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Serendipitous Structure
Practical Matter
The Creative Matrix



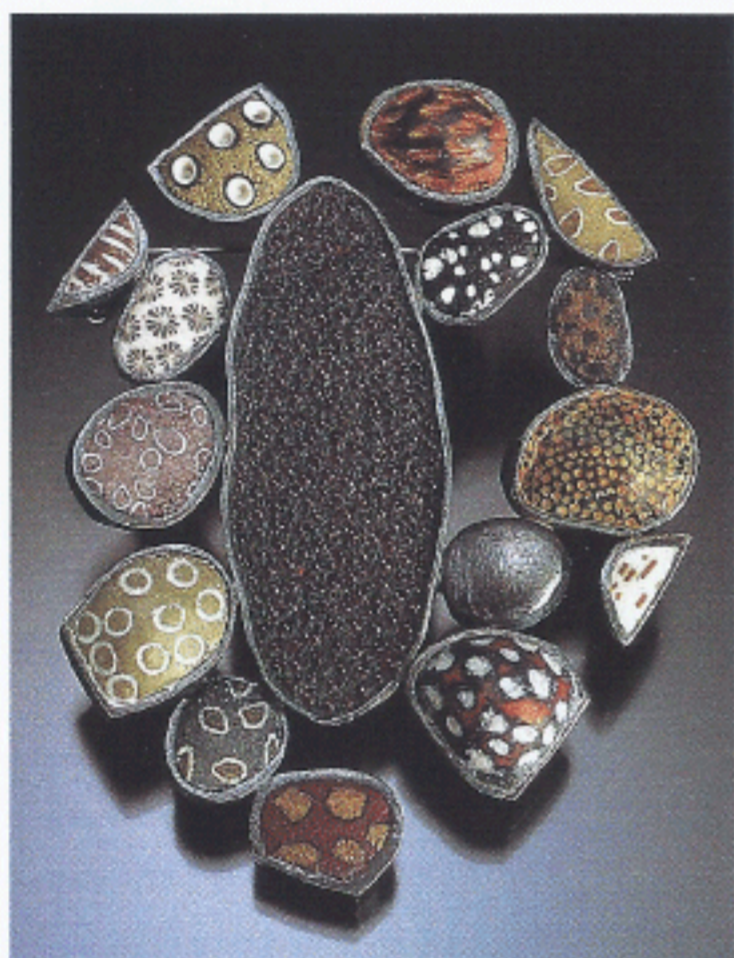


Pebble Galaxy (wall piece with removable pin), 2002
bronze, sterling silver, polymer clay, glass, coral, shell, magnets
diameter 13"
Photo: Karen Mauch

Ford + Forlano

Serendipitous Structure

by Marjorie Simon



Colors gallop, parabolas swoop over and under boulders, textures invite caresses. Flowers deconstruct into Japanese textiles. Silver boundaries barely contain fractured color planes. Aggregates of tiny "rocks" jostle for space, adhering to each other like sea foam bubbles at the shoreline.

They appear barely to touch, as if they might float apart with the next wave. The same shapes in different colors morph into grandmother's button collection.

A swirling abstract reminiscent of a child's "scribble drawing" is in fact a take on Madonna and Child via Picasso; look again and a halo appears. Shifting patterns of light suggest an intimate three-dimensional version of one of Michael James's flickering and moody quilts. Somewhere between jigsaw puzzles and mosaics-to-wear, they could be art for the blind, but who would want to miss all that color?

