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Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads
October 21, 2011 – February 5, 2012

Introduction
RAM is pleased to announce the museum's recent commitment to establishing a permanent collection of polymer jewelry, beads and sculptural objects. As part of this commitment, the museum has organized ***Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads***, a large group exhibition that emphasizes the development of polymer as an expressive medium for artwork in recent decades.

Featuring over 200 objects, including furniture, vessels and adornment, ***Terra Nova*** reflects a short but sweet period in the history of creative endeavors. While this exhibition debuts a large portion of work RAM received from the **Polymer Collection Project (PCP)**, it is also comprised of works borrowed from artists, private lenders, and galleries.

The exhibition highlights advances in the use of polymer as an artistic material over the last 30 years and forecasts potential for the future. Offering an outline of what has happened to date ***Terra Nova*** also identifies a group of artists who simultaneously have embraced the medium and found recognition in the larger contemporary craft arena—artists we are recognizing as **Boundary Breakers**. The **Boundary Breakers** include: **Bonnie Bishoff and J. M. Syron, Jeffrey Lloyd Dever, Kathleen Dustin, Steven Ford and David Forlano, Tory Hughes, Cynthia Toops, Pier Voulkos, and Elise Winters.**

While the works of these artists are most prominently featured, pieces by other artists working in polymer and included in RAM's permanent collection are also on display, emphasizing the depth and variety of work that has been produced.

History of Polymer
Polymer (from Greek, *poly* meaning "many" and *meros* meaning "part") is a mix of microscopic polyvinyl chloride (the material from which PVC pipe is made) particles suspended within a plasticizer. Colorants and other compounds are added to change the color and to enhance pliability and curing.

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. 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.

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"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."

–From 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."

–From 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 as a potential recipient of work from the PCP, RAM began to envision a future filled with more artworks made of **polymer**. The exhibition and accompanying book are the product of many conversations with Winters and others who have been working with the material, both actually and theoretically. RAM accepted the largest number of works from the PCP and, in doing so, established a holding of national importance that further underscores the museum's role as a leader in collecting and exhibiting polymer art.

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.

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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. See **Ford** and **Forlano's** *Ikat Cane*. 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. See **Nan Roche**, *Loop-in-Loop Necklace*.

FIMO – brand of polymer clay made by German company STAEDLTLER. The product is named after Kathe Kruse's daughter, Sophia, known as "Fifi."

Imitative – polymer that has been manipulated to resemble a different material, like wood, ivory or metal. See **Tory Hughes**, *Orrery* and *Berber Queen* neckpieces.

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. See **Lindly Haunani**, *Crayon Lei in Oranges and Greens*.

Marquetry – the application of veneer to a structure, often furniture. See **Bonnie Bishoff and J. M. Syron**, *Meander Credenza*.

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. See **Sandra McCaw**, *Persian Cuff*.

Micromosaic – similar to the **Bargello technique** in needlework, a micromosaic employs unusually small, often oblong tesserae. See **Cynthia Toops**, *Story Time*.

Millefiore – also known as cane work, **millefiore** 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. See **Kathleen Dustin**, *Odalisque* and **Sarah Shriver**, *Fish Cane Polished Bracelet*.

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. Variations on this idea include **Tory Hughes**, *Reef Brooch* and **Nan Roche**, stamped *Animal Auguries*.

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. See **Amy Zinman**, *Guacamole Act*.

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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. The polymer is them baked completely. See **Tory Hughes**' postcards.

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. See **Gwen Gibson**, *Comic Book Bracelet*.

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

Veneer – a thin layer of decorative material that covers another, less decorative material. See **Pier Voulkos and Daniel Peters**, *Box with Pearlescent Veneers* and **Dan Cormier**, *Natalia Necklace*.

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.

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.