



American **Craft**

The New Teamwork

How We Work Together Now



*Steve Ford &
David Forlano's
cross-country
collaboration*

+

*James Carpenter,
Binh Pho,
Tommie Rush &
Richard Jolley,
and more*

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True Colors

In their creative partnership of more than 30 years, Steve Ford and David Forlano have given each other space to grow – and their jewelry the freedom to evolve.

STORY BY
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PORTRAITS BY
Jared Castaldi

LEFT:
Flip the reversible **Full Pillow necklace** (2015), and you'll find a complementary design.

RIGHT:
Steve Ford (left) and David Forlano, who live in Philadelphia and Santa Fe, respectively, thrive in a long-distance partnership that nourishes their individuality. Each has time for solo pursuits; here, a group of Forlano's paintings hangs on the wall.

WHILE ATTEMPTING

to capture on paper the same model in an art class, Steve Ford drew a "squat and robust" figure, while David Forlano's version was tall and thin.

"I knew what to do to correct his, and he knew what to do to correct mine," recalls Ford. "So we switched drawings and showed each other how to fix the problem."



Machine photos: Ford/Carbano Studio



Tube bangle bracelet, 2015,
polymer,
5 x 2.5 x 1.25 in.

Since that first creative collaboration in 1984, the pair, both 52, have gone on to design and make bold, sophisticated jewelry sought after for its deeply inventive manipulation of polymer clay combined with metal. Over the decades, their partnership has survived geographical and personal hurdles, while their work, sold at high-end galleries and held in a dozen museum

collections, has become all the more sought after.

Ford and Forlano were studying abroad in Rome through Tyler School of Art when they met. They were both aspiring painters. "We had studios next to each other and would keep an eye on what the other was doing," says Ford.

They became fast friends and later, in Philadelphia, roommates. After graduation from

Tyler, they moved to Norfolk, Virginia, where Forlano had an offer to help rehab the home of a family friend. Ford joined him, and both spent evenings and weekends painting.

Around this time, Ford revealed to his best friend something he feared could end their friendship – he's gay. "I knew it was a very hard thing for Steve to say," Forlano remembers. "He was concerned that

I might freak out. I didn't, but we had to make sure we could comfortably continue being the friends we were without it being awkward. We ended up being fine, but we were both sensitive to it."

Armed with the skills from their rehabbing work, the friends went in on a fixer-upper in Norfolk, which they later sold at a \$20,000 profit – enough to establish a real studio. Priced



Originally painters, the pair found challenge in jewelry and kept going.

Shift necklace, 2014, polymer, sterling silver, 18 x 2.75 x 2.5 in.

BELOW: Ford shapes a piece of polymer on a Scotch-Brite wheel. He starts most pieces before shipping them to Santa Fe, where Forlano adds his twist.



out of New York, they set up shop back in Philadelphia, where they could afford more space and a good location; it jump-started their business.

"We were painters – jewelry was not on our radar," Ford says. That is, until 1988, when he saw colorful jewelry made of polymer, using a technique that resembled the millefiori caning he'd learned in glass-work classes. He showed

the work to Forlano, and the two 24-year-olds, knowing nothing about jewelry, fashion, or sales, figured that artful pieces of polymer could finance their painting.

"The jewelry business was only meant to make us money to give us time to paint," Forlano says. "But gradually the process of making became more and more challenging – and we wanted to keep going."

In the early years, as Ford and Forlano worked the art-fair circuit, customers and fellow artists assumed they were a romantic couple.

"It always bothered me a little on a personal level, because I was not seen for who I am," says Forlano. Still, "as an average straight white guy," he credits the experience with giving him "a valuable, if small, insightful perspective on what it feels like to be judged by a community based on general outward assumptions."

And it had some unexpected benefits. "The whole experience of jumping into this world of selling and buying was overwhelming," Forlano says. "I was shy and wasn't good at flirting with customers, so I had an excuse not to" – people assumed he was taken.

"I was just coming out at the time," Ford says, "and I experienced it as a form of personal support that David allowed some people to think that, although if anyone asked we'd explain the difference."

Though both were essentially self-taught, they continually honed their skills, and their jewelry quickly became known for its complex patterns and unusual color combinations. They took their work to an even higher level in 1999 when they introduced precious metal into the mix. Around this time, they also changed their business name from CityZenCane to Ford/Forlano.

"It was a meaningful moment, not only for structural reasons, but metal also gave the work gravitas," Ford says.

