



Moebius Necklace



Bargello Bangles



Coloured Cones

Carol Blackburn

Tell me about your background Carol, what did you study at university, how did you come to work with polymer clay?

After experimenting with various media at art school I decided to follow textiles. At Manchester School of Art the emphasis was on embroidery and experimentation was always encouraged. After two years post-graduate study of stained glass and environmental media at the Royal College of Art, I returned to textiles as a knitwear designer.

I produced 'swatches', sample pieces made on my knitting machines. I had agents in New York and in London who sold the designs to manufactures and to fashion houses. Each swatch had to combine key ingredients such as the forecasted colours, texture, welts and, sometimes, beadwork decoration. And every one had to be different – no buyer wanted to see two similar swatches in my portfolio for what if a competitor bought the other one?

I'd always been fascinated by beads, tassels and fringes and it was while looking for unusual beads for my swatches that I visited a bead fair. Here I saw beads of an unfamiliar material – polymer clay. I wanted to know more about the material and how the beads were made. This was in 2002 and as I didn't own a computer, there was little chance of finding any information. So there and then I booked a one-to-one class with the bead maker.

I still attend workshops with polymer clay artists I admire. I enjoy learning or seeing a new technique or a better way of doing something.

Could you briefly describe the processes and techniques you use to create such intricate and delicate patterns.

Polymer clay, feels similar to Plasticine but it requires oven baking to become hard.

Sometimes we just call it 'Polymer' simply for short. It isn't a clay in the ceramic/pottery sense. Different coloured clays can be rolled and folded together and reduced in size without losing any clarity of image. The colours do not bleed during baking. It's not essential, but the tool that most polymer artists use is a pasta machine! It makes kneading and rolling the clay so much easier and quicker and rolls evenly thick sheets.

Although maths isn't one of my strong points, at the moment I am interested in mathematical patterns and interlinking network patterns. Polymer clay is perfect for these design, because an image

made from layers of contrasting colours can be stretched and reduced in size without the lines blurring. Think of seaside candy rock with the letters running from end to end. We call this cane making millifiori, from the glass makers.

Colour plays an important part in your work, what inspires your designs?

A trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico two years ago was a colour turning point for me. I had been using a lot of black and white in my work and seeing the colours in the landscape and in the art on sale there was inspirational. Before this trip I'd been rather intimidated about colour, but I saw colour combinations in the high desert landscape that I'd not thought of before. So, I decided to just have fun experimenting putting colours together. Mixing any two colours in polymer clay gave me a whole range of other colours. Sometimes the result is a variety of beautiful muted colours, as in my Coloured Cone beads, which are an exercise in mixing varying proportions of two colours.

With polymer clay there's no wastage, it doesn't dry out so there's no rush. This gives me the time to think and work carefully. Even if I think the colour I mix is ugly and unusable it isn't wasted as it can be used as a scrap core inside the next set of beads.

I find when I'm working with polymer clay unexpected accidents can result in leading me in a new direction. A deadline or an up-coming class or workshop will prod me to come up with something new to show students.

I take infinite time to get something perfectly made and finished but at the same time I love happenstance.

I've always got more ideas than there's time to explore. I guess it was the same in my knitting days when every design had to be followed by something different. I keep an Ideas book with jottings, I don't sit down and resolve a design on paper. I have to work with the actual material to develop a design in three dimensions. Ideas come from anywhere. A drain grid in the street can resemble a brooch, so I jot it down on a bit of paper and stick it into my ideas book later. Then I'll start thinking how I can translate this into polymer clay and which technique



Hexagon Bangles

will give me the effect I'm looking for. Frequently while working on one design the clay takes me in another direction. As there's no drying out of the clay I can leave the project to pursue the new idea and come back later to the original idea.

You have had a book published, how did that come about? What was involved in putting the book together? And what advice would you give other artists who would like to do something similar?

'How to Make Polymer Clay Beads' has been incredibly successful - I'm told it has sold over 70,000 copies worldwide. The publishers, Quarto, took a risk as it was my first book, but I had been suggested to them by one of their authors, Sue Heaser.

Writing the book was a learning curve for two reasons. I was fairly new to polymer clay and had much to learn so I learnt as I wrote. I was also new to computers so had to learn my way around the software and the computer.

The first thing was to produce sample pages showing how the book would look. The mock-up was shown at a book fair where A & C Black (UK) and Interweave(US) bought the concept.

I then got the 'green light' to write the book for a fixed fee - no royalties unfortunately. I was lucky in that the publisher's art director liked my work and lived nearby. She took a personal interest in the project and later came to several of the step by step photo sessions at my studio. I was a novice author and a perfectionist so we needed twice as much time as was normal to capture all the shots. I must have driven the photographer mad - shortly afterwards he emigrated to the

Namibian desert.

My advice to anyone being asked by a publisher to write a book is, yes, take the opportunity, but expect it to take over your life as you try to meet deadline after deadline. It's hard work and there will be tears. You may even go grey in the process. Would I do it again? Yes.

