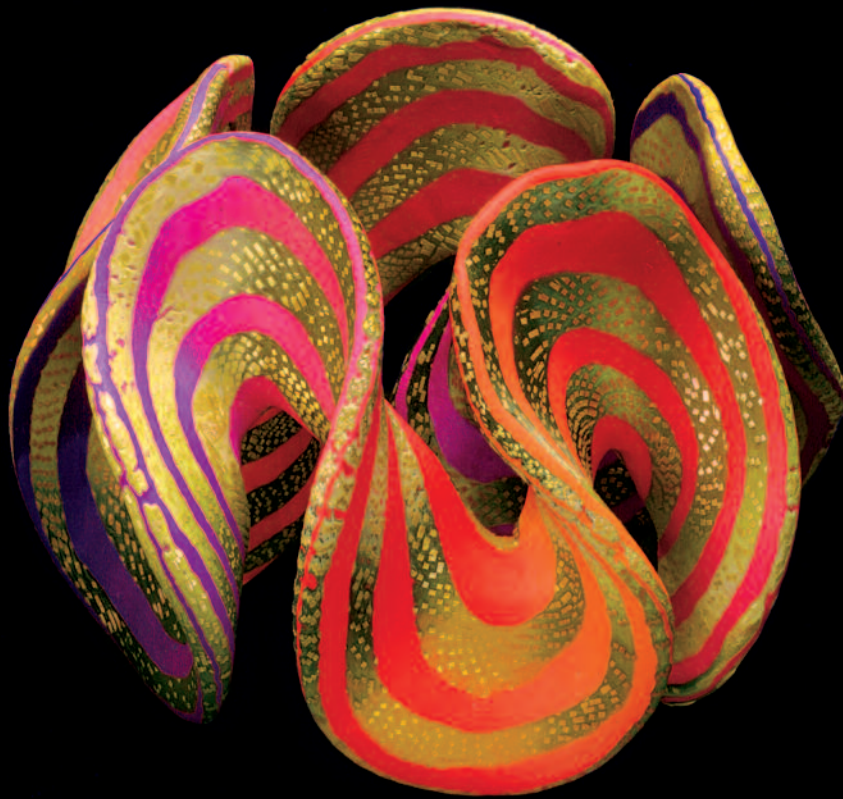


ELISE WINTERS

THE ESSENTIAL LIGHTNESS OF BEING



Opposite: RUFFLE CUFF IN RED of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 8.0 x 10.0 x 10.0 centimeters, 2008. Photograph by Robert K. Liu/Ornament. PENTALA BROOCH of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 7.8 x 8.0 x 0.7 centimeters, 2006. Photograph by Hap Sakwa. SHELL BROOCH of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 3.5 x 5.0 x 1.0 centimeters, 2006. Photograph by Ralph Gabriner.



A joyous expression spreads over her face as Elise Winters talks about her latest polymer clay jewelry. “I have never been this happy about what I’m doing, as excited and energized and charged up. I’ve always loved working, but the work I’m doing now feels like I found my voice and it’s flowing off my fingers,” she states. It is easy to see why she is satisfied—there is an energy of serenity in the work, but also a punch of drama; her polymer pieces are the kind of jewelry that gets noticed and begs to be touched. Winters’s color choices are stunning, and there is a certain quality of light that seems to illuminate from within. This shimmering characteristic calls to mind the radiant sunlight of early dawn or dusk, so loved by photographers because it draws out exaggerated shadows and highlights, leaving everything with a subtle, golden glow about it. While often abstract, the artist’s works are allusive and evocative of nature in this way, without directly referencing any particular shape, color or pattern found in the natural world.

Color, light, reflectivity, and translucence have always been of great interest to Winters. While pursuing her first master’s degree, she focused on translucent ceramics, experimenting with the thickness of clay. When she began teaching photography, she took a second master’s degree in media studies. Her final project could have been in any format, but she chose a multimedia presentation called *Morning Light*, about the sun rising over New York City, near her New Jersey

home. This fascination with light and color is all part of the process of discovery Winters feels is synonymous with being an artist. While she was not necessarily conscious of this unifying theme throughout her work, it all came together when she found polymer clay.

“It was the right material at the right time. The color and light element, which I had a full command of through teaching photography and having studied it, got overlaid onto the malleable wonder of clay and, of course, polymer clay let me do all the things that ceramic clay did, in a setting which wasn’t time sensitive.” Winters began exploring the medium at a time when there was little information or classes available on the subject, taking cues from the early masters in the field, such as Tory Hughes, Cynthia Toops, Pier Voukos, Kathleen Dustin, Steven Ford, and David Forlano.

