

# How Polymer Hit The Big Time

*The once-snubbed material is making a grand entrance in the art world, thanks to one woman's vision and drive.*

**Pier Voulkos**  
*Fall Leaves Neckpiece*, 1993  
polymer, telephone wire;  
9.6 x 8.4 x 1 in.  
gift of Nan Roche and  
John Bender

STORY BY *Monica Moses*  
PORTRAIT BY *Barbara Bordnick*

In the 1990s, Elise Winters became convinced polymer artists weren't getting the money or respect they deserved. "The whole field needed to be elevated," she says. A natural strategist and organizer, Winters set out to make that happen.

*Fall Leaves* photo: Penina Meisels





Many people who know polymer as a hobbyist's material don't realize the scope of its artistic applications.



**Barbara Sperling**  
*Koi Bowl with Lilac Stand*, 2006  
polymer, lilac branches  
13.2 x 15.5 x 12.6 in.  
gift of the artist



**Tory Hughes**  
*Orrery*, 1992  
polymer, metallic powders, acrylic paints, found brass, Lucite, ball bearings, glass beads, spring-steel wire  
11.5 x 7.7 x .7 in.  
gift of the artist



**Linda Pedersen**  
*Bracelet*, 1998  
polymer, elastic  
.75 x 3.25 in. dia.  
gift of Elise Winters and Sherwood Rudin



**Cynthia Toops**  
*Sampler Necklace*, 1999  
polymer, silk thread, glasswork by Dan Adams  
16 x 7 x 1 in.  
gift of Elise Winters and Sherwood Rudin

THE PHONE RANG ON A SUNDAY MORNING in February 2009 at Elise Winters' house in Haworth, New Jersey. When Winters answered, still in her pajamas, she was flabbergasted to hear the voice of Ursula Ilse-Neuman of the Museum of Arts and Design. The jewelry curator wanted to see Winters' polymer art collection – as soon as possible.

Winters felt a mix of emotions: surprise, joy, curiosity, yes – but also a twinge of panic. I'm not ready, she thought, surveying her living room where, like most of her house, every surface was cluttered with small polymer works. For the better part of two years, her 3,000-square-foot Rambler had been given over to an ambitious project to establish the first permanent museum collection of polymer art.

Winters and several friends, including art historian and polymer artist Rachel Carren, had been immersed in the painstaking process of sorting through the more than 2,000 polymer pieces they had gathered. They were laboring to photograph and document some 500 of the most notable ones – those most likely to interest a museum – in time for SOFA New York in April. The plan: Be ready when curators flew into town and persuade a few to make a side trip to Winters' house.

But the phone call meant word of her project was spreading. "Ursula's call put me under the gun," Winters recalls. Polymer was catching on. Sooner than expected, her moment had arrived.

This is the story of how one woman, with grit and determination, got the museum world to pay attention to artists making groundbreaking work in polymer – a material often misunderstood, if not maligned. The story culminates in a genuine milestone: the establishment of a permanent collection at the Racine Art Museum in Wisconsin, with an exhibition, "Terra Nova," opening in October; a symposium at Frank Lloyd Wright's Wingspread; and publication of a lush 130-page hardcover book.

WINTERS IS NO WEALTHY COLLECTOR. She's a polymer artist herself, having spent many of her 64 years as a high school art teacher. But since 1997, just four years into her own exploration of the medium, she has burned with a purpose: to achieve for great works of polymer the recognition so naturally accorded to works in wood, glass, ceramics, fiber, and metal.

Those close to her call Winters "a true visionary" and "a force." "I was the little engine that could," she says, "pulling a train

Photos (4): Penina Meisels



up a very high hill.” Her obstacle: the dubious public image of polymer (often called polymer clay, although, as Carren points out, “clay is mud, from the ground; polymer is a synthetic modeling compound”). Other craft mediums are associated with professional artists and centuries of documented achievement. But polymer, widely available in the United States only since the 1970s, is “dramatically different,” Winters says. “It started in the hands of hobbyists.”

