

Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads

RACHEL CARREN, BRUCE W. PEPICH,
AND LENA VIGNA. PUBLISHED BY THE
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BY DONALD FRIEDLICH

TERRA NOVA: Polymer Art at the Crossroads, the Racine Art Museum's (RAM) first venture into self-publishing, is a beautifully produced and elegantly designed hard-cover book that serves both as a catalog for RAM's exhibition of the same name and as an autonomous survey of polymer art as a medium. Three well-written and insightful essays effectively illuminate the field in general and also contextualize the objects in the portfolio portion of the book.

The first essay, "Forging a Unique Path: The History of Polymer Art," by art historian Rachel Carren, traces the early development of polymer clay in the late 1930s by a German plastics manufacturer.

Carren goes on to document the two most prominent brands of polymer: FIMO and Sculpy, both introduced in the late 1960s. The material was used only sporadically in Europe and the United States until the 1980s, when it surged in popularity due to its very modest equipment demands, broad technical accessibility, and vibrant color palette. As the use of polymer grew, so did the quality and inventiveness of the artworks made of it.

Polymer's remarkable growth in the United States was greatly facilitated by the generous sharing of information and the proliferation of an extensive network of guilds and workshops. As a result, the field of polymer enthusiasts grew into a close-knit community.

Carren's essay concludes with an in-depth assessment of the historical impact of some of the prominent polymer artists including Pier Voulkos, Elise Winters, the team of Steven Ford and David Forlano, Cynthia Toops, Kathleen Dustin, Tory Hughes, and others.

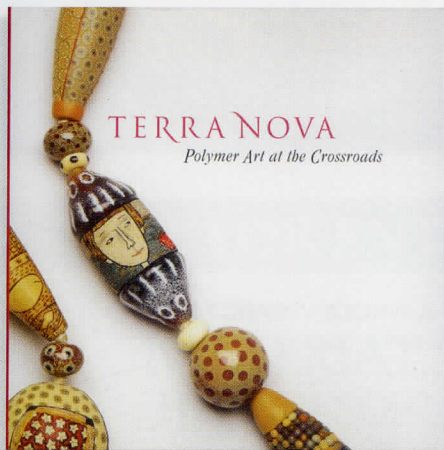
The second text takes the form of an interview between Elise Winters and RAM's Executive Director and Curator of Collections Bruce W. Pepich. Winters has been central to many of the seminal

exhibitions and events that have combined to advance polymer art, and she was of paramount importance to both the *Terra Nova* book and exhibition. This inspiring and enlightening interview should be required reading for anyone who wishes to advocate for a particular art medium. It is a brilliant case study of someone who has been an artist, teacher, collector, curator, fundraiser, and visionary. Passionate and tenacious, Winters founded the Polymer Collection Project (PCP) with the initial objective of buying, as she puts it, "one really stunning example from each of the artists whose work I loved." Later she was joined by Nan Roche, then Lindly Haunani and Carol Watkins, who together assembled, catalogued and documented a staggering collection of 2,000 objects.

Winters next set out to educate museum curators about the medium and its history, and then to place the work in the permanent collections of those curators' institutions. The largest group of 180 pieces was given to RAM, formed the basis for the *Terra Nova* exhibition, and established RAM as the major center for polymer art. The Mingei International Museum in San Diego received 52 works, and another 41 went to the Newark Museum. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York also acquired pieces.

The third essay, "A Visit to New Territory: A Conversation about the Polymer Landscape," is a dialogue between Bruce Pepich and Lena Vigna, the RAM curator of *Terra Nova*. As Vigna says, "We see this book and its related exhibition as a chance to set the stage for what comes next for polymer as an artistic medium. Instead of a traditional essay, we decided to have a curatorial conversation about polymer and where the field is at aesthetically and philosophically today. In the sidebar commentary, we have invited curators from the museums that have received pieces from the Polymer Collection Project (PCP) to also share their thoughts."

The conversation between Pepich and Vigna delivers as outlined above and the addition of perspectives from the curators Rob Sidner, Ulysses Dietz, Ursula Ilse-Neuman, Yvonne J. Markowitz, and Elisabeth Agro greatly enriches the already excellent discourse.



The first section of the portfolio portion of the book, *Boundary Breakers*, provides a comprehensive look at six distinguished polymer artists—Jeffrey Lloyd Dever, Kathleen Dustin, Tory Hughes, Cynthia Toops, Pier Voulkos, and Elise Winters—as well as the collaborative teams of Steven Ford and David Forlano, and furniture makers Bonnie Bishoff and J. M. Syron. Each artist, or team, is afforded a beautifully designed ten-page color sub-section that includes brief commentary from the artists as well as resume details. The book's second section, *Polymer Collection Project: A Selected Portfolio*, follows a more familiar format, showing one image each of twenty additional makers.

In craft publications, it is unusual to see the dual approach taken in *Terra Nova*, which so clearly emphasizes some artists over others. Polymer is thought of as an especially democratic medium and the editors' highly selective choices may have hurt some feelings and opened them up to charges of elitism. So be it. The reality is that all artwork isn't created equal. Some is more important and influential. While some artists work with a particular medium only occasionally, others make a lifetime commitment to the material and consistently produce excellent results. In the case of *Terra Nova*, I think the editors'

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approach was unerringly appropriate. They have produced a book that is not only beautiful and useful, but one that will lend credibility to and advance the field as a whole in the years to come.

Like many new mediums, polymer has received more than its share of derision, as has its culturally related cousin, precious metal clay. Admittedly, the great majority of the makers using these materials are hobbyists, but no one can deny that these crafters have hugely expanded the number of people using their hands to make jewelry. It's a cultural phenomenon that is, as Martha Stewart likes to say, "a good thing." As this book deftly illustrates, serious artists have over time explored polymer, pushed its boundaries, and finally created exciting new work. Perhaps someday we will learn as a field to be open and patient with new mediums, and be secure in the knowledge that in time great work will result.

Donald Friedlich is a studio jeweler and former SNAG President living in Madison, Wisconsin.



ELISE WINTERS
Chrysalis Brooches, 1996–2000
 Polymer and metal
 From 3 1/2 x 7/8 x 1/8 inches
 to 5 x 3/4 x 1/8 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Elise Winters and
 Sherwood Rudin

ELISE WINTERS
Sweet Flair Brooch, 2002
 Polymer, acrylic paint, and mica
 2 1/2 x 2 x 1/8 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Elise Winters and
 Sherwood Rudin

ELISE WINTERS
Rail Collar, 2011
 Polymer, acrylic paint,
 steel, and magnets
 10 x 10 x 1 1/2 inches
 Collection of the Artist