It was not long before Winters found herself among these same masters in polymer clay. Before she left teaching to devote herself to polymer work, Winters set the lofty but significant goal of raising the status of polymer clay in the art world—after buying a pair of Voukos’s earrings for a mere sixty dollars. “At that point to make money it was better to stay in teaching, do the work I loved and if anything, try to cultivate experiences,” she remembers. “I could show at this show and be cranking out twelve dollar earrings, but for what? I was making a living, I didn’t need to sell twelve dollar earrings; what I needed to do was to build the quality of the work and the quality of polymer at the time, so that there



RED RUFFLE RUCHE of polymer, acrylic, glazes, crazed acrylic, 5.0 x 21.0 x 21.5 centimeters, 2009. Photograph by Robert K. Liu/Ornament.



ELISE WINTERS shown wearing Red Ruffle Ruche. Photograph by Robert K. Liu/Ornament.

Opposite: TROPIC BRIO NECKLACE of polymer, acrylic, glazes, crazed acrylic, 7.0 x 51.0 x 1.5 centimeters, 2008. Photograph by Hap Sakwa.

was a point at which I could, if I ever chose to leave teaching, actually be able to make a little money at it.”

One of the first fruitions of this goal was the Masters Invitational Polymer Clay Exhibition and Sale of 1997. At the time, few in the art world had heard of polymer clay and those who had did not associate it with any serious artistic output. Twelve masters of polymer were invited to the month-long MIPCES exhibition, under the requirement that they attend the show on opening night. These twelve masters were encouraged to submit names of other polymer artists with whom they would feel comfortable exhibiting. Winters’s name was on the list, and she quickly began formulating ideas for the show. Her final product was a series of miniature fans, each done in a different technique as homage to the groundbreaking polymer artists featured in the exhibit. MIPCES was a huge success and played an important role in putting polymer clay on the artistic map. “At the end of this event, I felt I really had become an artist,” Winters says. “It was the first time I could use that word to describe myself. I called up my principal and said ‘I’m taking a leave of absence.’ I finished out the school year and stayed at home and worked for a year.”

Winters concentrated on crafting her aesthetic and skills, but also contributed larger innovations during this important time of discovery for the relatively new medium. Her sculptural fans were a demonstration of the ability to work polymer into paper-thin sheets and have it retain its strength. This innovation opened many different doors for different artists, from Cynthia Toops’s Rolodex bracelets and signature micro-mosaics, to Kathleen Amt’s book pendants. Winters also famously created the tube-bead cutter, based on an early model from Laura Liska. The cutter, which slices heishi-style beads, is still an important part of

Winters's tool set and is used for fashioning polymer beads for her popular sixty-four-inch-long tube bead necklaces.

"I have a very scientific, engineering and problem-solving nature," Winters says. "Besides the tools, early on I came up with a number of solutions to problems in the 1990s when people were acquiring skills. There were a number of things that I took as a mission that I wasn't just going to do empirically. I did extensive research in glue and adhesives because I was having problems with findings staying attached." One area of research that would play a vital role in her artistic journey was the use of paints on polymer surfaces. In a ceramic class, Winters learned a technique whereby a thick vessel of soft clay is put under a heat lamp so the outer skin begins to dry. As the surface dries, the clay can be cut into, pinched and pushed into a sort of relief of different textures and patterns. Later, when Winters was well into her polymer career, she employed a similar technique where she painted on raw clay to achieve the reflective qualities she prefers, and then ran it through the pasta machine (a popular tool for polymer artists) for a crackle effect. Called her crazed acrylic method, Winters uses this technique almost exclusively to this day.

When she realized this technique could work, "it was like a light went off and I connected with that concept of the brittle skin on the soft material. Fortunately, the first paints I picked up worked. It turns out almost no other acrylic paints do. I started experimenting and building tools to cut through, score and pierce both the paint and the clay. I developed this whole technique of cutting through paint and clay so I could control the patterning and the way the crackle would go. I also began exploring the ways of layering clay and cutting through it, backing it and pulling it out so that you would be building

it from behind." Winters spent five years researching different types of paint and their compatibility with polymer, her own skills advancing all the while. In her current work, she paints multiple layers of acrylic and interference paints and glazes, cutting away to reveal patterns and textures. As she sculpts her organic shapes, the paint on the surface follows the curves and bends of the clay, giving greater depth to her colors and forms.

