leading artists could come together to discuss the past, present, and future of the material.

***Polymer Art: Recent Acquisitions*** showcases works that have come to RAM since 2011. Referencing the significance of the groundwork laid in earlier years, the show also includes pieces that were part of the original gift that established RAM's polymer collection, the largest of its kind in the world.

While art jewelry comprises the biggest portion of the polymer holdings, there are also examples of sculpture, furniture with polymer veneers, and vessels. Recent gifts have introduced new artists to the collection and expanded upon existing bodies of work by incorporating different types of objects or broadening the scope of years represented. This exhibition also debuts a teapot by **Jeffrey Lloyd Dever**, ***Seeking Solace***, which is the first piece purchased from the Polymer Art Acquisition and Care Fund.

This particular exhibition ties artwork together based on material commonality. Remaining consistent with RAM's desire to look at the field in a broad context, polymer objects have been—and will continue to be—shown in future exhibitions alongside craft made with other media.

### **History of Polymer**

Polymer (from the Greek, *poly* meaning "many" and *meros* meaning "part") is a relatively modern medium whose popularity has increased exponentially since the 1970s. Describing its physical nature, author and artist **Rachel Carren** states, "It is a clean-feeling, acrylic modeling compound that comes in a wide assortment of colors. Polymer can be rolled, sheeted, molded, sculpted, painted, carved, and readily combined with any number of other materials. Chemically, it is a mix of microscopic polyvinyl chloride particles suspended within a plasticizer, to which colorants and compounds are added to enhance pliability and curing..." As a product, polymer is widely available, needs little special equipment, and offers a seemingly unlimited range of possibilities from the most basic to highly sophisticated forms of artistic expression."

Polymer feels like traditional ceramic clay—it has a similar smooth texture, and is very plastic and moldable. It does not dry out in the open air, but can become less pliable. Polymer is conditioned before use by repeatedly rolling it through a pasta machine.

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This helps align the polymer molecules, which makes the conditioned polymer stronger. In order for work to become more stable and “permanent,” polymer is baked in a convection oven.

Material innovations have impacted polymer’s development, but so has its adoption for use by artists from a variety of backgrounds, with training in numerous disciplines, including painting, photography, ceramics, fiber, printmaking, science, and engineering.

*The earliest history of polymer remains vague. The material seems to have been an accidental, chemical by-product related to the late 1930s manufacture of plastics in Germany...In the United States, Zenith Products developed a substance during the mid-1940s that they hoped to use as a thermal conductor. It, too, proved unsuitable for the intended purpose, but this material, dubbed “polyform,” was the original version of another variation of polymer...*

*[Polymer] emerged as a useful material for American doll makers and miniaturists during the 1970s and has maintained a strong presence with that audience. But its blossoming as a general art medium did not begin until the 1980s, when individuals all over the country began to encounter it. Most of these artists worked in isolation and discovered their own methods for utilizing this unfamiliar substance.*

–Rachel Carren, “Forging a Unique Path: The History of Polymer Art,”  
*Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads*, pp. 3-5

*Ornament* published its first article on polymer in 1988, written by Kathleen Dustin, who outlined its basic properties, as well as some artistic connections to ceramics and glass techniques. The article included images of Dustin’s beads, a finished necklace, and a close-up of a complex cane...The very fact that *Ornament* presented articles about polymer provided an important measure of recognition. The promotion of these artists through the magazine not only elevated an individual artist’s profile but also added to the growing awareness of the material. For readers, the images and articles offered access to high-quality polymer art as well as technical information.

–DeDominicis, Jill A. “Polymer Clay: A Modern Medium Comes of Age.”  
*Ornament* Vol. 34 No. 4 2011: pp. 38-45

## **Polymer at RAM**

When artist **Elise Winters**, founder of the Polymer Art Archive and organizer of the Polymer Collection Project (PCP), approached RAM in the 2000s as a potential recipient of work from the PCP, RAM began to envision a future filled with more artworks made of polymer.

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The 2011 exhibition, **Terra Nova**, and its accompanying book were the product of many conversations with Winters and others who were working with the material, both actually and theoretically. Of five institutions that were given work, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, RAM accepted the largest number of works from the PCP. In doing so, RAM established a holding of national importance that further underscores the museum's role as a leader in collecting and exhibiting polymer art.

A symposium was held in 2011 that brought together leading artists to discuss the history and the future of the medium. A second symposium was held in 2014, reviewing what had happened in the field since the first gathering. Throughout this time, RAM exhibitions have included works made of polymer, either from the collection or as loans. In addition, several artworks have been gifted to the collection, including jewelry, furniture, and sculpture.

## Recent Acquisitions

Artworks are offered to a museum from a variety of different sources—it is important to highlight this as it underscores the relationships a museum has with a broad range of individuals and, at times, other organizations. While the majority of work gifted in 2011 came through the PCP, recent acquisitions have been donated by private collectors as well as the artists themselves.

