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RAM Showcase:

CYNTHIA TOOPS

June 10 – November 21, 2026

Originally from Hong Kong, Seattle-based Cynthia Toops (1956–) is a polymer art pioneer who has been pushing the boundaries of the medium since the 1980s. Toops moved to the US in 1975 where she earned her BA in biology and attended a year of graduate school at Drake University before switching her focus to art. In 1983, she received a BFA in printmaking from the University of Washington, Seattle.

Toops first began working with polymer in 1986 after encountering it during a visit to Hong Kong. At this time, polymer—a workable plastic-based compound used to make modeling clays, such as Fimo® or Sculpey®—was just beginning to emerge as a craft medium, which meant that Toops could experiment and create her own rules. The low cost of material and tools made the medium accessible for Toops who had just begun her art career. Over the last 40 years, she has used polymer to create beads, pendants, necklaces, and bracelets.

In 1992, Toops developed the micromosaic technique, which pieces together tiny shards of polymer into figurative or abstract compositions. The technique draws from historical examples such as Huichol Indian seed beads and ancient Roman micro-mosaics, but with a contemporary spin. In her compositions, Toops utilizes a wide variety of polymer colors and has been described as “mixing polymer clay like paint.” She then rolls the polymer into threads which she slices and uses to form the tile beads which make up the image. In her recent work, Toops has used glass threads which she pulls herself to create similar micromosaic compositions.

Her distinctive style draws inspiration from everyday events or objects, botanical subjects, folk art, and the cultural jewelry and ancient beads which she collects. While Toops works on her own, she also often collaborates with her husband, Dan Adams, who creates the glass beads and components featured in some pieces.

Toops is the recent recipient of the 2025 SOLA Prize—an award for women in Washington state who have dedicated at least 25 years to creating art. Her work can be found in collections nationally and internationally, including the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery, Washington DC; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; and the Swiss National Museum (Koch Collection), Zurich, Switzerland. She is represented at RAM by 13 works, including three in collaboration with Dan Adams.