Much of her work is in series, each piece typically inspiring a new direction. "I do designs that are more or less production, but every piece comes out of me. You could never make something exactly the same every time because there are vagaries in the way the paint falls, the color, and because everything is formed by hand," she says. "I wouldn't be doing production work if I didn't enjoy it. I love color and light and elements of form; it becomes an easy format for me to experiment with those qualities that I am interested in without having to redesign some kind of structure every time. The tube bead necklaces I make are a really big seller for me and people would call that production but I'm always experimenting with different color combinations. It becomes a canvas for me."

This natural growth and evolution is evident in the various manifestations Winters's designs take on. For example, her boa bangles—so-named by her husband Woody Ruskin because of their resemblance to a boa constrictor that just finished a seven-course meal, plates included—have undergone a few designs. In one of their first incarnations, the boa bangles were a continuous circle, with random bulges in the luminescent striped pattern. In a more recent state, the boa bangles feature frosted bands in different accent colors encircling the bracelet's thinnest parts. The ruffle series





designs progressed as Winters became bolder in her manipulation of the polymer, stretching it further and gaining a better understanding of the material's limitations. In an early rendition of the ruffle necklace, numerous ruffles in cool blues and greens are strung together on wire cables. Unsatisfied, Winters kept exploring, eventually designing neckpieces that are one solid form of ruffles floating around the wearer's neck, with a self-hinging clasp in the polymer itself. These same rhythmic ruffles grace the bracelets and brooches in the series, their implied movement mimicking a rippling river, or the energy of a spiraling fern.

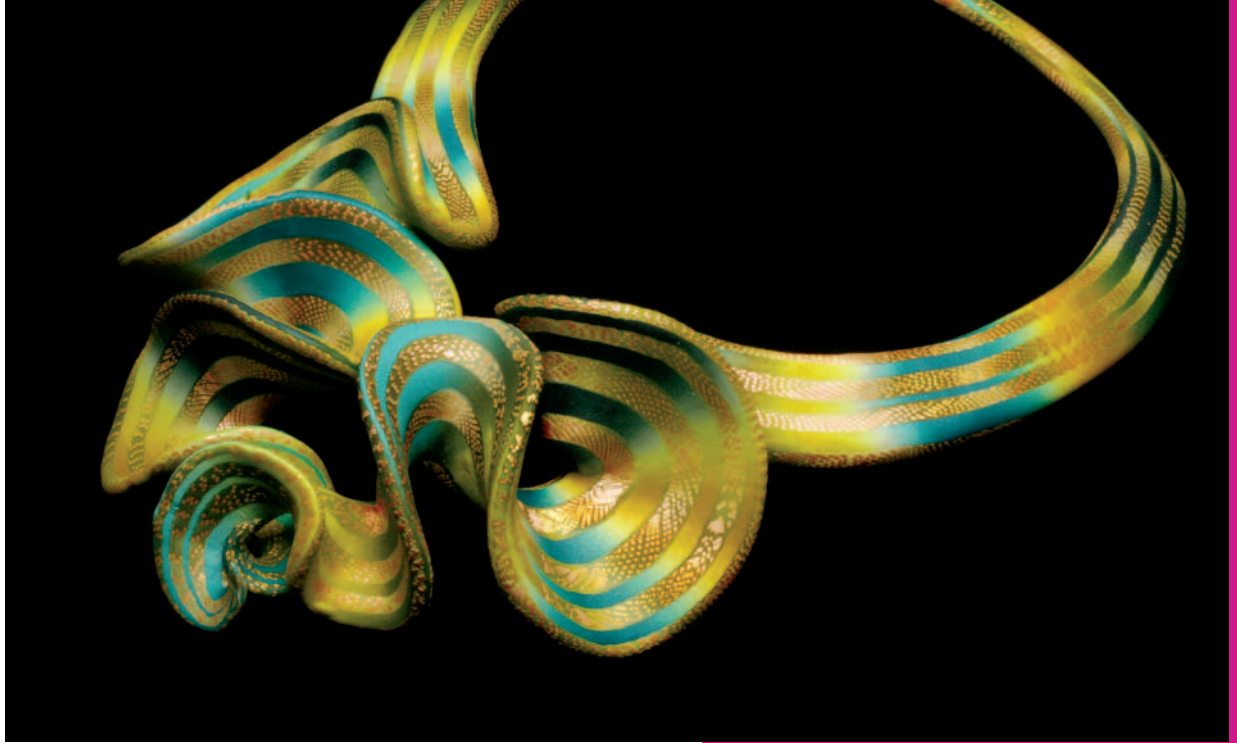
Growing up, Winters lost her father to pancreatic cancer just as he was about to retire, something the artist credits as her inspiration to follow her heart and create work she loves. "One of the greatest gifts my father gave me was an understanding that you don't wait for tomorrow if you can do what you want today," Winters says. "At a certain point I understood that I needed to be doing my artwork even if it meant sacrificing some financial issues for myself. I could have retired without penalty at fifty-five, but I decided to retire earlier than that." In the year she would have retired had she stayed, Winters was accepted into the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show. One month before the show, she was diagnosed with cancer. "All I could think was what a blessing. I walked into that show and thought I never in my life dreamed I would be in a place like this with my artwork. I knew I was going home on the Tuesday after the show to surgery and I thought if I die on the table, I've been in heaven already. It was such a gift that my father gave me in that way."