- **Maggie Maggio** and **Melanie West** gifted large organic neckpieces—different from work already in RAM's holdings—after being featured in the 2014 RAM exhibition **(in)Organic**. **Wendy Wallin Malinow** offered a neckpiece, bracelet, and two watercolors after her work was showcased in the companion exhibition, **(in)Organic: Labs**.
- Works from both **Steven Ford** and **David Forlano** and **Cynthia Toops** were given by both **Gail M. Brown** and **Trish Rodimer**, donors who have given dozens of other works, mainly art jewelry.
- **Laura Oskowitz** expanded RAM's holdings of **Pier Voulkos** by donating a table that Voulkos made with her partner, **Daniel Peters**. In color and techniques utilized, this piece matches a box that was given to RAM earlier by a different donor.
- **Sienna DeGovia's** polymer deer head that looks as if it is a centerpiece for a banquet table was borrowed for the 2016 RAM exhibition **Go for Baroque: Opulence and Excess in Contemporary Art**. The artist and her gallery, **Klowden Mann**, arranged for the work to be given to RAM. It is an example of a piece made by an artist who is not traditionally known for using polymer.
- The first two-dimensional polymer piece came to RAM in 2017 through the artist, **Fran Abrams**.

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- Also in 2017, **Elissa Farrow-Savos** donated a figural polymer sculpture that addresses her relationship with her mother. Because it incorporates text, it is being featured in the RAM exhibition, ***Text Message: Words and Letters in Contemporary Art***, on view January 21 through May 6, 2018.

As mentioned previously, works will also be added when possible as purchases through a fund established to support polymer art in RAM's holdings. **Jeffrey Lloyd Dever's** teapot, ***Seeking Solace***, is the first piece purchased through the Polymer Art Acquisition and Care Fund. This fund can be used for the "care and feeding" of polymer pieces already in the collection or utilized to acquire new works that expand the dimension of polymer holdings at RAM.

## Glossary

**Backfill** – technique that involves carving a piece of cured polymer and filling the negative space with a different color of polymer.

**Canes** – long cylindrical rolls or logs of polymer that contain a pattern throughout.

**Cane Laminating** – the creation of a cane from many layers of polymer.

**Fiber Techniques** – a number of processes used in working with fiber have been brought into the fold of polymer. For example, **Steven Ford and David Forlano** have incorporated **ikat**—a Japanese textile weaving technique that uses resist dyeing (similar to tie-dyeing) to color either the warp or weft threads. Also, **Nan Roche** adapted chaining, more commonly used with metalwork but which treats the strands of material as "fibers," using extruded polymer strands and creating loop-in-loop pieces.

**FIMO®** – brand of polymer clay made by German company STAEDTLER. The product is named after doll maker **Käthe Kruse's** daughter, **Sophia**, known as "Fifi," who developed it.

**Imitative** – polymer that has been manipulated to resemble a different material, like wood, ivory, or metal.

**Inclusions** – powders, fibers, or papers that are added to the polymer to create color or texture. Inclusions can also be used to alter the properties of the polymer itself.

**Marquetry** – the application of veneer to a structure, often furniture.

**McCaw Caning Technique** – process created by **Sandra McCaw**, which involves several color gradients of polymer stacked and cut repeatedly. The stacks are then reduced and divided to create intricately detailed canes.

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**Micromosaic** – similar to the Bargello technique in needlework, a micromosaic employs unusually small, often oblong **tesserae** (a small block of stone, tile, glass, or other material used in the construction of a mosaic).

**Millefiori** – also known as cane work, millefiori is an Italian glassmaking technique that has been adapted for use with polymer. Meaning “thousand flowers,” this technique involves joining canes to produce intricately detailed canes that are often cut to make beads.

**Mokume Gane** – a Japanese metalsmithing technique appropriated by polymer artists. Thin sheets of polymer are stacked or layered to form a “loaf.” The loaf is then punctured, cut, and distressed to mix up the layers. Sheets are then cut horizontally from the top, revealing a distinctive pattern.

**Nonpareils** – term used within polymer to describe tiny balls of polymer used as a pebble texture. Resembles the decorative sugar candies of the same name.

**Photo Transfer** – process for placing a printed image onto polymer. The image is printed with a laser printer or photocopier, and then placed on the polymer. The polymer is baked for about five minutes, after which the paper is removed. Then, the polymer is baked completely.

**Premo®** – brand of polymer clay made by **Sculpey®**, specifically designed for artists.

**Silkscreen** – a printing technique that uses a woven mesh with an ink-blocking stencil to either block ink, or allow it through the mesh and onto the object being printed. A **roller**, or **brayer**, is used to ensure that the ink is spread evenly across the surface.

**Skinner Blend** – a mixing process developed by **Judith Skinner** that creates a smooth linear gradient between two or more colors.

**Veneer** – a thin layer of decorative material that covers another, less decorative material.

## Tools

**Bead Roller** – two curved plates that slide back and forth to create uniformly sized beads.

**Brayer** – printmaking roller tool used to smooth or flatten polymer.

**Convection Oven** – a type of oven that uses moving hot air to heat the object. This type of heating maintains a more even temperature throughout the oven, and is the preferred type of oven for curing polymer.

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**Diluent** – a compound added to polymer to make it more soft and flexible.

**Extruder/Clay Gun** – tool that applies pressure to a ball of polymer, forcing it through a shaped die at the end.

**Pasta Machine** – kitchen tool that has been appropriated by polymer artists to roll out even sheets of polymer. Also used for conditioning, the machine helps align the polymer molecules, strengthening the final piece.

**Push Mold** – a negative shape in which polymer is pressed to create a positive shape in the polymer.