

Carol Blackburn

Where were you born? What was it like growing up over there?

I was born in Heswall, a village in Wirral, Cheshire, near Liverpool. I remember carefree days playing in fields and dressing up in whatever old adult clothes and fabrics we could find.

What kind of study did you take?

I have to admit that I didn't excel at anything at school but I enjoyed games, gymnastics and art and for some reason I liked algebra but maths and cookery were my weakest points and that still seems to be how it is today. From high school I went to the local art school in Chester. Here students were encouraged to try different media. I chose textiles and embroidery which I studied for my first degree before gaining a post-graduate degree at the Royal College of Art in London. My machine knitting interest began by finding a discarded machine in a builder's skip. I repaired the machine but soon bought a new one and began working full time designing knitting garments.

Did your family have any influence on your arty way of thinking?

There were lots of children to play with in the village where I grew up but I could enjoy a whole day on my own as long as I had paper, pencils, crayons, a pair of scissors and glue or sticky tape. I can't actually remember my parents praising any of my artistic endeavours!

What do you do for a living?

Before I discovered polymer clay I was knitting fabric swatches as ideas for knitwear manufacturers. My designs were sold through agents in New York and Paris. It sounds glamorous but I had to constantly create new designs for each season using inspirational themed mood boards and the forecasted colours. This was always working a year in advance to the high street shops.

Tell us about your family.

My mother was from a tailoring family and made most of my clothes and my father was in the cotton business. He travelled to the southern United States several times and sent home wonderful picture postcards which I still have.



How did you come to be a polymer clay artist? What was your first acquaintance with polymer clay?

I was a machine knitter for many years selling my fabric designs through agents. Each knitted piece had to have certain elements such as an interesting stitch, some decoration and often beading for women's wear. It was at a bead fair that I saw a stand selling beads I hadn't seen before. The maker told me they were of polymer clay and I was fascinated. I booked a class with her for the next month. Following the class I bought a pasta machine and an oven. Gradually my 5 knitting machines were packed away to make space for my new hobby. This became my full time passion!

Tell us about your studio.

My workroom/studio is in south London and has an inspiring view of the river Thames. I've watched many new buildings go up and as one evolved, a pointed bullet shape, affectionately known as the Gherkin, I found myself hand rolling lots of pointed oval beads!

What is your favourite time of day?

I like the early morning and I'd like to say I'm an early riser but I don't often succeed. I seem to wake up late at night when most people go to bed and if I'm on my own I'll work into the small hours. I have a piece of paper and pencil by the bed in case I think of something during the night otherwise I tend to forget it by morning.

What is the main inspiration for your designs? Did you take classes?

Inspiration can come from anywhere. Often it will be the clay itself that inspires me. One of my best designs is what others have called my Moebius pieces. These happened via my recycling efforts. I had saved large plastic milk bottles that I cut the tops off and use as storage containers for poly clay things. I had more than I needed for storage boxes and I thought there must be a way of cutting and bending the plastic into curved shapes and threading them to create a necklace. I made a necklace and then thought I could do this in polymer. I already had a Skinner blend in brown to white and so my version of the Moebius came into being. I will travel anywhere to learn from the best people and I am booked to do a class with Jeff Dever in the USA later this year.

Describe how you evolved into your current style.

Just recently my textile background has begun to re-emerge and I am





fascinated by patterns and how they can repeat and fit together. Just at the moment I am working with a classical guitar maker who wants to inlay his work with my designs in polymer.

What is your favourite colour?

I have two favourite colours, green and purple. The art director for my book opened my eyes to green with all its variations from lemon green through to blue green. Purple goes with so many colours and I love the two together! Recently, when I sorted out the family home, I found my junior school gym shoe bag from when I was about 8 or 9 years old. It was purple with embroidered yellow & blue birds on. I also chose purple for my school name tags, so I must have liked purple for a long time.

What medium do you prefer to work with?

For me it has to be polymer, polymer, polymer in any shape or form. It's just the best stuff and a wonderful chance to have fun 'playing and creating'.

What brands clay do you use?

I mainly use Fimo as this is the clay most likely to be in an art store in the UK. It was also the clay used at my first class in polymer. However there are more online suppliers in the UK now. I use Premo clay for the mica shift effect and Premo translucent clay as I get the best results with these.

Do you have a favourite tool?

The ripple blade is my favourite tool at the moment. It can be used as a texture tool, for cutting into a layered stack to reveal the ripple effect and for cutting wavy lines.

Do you have a Tip or Trick for our readers?

Tip 1. When I'm rolling pale or white clay through the pasta machine I first use kitchen paper to clean the rollers then I roll a piece of translucent clay several times through, all along the rollers. A piece about a 4cms ball is enough and shows if dirt is picked up. I can use it many times till the clay is dirty. The translucent clay leaves the rollers clean.

Tip 2. I use an old 1.5 volt battery laid between the pasta machine rollers to reduce the width of a sheet of clay. Use sticky tape to hold it in position.

Tip 3. This isn't really a tip just a suggestion as to how I work. I used to have a very large work table and I pushed a day's work to one side each day until it was totally full at the end of the week and I couldn't find anything. Now I have a smaller table and I have to keep it tidy each day.

Do you have a favourite weblink to share with our readers?

My favourite polymer website has to be Cynthia Tinapple's Polymer Clay Daily www.polymerclaydaily.com. It's so varied and something for everyone.

What are your goals in polymer clay?

My goals are to continue promoting polymer clay through teaching and demonstrating and to see this exciting clever stuff accepted by the craft shops and galleries as a serious medium.

Tell us about you offering workshops and jewellery classes? Do you exhibit your work?

I've teamed up with an event organiser Rebecca Thickbroom of www.Clectic-Events.co.uk to run a series of one day workshops in London with 20 students. Our first of three this year was in May on making bangles and the next is on the ripple blade and the third is extrusions with 3 planned for next year. I'm exhibiting at 'Woman Creative' in Georgia USA. And whenever I can I wear pieces I've made.

What has been your greatest achievement in polymer clay?

My book 'How to Make Polymer Clay Beads' has been one of my greatest polymer clay achievements. It was a learning curve as I was fairly new to the material and new to using computers. The other achievement is starting the London Polymer Clay Group in 2007. In May this year we celebrated our 4th birthday and now have over 80 people on the membership list.

Can you tell us your weirdest, best or most beautiful dream? Still a dream, or did it come true?

Just before one workshop I dreamt that the sheets of clay I rolled in class were swallowed inside the pasta machine. Luckily it didn't come true!

