



STEVEN FORD
AND
DAVID FORLANO

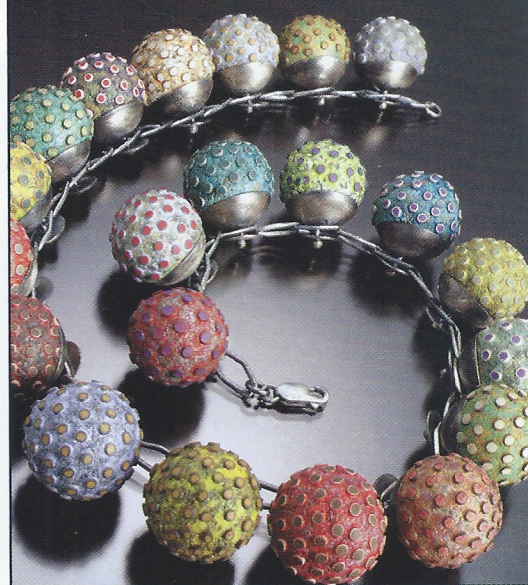
THE DELICATE AESTHETIC BALANCE
OF EQUIVALENT TERMS

Glen Brown

Artistic collaboration is a relatively unique process. Most forms of cooperative production tend to be geared toward obvious practical ends, as, for example, when tasks are distributed to increase productivity, resources are consolidated to enhance operations, or specialists from different disciplines team up to solve multifaceted problems. Collaboration in art may sometimes be undertaken for just such pragmatic purposes, but it is generally driven by other motives as well. After all, art is often anything but pragmatic. In art, tendentious uselessness is commonplace precisely because it is so uncommon in other kinds of production. Whether or not art closely mirrors life, it must certainly depart from life in some appreciable respects if it is to remain distinguishable as art. Impracticality can therefore play a part in art's self-preservation, and, accordingly, since the late nineteenth century the artist's key prerogative has been to work in the absence of any definite goal simply to discover what might arise as a result.

To some degree this kind of disinterested, see-what-may-develop approach to collaboration has shaped the jewelry that Steven Ford and David Forlano have produced together for the past fifteen years. Despite the financial success of their endeavor, marketability has by mutual agreement never taken precedence over artistic concerns. The two have willingly, indeed eagerly, accepted a certain degree of aesthetic risk: not the sort of risk that accompanies an impetuous leap into the void but rather the more calculated form of risk that comes with consigning one's vulnerable ideas to the nurture of another. Ford and Forlano's collaboration is largely sequential rather than simultaneous, so each must allow the other to spend some time alone with the work and to exercise a strong personal influence over its final form. Although their roles have occasionally overlapped or even reversed, Ford has generally initiated the process by defining the structure of a piece through a series of sketches. Following the fabrication of that structure in oxidized sterling silver, Forlano responds by spontaneously manipulating polymer clay to build up expressive surfaces within the parameters of the metalwork.

Without question, serendipity plays a role in Ford and Forlano's process, since one can only roughly anticipate what the other might contribute. Their procedure is subject to an additional degree of unpredictability because neither artist fabricates the silver components of the jewelry, a task routinely entrusted to the metalsmith Maryanne Petrus. For both Ford and Forlano the potential for unexpected consequences to arise from this circle of creativity proves a safeguard against