I see that you will be teaching at West Dean this year and also in Prague, tell me more.

I thoroughly enjoy teaching, especially at West Dean residential college. I do lots of demos and I work students hard, but we always have a fun weekend. And the food is great! I'm teaching a bangle making class there in August.

I'm really excited about teaching in Prague in April. There is a keen polymer clay following there and they are hungry to learn more. I visited twenty years ago so it'll be interesting to see how it has changed. I'll also be teaching in Moscow later in the year. In March this year I'll be teaching at 'Polymer, Pamper and Play' in Lyme Regis. It is an event organised by members of the London Polymer Clay Group.

Where do you usually sell your work ?

I sell my work at polymer clay events in the UK, Europe and the US and last year I represented West Dean College at Art in Action, where I taught four short taster classes and had a stand where I sold my work. Just at the moment I am building an on-line Etsy shop where I will sell my polymer clay jewellery.

This year I've been selling online classes at www.craftededu.com. I've been featuring the mica clay effect, one of the special properties that you can get with metallic polymer clays.

And you undertake special commissions too...

I have accepted commissions for my tassels and braids where I've used polymer clay and fabric.

The theatre and film world offers an opportunity to create costume jewellery and artefacts using many of the faux techniques possible in polymer clay at a fraction of the cost of real amber or coral jewellery.

You are an active member of several groups, the International IPCA and American Polymer Clay Guild as well as the London Polymer Clay Group. What benefits does membership offer you?

I definitely benefit from meeting others in the group with a passion for polymer. I began the London group to share and swap tips and ideas, have demos and generally help raise the standard of our work. There are nearly fifty people in the group and we hire a hall in central London for our bi-monthly clay days. People come from all over the home counties. (www.lpcg.co.uk)

I believe the LPCG are planning a special event for Craft and Design Month in May 2011 - is there any more news about that yet?

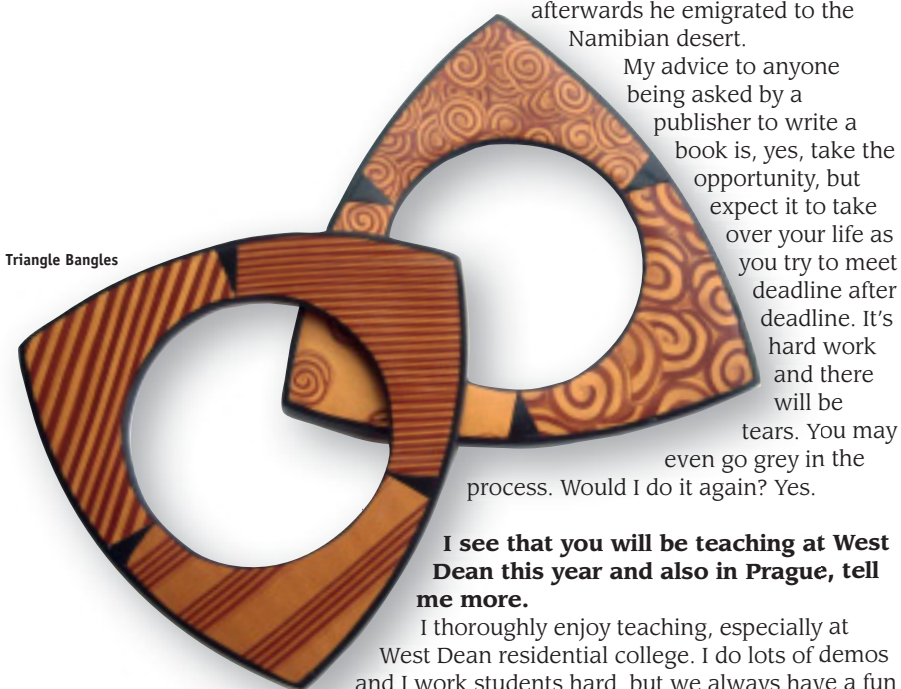
This is still in the planning at the moment, but we're hoping to have a clay day on 29 May with demonstrations. (Ed: Keep up to date with that at www.craftanddesignmonth.net/events).

With your polymer clay interests extending internationally, do you think the work produced by artists in the UK differs very much from that in other countries?

In Britain the early clayers excelled in replicating food for dolls houses at 1/12th scale. While this miniaturist tradition continues here, we are learning to exploit the material's potential through other expressive art forms such as jewellery. The USA has led the field but there are excellent polymer clay artists in most countries now and it's impossible to characterise any country's style when the movement is truly international. While Polymer as an art form has been flying in the USA where collections are being built by museums and individuals, here in the UK we are still seeking recognition in craft shops and galleries.

There has been a reluctance to accept polymer clay as a serious craft medium, perhaps because it was familiar as a kid's modelling material. However I'm optimistic that this will change.

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Triangle Bangles