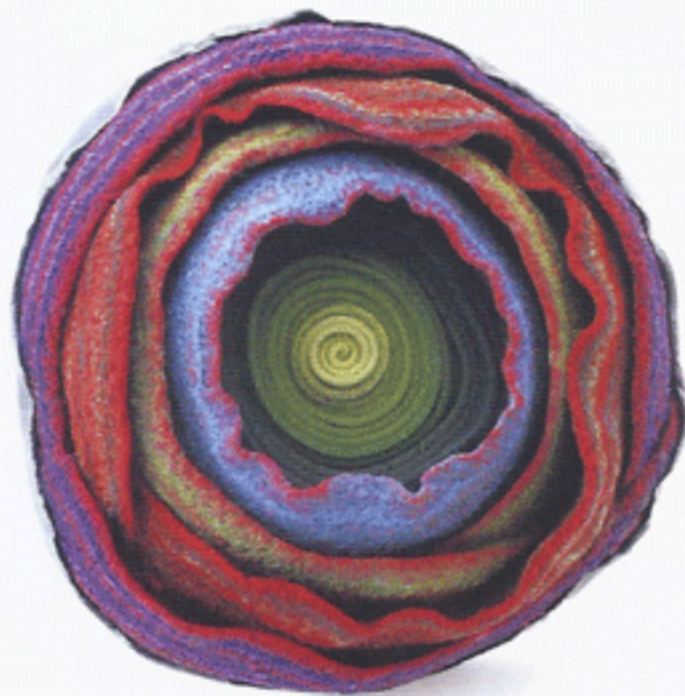
Initially they envisioned doing their own metalsmithing, but ultimately decided they should focus on what they do best and leave the metal to an expert.

Their friend and colleague Chris Hentz, on the metals faculty at Louisiana State University, was "instrumental,"



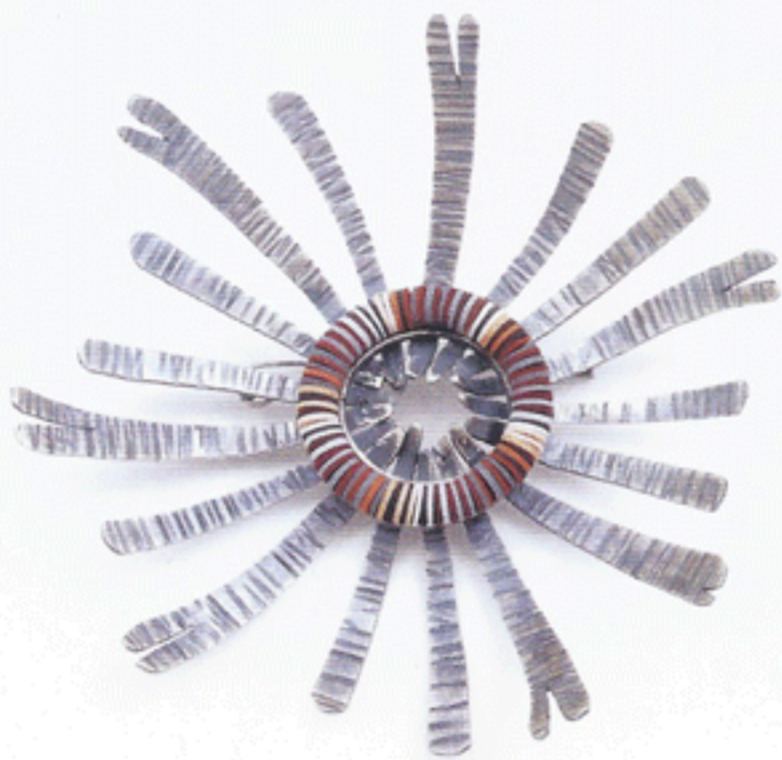
FROM TOP:
Center pin,
2015, polymer,
sterling silver,
gold leaf,
2.5 x 3 x 1 in.

O'Keeffe pin,
2015, polymer,
sterling silver,
3 x 3 x 1 in.



Calder flower pin, 2011, polymer,
sterling silver,
4.5 x 4.25 x 1.5 in.

Hydro top pin,
2016, polymer,
sterling silver,
gold leaf,
2.75 x 2.5 x .5 in.



Forlano says. "He said, 'Don't let yourselves know too much. Draw everything you're dreaming of, and let the metalsmith solve the problem.'"

For years, they worked side by side in their Philadelphia studio, riffing off each other's designs and also working with metalsmith Maryanne Petrus-Gilbert. They've recently added metalsmith and enamelist Nicolette Absil to the mix.

Typically, then and now, Ford will sketch the design and provide the structure, while Forlano focuses on the surface.

"My approach to making paintings or objects is that what you see is what it is," Forlano explains. "Whereas Steve has this wholly different way – intellectual, wanting to know how the thing is made, decomposing it. That carries over into our business structure, too. It's a good balance."