As a material, polymer is as humble and accessible as glue sticks and glitter. You can buy it at Michaels, mold it with your fingers, bake it in your oven. Many people equate Fimo and Sculpey – two of its brand names – with “muddy craft shows and kids’ toy departments,” Winters says; their first awareness is of “dinosaurs and silly snakes, and what I call ‘bubble-gum

beads,’ ” trinkets sold online for 20 cents apiece. They aren’t likely to know the painterly polymer-veneer furniture of Bonnie Bishoff and J.M. Syron, or Tory Hughes’ amazing facsimiles of jade, coral, turquoise, and ivory. They don’t know Winters’ friends and colleagues in a close-knit community that, more than most, shared support and discoveries as they created progressively more sophisticated work over a mere three decades.

As an advocate, Winters was emboldened by her experience in other art mediums. Trained first as a photographer, she had seen genius in the work of Ansel Adams when his prints were selling for \$30. As a ceramist in the 1970s, she recalled how that medium steadily gained ground in the art world and ultimately showed up in elite galleries in Manhattan and at SOFA.

“I knew polymer was following the same path,” she says. “Polymer was sneered at, but the same was true in the ’60s with earthenware mugs that scratched your lips.” Winters’ determination to achieve recognition for polymer artists went beyond a sense of justice. She knew that if a museum were to establish a permanent collection, polymer artists could begin to charge higher prices and more could make a living from their art. She knew that as important polymer artists aged and died, more of their pieces would be preserved and valued, and not wind up at garage sales.

She also knew that legitimacy would require the medium’s brief but rich history to be documented, before seminal events of the 1980s and ’90s faded into memory. In late 2007 she set up [polymerartarchive.com](http://polymerartarchive.com) to collect the stories of what Carren,

*A museum collection means prestige for a medium. Potential benefits: Artists can command higher prices, and their work won’t end up at garage sales.*

Meander photo: Dean Powell Photography

Other polymer photos (3): Penina Meisels



**Dan Cormier**  
*Rocket Vessel, Robot Vessel, and Fiji Mermaid 2000 Vessel*, all 2000; polymer, aluminum, aircraft cable, sterling silver wire, glass, photocopy on paper, transparent film, vinyl, rubber; dimensions vary from 4 to 5.25 in. high gift of the artist



**Wendy Wallin Malinow**  
*Badigeon Beetle*, 1999  
polymer, telephone wire, pearl, vellum, ink  
13.2 x 9.4 x .9 in.  
gift of the artist



**Pier Voulkos and Dan Peters**  
*Box with Pearlescent Veneers*, 1999; polymer, plywood  
7.75 x 9.6 x 6.6 in.  
gift of Elise Winters and Sherwood Rudin



**Bonnie Bishoff and J. M. Syron**  
*Meander Credenza*, 2006; polymer, ash, Japanese tamo wood  
2.7 x 5.4 x 2 ft.  
gift of the artists



who has emerged as the field’s historian, calls the “Renaissance moments”: the publication of *The New Clay* by Nan Roche, still an important manual some 20 years later; the Masters Invitational Polymer Clay Exhibition and Sale, organized in 1997 by Winters; numerous “master class” articles in *Ornament* magazine; Marie Segal’s discovery of the pasta machine as a crucial tool; the founding of the first polymer guild by Lindly Haunani and Nan Roche; and the mid-1990s development of the Skinner blend, an elegant method for creating sheets of polymer with gradient colors.

The website also helped her build support for the collection project. Her vision, taking shape in 2006, involved calling on friends in the field to amass a collection of the most fabulous polymer pieces to be presented to curators.

She hadn’t even approached MAD, which is why she was so surprised to hear Ilse-Neuman on the phone that February morning. MAD didn’t “need a polymer collection,” she says. Instead, Winters had decided to pursue a “forward-thinking, smaller, or young museum that would understand polymer was going to come of age at some point,” one that could see “there would come a time when it would become explosively collectible.”