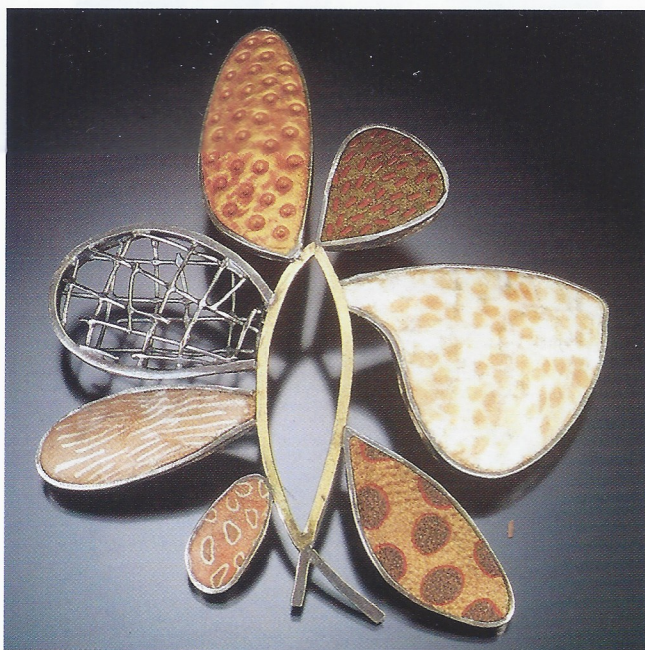
artistic burnout: a perpetually invigorating factor in the creative process. In this respect, uncertainty in their working procedures could ironically be considered a useful, even practical element. There is, however an even more significant reason for arguing that Ford and Forlano's collaboration—despite the aspects of chance and risk that it introduces to their process—has its pragmatic side. As the artists themselves readily acknowledge, in aesthetic temperament Ford and Forlano are polarized: the former gravitating toward structural concerns and the latter drawn to expressive aspects. Interestingly, the complementariness of these temperaments is not simply influential on the evolution of style in their work; it is diagnostic of a perspective on form that has been prevalent in aesthetics since the inception of modernism.

In the *The Birth of Tragedy*, the first book of his voluminous production, the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that works of art could only arise through synthesis of two opposing human tendencies: a striving for order and an abandonment to the primal and chaotic forces of nature. Concentrating his argument on the example of Aeschylean theater in ancient Greece, Nietzsche named these disparate impulses the Apollonian (in reference to Apollo, the god of reason) and the Dionysian (after Dionysus, the god of wine and sensual pleasure whose chief distinction was to be notoriously venerated through orgiastic ritual). For Nietzsche, in the greatest works of art the Apollonian tendency to assert the self and the Dionysian inclination to dissolve the self in rhapsodic expression worked their influences one upon the other to achieve an exquisite balance. Over the next century, the terminology of Nietzsche's argument as well as its general substance proved influential on formalist theory, and one finds numerous instances of artists such as the Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko explaining their works in terms of a dialog between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses.

Given the modernist conception of the artist as solitary and heroic originator of art, it is not surprising that this dialog has generally been treated as metaphorical and internal: a relationship between different visual effects that is orchestrated

Opposite Page: RIBBON PIN of polymer clay, sterling silver; fabricated and oxidized, 8.3 centimeters wide, 2005. *Photograph by Robert K. Liu/Ornament.*

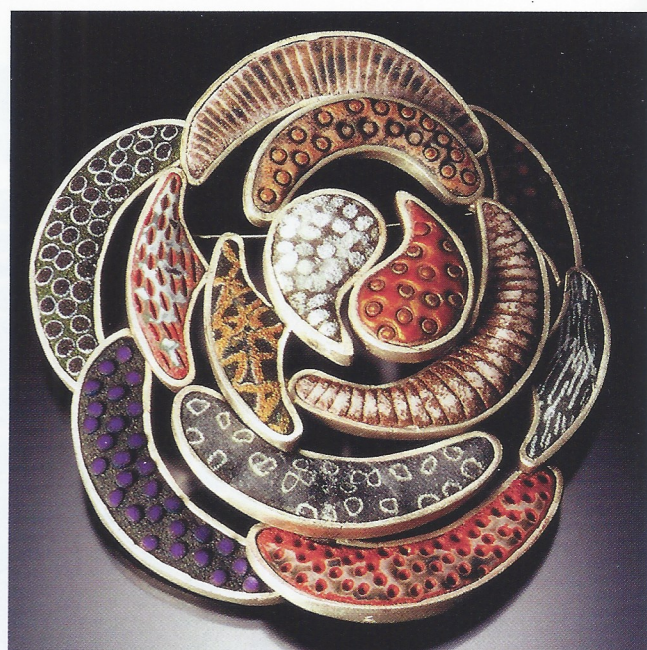
Above left: SATELLITE BEADS, on chain, of polymer clay, sterling silver, liquid polymer, oil paint; fabricated and oxidized, 48.2 centimeters long, 2006. *Courtesy of Mobilia Gallery. Photograph by Robert Diamante.*