That equilibrium was upended in 2005, when Forlano moved to Santa Fe to be with Debrianna Mansini, an actor firmly rooted in New Mexico. The two had met on the craft-show circuit; she was assisting a friend. Ford, who has been partnered for 21 years to artist and art dealer Ron Rumford, served as best man at the couple's wedding in 2006.

Even so, as the self-described pessimist of the duo, he was certain their business was doomed. "I thought the daily interaction was key to our collaboration, plus I felt abandoned," Ford says.

Forlano, on the other hand, arrived in New Mexico in love, brimming with enthusiasm, and looking for more creative space. Their different outlooks at the time led to resentment and friction, and the pair ultimately turned to a mediator to help work things out.

They're now back in a good groove, they say. "As my partner, Ron, pointed out," Ford



While each artist contributes different parts to the work, the result is a harmonious whole.

Shape pin,
2015, polymer,
sterling silver,
4.5 x 3.5 x .5 in.



Long Shell necklace,
2014, polymer, sterling
silver, gold leaf, spinels,
48 x 1.25 x 1 in.



Long Shift necklace,
2015, polymer,
78 x .5 x .5 in.



Shift necklace,
2015, polymer,
sterling silver, magnets,
18 x 3 x 2.75 in.



**Black and White
Shell necklace,** 2016,
polymer, sterling silver,
glass, 17 x 1.5 x 1.5 in.

says, "David and I would tend to shoot each other's ideas down. Ultimately, with distance, we had more time to let the ideas individually mature."

"We're like a long-term band," he jokes. "I'm sure the Rolling Stones have had a therapist."

As before, Ford starts off most pieces, and now ships them to Forlano for his part of the process. On a brooch,



Although he usually works in Santa Fe, here Forlano finishes up at the duo's Philadelphia studio, where their collection and archives are stored.

for instance, they might each contribute several wedges of surface and color that are substantially different but complementary. They often text photos back and forth, but have discovered they don't check in on every design as they once did. They do, however, have an understanding that each can undo the work of the other if they feel it improves the piece.



Big Bead necklace,
2016, polymer, sterling
silver, 17 x 1 x 1 in.

*Trust is
central to this
partnership.
Each artist
can undo the
other's work
if that's best
for the piece.*

Meanwhile, each has put more energy into his solo artistic interests. Ford has been especially active in printmaking and has two upcoming museum shows. Forlano, who is also a musician and has composed and performed in the past, has most recently immersed himself in drawing as a deliberate pursuit, “much like a meditation practice,” he says.



Ford strings vibrant Big Bead necklaces. Forlano's beads tend to have smoother surfaces, while Ford likes texture that contrasts matte and shiny finishes.

One new well of creativity for their partnership has been revisiting early work they liked, but that didn't quite hit the mark, Forlano says. (In 2008, they had the foresight to establish an archive of their own work, containing several hundred pieces, both as a reference and as the basis for future exhibitions.)

“We're much braver than we were back then,” Forlano says.

Over time, they have grown braver, less concerned with rules – and freer to create.



Chip earrings, 2015, polymer, 22k gold, 3.25 x 1 x .5 in. ea., in collaboration with metalsmith Teresa F. Faris



Ford and Forlano began making jewelry in 1988, after Ford saw polymer pieces made using a technique resembling millefiori glass – a staple method they still use today.

“Sometimes just scaling something up in size, making it more sculptural, gets it to where we think it should be. Before, we were very concerned with keeping everything delicate, wearable, feminine. We had a lot of rules.”

Their techniques continue to mature as well. Recently, for instance, on some parts of a near-finished piece, Ford has begun rubbing a mix of oil



paint and liquid polymer into the surface. He then wipes most of it off, “as one would an intaglio plate in printmaking,” giving the work greater range and variety.

Being invited by museums and collectors to create more substantial work, such as the *Pillow Collar* necklace, commissioned in 2008 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, has also altered their outlook, Ford says.



Ford and Forlano have invested a lot of work in their decades-long partnership. They joke they're like a long-term band: "I'm sure the Rolling Stones have had a therapist," Ford says.

The partners' palette changes from year to year. Currently strong colors dominate, as in this luscious pile of Big Bead necklaces.

"Before, we had a craft-show mentality, but that's changed," he says. "Now it's possible to make larger pieces that don't always have to be wearable."

Ford and Forlano now use the major shows, such as the PMA's annual craft show, as places to debut more challenging work. Early design ideas they were pondering for this year include scaling up



even more, incorporating a black-and-white back, and using more gold for its intensity of color.

"It's still early," says Forlano, adding what could be the key to their longevity: "We'll have a lot of conversations about it and sort it all out."

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fordforlano.com

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