She sought advice from respected curators Michael Monroe and Cindi Strauss, and Art Jewelry Forum founder and board chair Susan Cummins. Then she targeted a few prospects that seemed to fit and made her case, sending luscious images of the work of Pier Voulkos (fortuitously, a daughter of legendary ceramist Peter), Ford/Forlano, Cynthia Toops, and Kathleen Dustin. In the manner of a *grande dame* patroness, she wrote on letterhead, saying she was “looking to place a collection.”

A few curators responded to her pitches as she had feared, with terse notes along the lines of “your collection does not meet our criteria.” Some, like Ilse-Neuman ultimately, were eager to cherry-pick but could not take a big collection. Then Winters hit the jackpot.

In late 2007 she and her husband traveled to Racine, Wisconsin, expecting to get 30 minutes with executive director and curator of collections Bruce Pepich. Instead, the trio spoke for three hours, while Pepich slowly paged through a portfolio of works from the collection, asked questions, and listened intently. Recalling the meeting, Winters says, “I was just



Above:  
**Jeffrey Lloyd Dever**  
*Blossoming Radii*, 2006  
polymer, wire  
5.4 x 2.6 x 1.25 in.  
gift of the artist



Below:  
**Melanie West**  
*Bamboo BioBangle*, 2008  
polymer; 1.2 x 4.5 in. dia.  
gift of Elise Winters  
and Sherwood Rudin



Below:  
**Lindly Haunani**  
*Asparagus Crown Bracelet*, 2006  
polymer, elastic  
3 x 3.6 in. dia.  
gift of the  
artist



**Elise Winters**  
*Pentala Brooch*, 2006  
polymer, acrylic paint, nickel;  
3.1 x 2.8 x .4 in.; gift of Elise  
Winters and Sherwood Rudin

enthralled with him, with the museum, with their whole philosophy.”

Over the next year, Winters and Pepich kept talking, steadily building a common vision. By mid-2009 they were whole-hearted partners, with a fund-raising strategy to stage the exhibition and publish the book. (So far, \$65,000 has been raised, much of it from individual polymer artists making small contributions of less than \$500.) Pepich took 191 pieces for RAM’s permanent collection, along with dozens of pieces to be studied for their historical significance. Pepich also helped pave the way for smaller chunks of Winters’ collection to go to the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Newark Museum; and the Mingei International Museum in San Diego. Ilse-Neuman arrived on Winters’ doorstep on Easter Sunday 2009 to hand-pick some works for MAD’s collection. Seeing her once-amorphous vision become real, Winters says, “is unbelievably thrilling.”

For RAM, situated in blue-collar Racine, polymer’s populist appeal is an advantage, not a stigma. Pepich says he is “intrigued by the prevalence of hobbyist involvement in the medium” and happy to support a material “that so many find accessible. It is a great opportunity to demonstrate to an extensive audience how a medium they appreciate can be used to make high art statements.” In Racine, “high art” isn’t constricted by exclusivity and tradition. As curator of exhibitions Lena Vigna puts it, “RAM has flexibility that the Met does not.”

After the big show at RAM, what’s next for Winters and her fellow advocates? Carren wants polymer manufacturers, whose marketing she calls “appallingly dorky,” to embrace their fine art users. (Cobalt blue was retired by one recently in favor of a color called “denim.”) A bigger prize would be a slot in the curriculum at a university or two.

But perhaps the greatest triumph will come when the medium itself is not so much of the message. As Vigna says, “I care what the material is. But what do you say with the material you use?”

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[elisewinters.com](http://elisewinters.com)  
[polymerartarchive.com](http://polymerartarchive.com)  
[ramart.org](http://ramart.org)  
*“Terra Nova: Polymer Art at the Crossroads” is on view at the Racine Art Museum Oct. 21 – Feb. 5, 2012. Monica Moses is American Craft’s editor in chief.*

Photos (5): Penina Meisels



**Kathleen Dustin**  
*Mother Purse*, 2005  
polymer, bronze, glass  
beads, cotton thread  
6.5 x 3.6 x 2.4 in.  
gift of Marilyn Radke

*Seeing her vision take shape at Racine Art Museum is “unbelievably thrilling,” Winters says.*