LEAF PIN of polymer clay, twenty-four karat gold, sterling silver; fabricated and oxidized, 8.8 centimeters wide, 2004. *Courtesy of Mobilia Gallery.*

into something harmonious, first in the artist's mind and then within the work of art. Ford and Forlano's collaboration has, in contrast, externalized this all-important relationship and thereby rendered more literal the concept of a dialog between Apollonian rationality and Dionysian passion. Forlano remembers that upon first seeing one of Ford's paintings when both were studying in Rome through the Tyler School of Art his impression was of a fascinating but entirely alien way of composing: a linear and structural method of organizing space that seemed oriented far less toward expression than order. Ford, for his part, asserts that collaboration with Forlano has provided a perceptible energy, a spark of vitality that he found lacking in his solo work. For both artists, collaboration has been the avenue to aesthetic completion: a means toward the formal harmony that the modern painter Piet Mondrian, for example, described as a balanced relationship between "equivalent terms."

It is interesting to note that Mondrian found the clearest manifestation of these equivalent terms in the coupling of the logical, rhythmic beat and the exuberant improvisation of jazz music. An accomplished musician as well as a visual artist, Forlano is quick to draw the analogy between collaboration with Ford and his preferred mode of playing music: group improvisation. The exhilaration of performing live with only the barest of guidelines established in advance serves Forlano as a creative tonic. Ideally, although many minutes may pass in halting, probing cacophony, sudden moments of elation can arise when all the disparate sounds merge with astonishing clarity and correctness. Though brief, those moments of harmony can be tremendously productive. Forlano describes his collaboration with Ford in much the same terms as group improvisation in music, although he observes that the stretches of uncertainty are shorter and the moments of triumph more numerous. The process of collaboration is protracted as well,

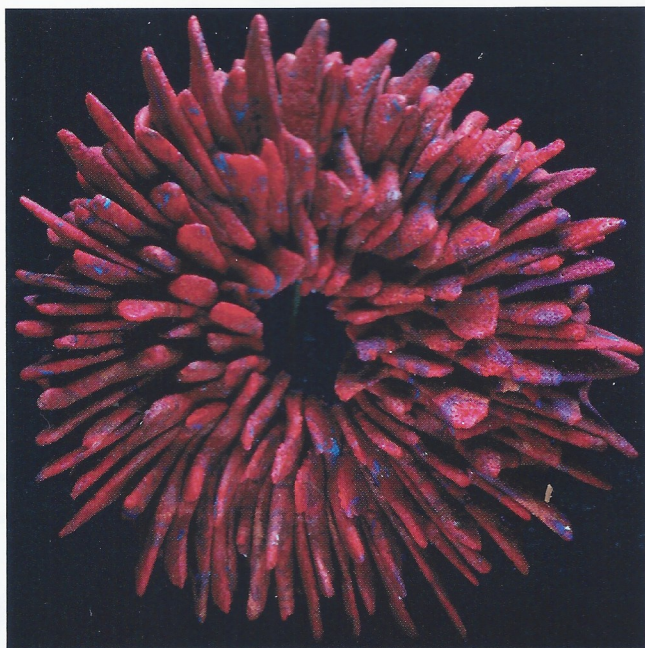


ROSE PIN of polymer clay, gold-plated sterling silver; fabricated, 8.8 centimeters wide, 2005. *Photographs by Robert Diamante.*

occurring over a period of months rather than minutes. The relatively slow back-and-forth nature of their collaboration has in fact been underscored since May of 2005, when Forlano moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Ford remained in Philadelphia: a factor that the two insist has yet to exert any discernible impact on their working arrangement.

Generalizations about art are, of course, only useful up to a point, and it would be inaccurate to describe Ford and Forlano's collaboration as clearly segregated into structural and expressive roles and responsibilities. Ford often assists with the sculpting of the vibrant polymer elements, especially in the case of multipartite compositions, and Forlano has on one important occasion contributed structural designs. In November of 2005, while on an airplane en route to Philadelphia, he occupied the last hour before touchdown by uncharacteristically sketching some potential frameworks for jewelry. The happy result, after consultation with Ford, was the introduction of a new element to the artists' aesthetic repertoire: movement. Incorporating dapped cups of metal that swivel on wire pins and serve as backings for hollow polymer spheres, the Satellite Necklaces roll and spill in bulbous asymmetry like elongated bunches of textured and multi-colored seed pods. Movement is also integral to the otherwise quite different Square Link Bracelet, in which small, rectangular, planes—framed like miniature liquid-polymer-and-oil paintings in buttery, multicolored lines—are free to slide along parallel oxidized sterling silver bars.