Once she returned to work following chemotherapy, Winters had a difficult time focusing. After struggling for some time, she realized the chemotherapy had left her less able to multitask or sort through the various stages of work all being

done on one table. She completely reorganized her studio, breaking the small space up into four separate stations—one for paper, polymer, color mixing, and metal, which she incorporates into her jewelry, mostly in cast or anticlastic-formed gold, gold-plated or vermeil elements. The warm hues complement her color palette of vibrant oranges, luscious pinks and purples, and calming blues and greens better than silver. Another shift following chemotherapy was in her color mixing. Before she headed to surgery, knowing she could not do any physically strenuous activities afterward, she decided to premix her colors, working her gradations of hues into little loaves from which she could take slices. "I now use this all the time," she says. "It has spurred some new creative directions for me because I now mix and match color combinations, or I may be experimenting with color in different ways because these things have been pre-made."

Winters is a valuable asset to the polymer clay field not only for her pioneering aesthetic and techniques, but also for her role as spokesperson for the medium. When she collected slides, print materials, artist statements, and letters for the MIPCES show years ago, Winters realized that her efforts would not culminate with the exhibition, but were rather the beginning of a much larger project. Winters knew one day the archival nature of the materials she was collecting would be valuable to art historians. "I had been archiving slides, catalogs and all kinds of ephemera about everything that had been happening for fifteen years, under the theory that someone else would write the book. There were a lot of important early artists who were not working anymore who had no web presence at all and I thought the material needed to start getting out there." The materials became the foundation for another of Winters's greatest contributions to the polymer clay world, her Polymer Art Archive.





An online site, the Polymer Art Archive is designed to be the prime resource for information about the progression of polymer clay as an artform. The archive features stories and histories of events, exhibits and artists working in the field. Intended to be a historical record, the site also traces more abstract growth in polymer, such as how early artists were borrowing and sharing innovations, then adding their own interpretations. Set up as a blog, the site allows Winters to bring in first-person commentary from other artists, to add, modify and correct information as she pleases, and to do so with no limits. As the site expands, the blogging software creates its own index of the material, making it easily accessible. Winters has also committed herself to securing a museum space for a polymer study center, which will house many of the materials and a portion of the two thousand polymer pieces she has been collecting over the years. She hopes to have a commitment from a museum soon, and to start working on an accompanying catalog, which will pull largely from the archive site. The remaining pieces in the collection that do not find homes in museums will be auctioned off to subsidize the archive and collection efforts.

It seems everything Winters touches has the same golden shimmer of her polymer work. Whether it is field research, personal expression, or elevating the status of a medium that grows more popular each day, Elise Winters is a fine example of the kind of success and gratification that comes with following your dreams. ☞

SUGGESTED READING

- Allen, Jamey D.** *Five Artists-Five Directions: Working in Polymer Clay*. Rockville, Maryland: Flower Valley Press, 1995.
- Ashcroft, Pierrette Brown and Lindly Haunani.** *Artists at Work: Polymer Clay Comes of Age*. Rockville, Maryland: Flower Valley Press, 1996.
- Finnerty, Bernadette.** "No Doubts," *The Crafts Report*, February 2006: 24-25.
- Roche, Nan.** *The New Clay*. Rockville, Maryland: Flower Valley Press, 1991.
- Winters, Elise.** "Artist Statement," *Ornament Magazine*, Volume 26, No. 2 (2002/3): 30-31.



CITRON DOUBLE RUFFLE NECKPIECE of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 16.0 x 17.0 x 5.3 centimeters, 2009. *Photograph by Robert K. Liu/Ornament.* **COOL JEWEL RUFFLE BROOCH** of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 9.0 x 8.5 x 3.5 centimeters, 2009. *Photograph by Hap Sakwa.*

Opposite: RUFFLE BROOCHES, DETAILS, of polymer, acrylic, glazes; crazed acrylic, 2007-2008. *Photograph by Hap Sakwa.*