While admitting that Forlano's more active, Dionysian approach to structure was something of a revelation, Ford stresses that movement has always been an implicit element of the artists' work in the vibrant compositions of shifting color and the organic characteristics of masses and contours. Life forms have from the start influenced pieces such as the popular O'Keefe Pin, which, as the title suggests, reflects the



URCHIN PIN of polymer clay, sterling silver; fabricated and oxidized, 9.3 centimeters wide, 2005. Photographs by Robert K. Liu/*Ornament*.

ambiguous feminine-floral qualities of a Georgia O'Keefe painting, and the Urchin Pin that, through its radiating arrangement of colorful polymer sherds, approximates a spiny sea creature. Aquatic organisms in particular have inspired Ford and Forlano, who over the years have adorned their studio walls with photographs of colorful anemones torn from the pages of nature magazines and actual specimens of coral, poriferans and other organic structures scavenged from the washed-up debris of ocean beaches. Inspiration has also come from a book, *Art Forms from the Ocean: The Radiolarian Atlas* of 1862, the nineteenth-century evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel's exquisitely illustrated volume of images depicting microscopic views of amoeboid protozoa.

The idea of rendering images of tiny creatures on an expanded scale was no doubt one of the seminal influences on an unusual series of works that Ford and Forlano completed in 2003. Titled *Nine*—the number selected in advance as the total of works—the series consists of large (up to twenty-inch) wall-mounted structures of which brooches or necklaces serve as integral parts. A response to the numerous observations of friends and clients that the highly plastic forms of their jewelry might translate well into relief sculpture, *Nine* marks an explorative phase in Ford and Forlano's career for more reasons than one. With expanded scale came a more adventurous attitude toward mixed media. *Low Tide*, one of the more spectacular compositions among the *Nine*, remains chiefly composed of polymer clay and metal, but other brooch and relief-sculpture combinations in the series incorporate substances as diverse as shell, rusted steel, burlap, antique block type, gold leaf, and carbonized wood.

The dark and irregularly textured surface of the last of these materials forms the backdrop and housing for four organically shaped pins in *Char*, the second work in the *Nine* series. Punning on the word *char*, Ford and Forlano later extrapolated



SATELLITE BEADS, on links, of polymer clay, sterling silver, liquid polymer, oil paint; fabricated and oxidized, 51 centimeters long, 2006.

on the shapes of the pins to create a lustrous, intricately patterned and predominantly burgundy necklace in which wires and disks connect a string of slightly convex abstractions of a species of sea trout. The *Nine* has given rise to other successful spin-offs as well. The piece *Arc*—a fifteen-inch long tubular structure that protrudes from the wall to form a porous coral-branch handle topped by three flagella-like pins—served as inspiration for an especially successful series of gnarled Cuff Bracelets in which waxy marbled polymer surfaces give way to bulbous eruptions of textured forms washed in liquid polymer: bizarre spotted polyps clinging to polished fossilized crustacean beds. Plastically some of the most dramatic works that Ford and Forlano have produced, the Cuff Bracelets also pay homage to the massive acrylic biomorphic forms of British jeweler Peter Chang, whom both artists particularly admire.

The Satellite Necklaces, *Char* pieces and Cuff Bracelets, all products of the last three years, confirm that Ford and Forlano's creative wellspring is far from running dry. The recent incorporation of literal movement into their aesthetic is an invigorating factor that could no doubt sustain a significant body of new work even if the artists' reservoir of ideas were effectively tapped out. In fact, both artists seem to possess creative energy to spare, and Forlano's activities as a musician have developed a recent counterpart in a series of experimental porcelain-and-polymer brooches that Ford has begun producing in collaboration with Philadelphia ceramist Robert Sutherland. Other similar projects may very well arise. Ford and Forlano's primary commitment, however, remains with the collaborative jewelry that they have developed over the past decade and a half. In these pieces the perfect mesh of artistic personalities has produced something at once stunningly unique and seemingly universal: the delicate aesthetic balance of equivalent terms. □