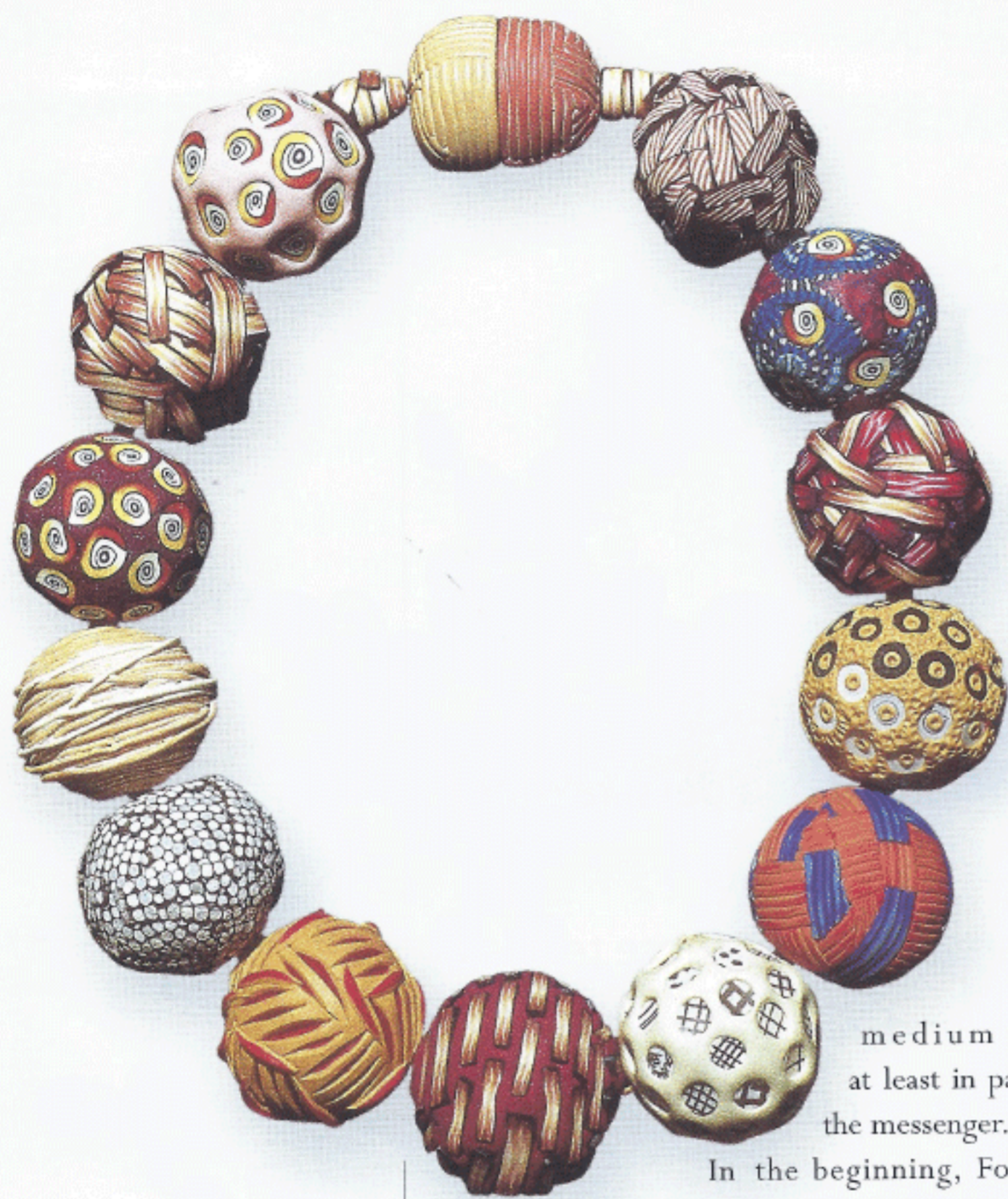
Visitors to craft shows may know Steven Ford and David Forlano by their company name, CityZenCane, the polymer clay guys, but that doesn't cover all they do. True, they emerged from the world of polymer clay with a highly developed aesthetic, and have only recently considered the conceptual side of jewelry. But their spirit, their constantly evolving designs, and their refusal to coast on a well-earned reputation warrants attention.

Ford and Forlano have been making jewelry together since 1988. As sophisticated interpreters of the new idiom of polymer clay, they moved through a vocabulary of glass (*canes*, *millefiore*), and fiber (*ikat* and *shibori*) techniques. About three years ago, they began to include metal in their jewelry, and have gradually developed a more "metalist," formal approach to their work. That they continue to use polymer clay is now of less interest than their collaboration and what they are exploring, but the

Rock 59, 2002
polymer clay, sterling silver, glass
2 1/2 x 2 x 1/4"
All Photos: Robert Diamante



Rock 62, 2002
polymer clay, sterling silver, 24k gold,
seed beads, glass grinding beads
3 x 2 1/2 x 1/4"



Big Bead Necklace, 1998
polymer clay
1 1/4 x 21"

medium is at least in part the messenger.

In the beginning, Ford and Forlano's designs stuck to the established vocabulary of polymer clay, but were a lot more interesting. The two painters employed their design philosophy to create work that was juicy, colorful, lightweight, and, not coincidentally, beautifully crafted. For the most part, surfaces were flat and pattern reigned; elements were simply cut off the cane and assembled. But the composite parts had valence all by themselves. Richly patterned, they were much like Ford's contemporary paintings.

mysterious substances, Ford and Forlano now build jewelry with and without a metal frame, using the material as needed. They bring a broad range of creative sensibilities to the body, unencumbered by a narrow view of what jewelry is supposed to be.

Ford and Forlano produce several lines of limited-edition jewelry, on which they practice an almost infinite rotation of forms, surfaces, patterns, and palettes. There are "Hydro-top pins," mixed-metal circles partially formed on the hydraulic press and completed with clay, Mother and Child brooches, and several varieties of flowers. A simple four-petaled blossom like an animated propeller is reproduced in seemingly endless partnerings of color and texture; a circular bloom suggests a cubist peony with nearly overlapping petals. Because polymer clay is pigmented, color and surface are integrated, and three-dimensional dots, "bacilli," circles, and random spots grow within their bezels. Flat areas of patterned color may be abraded or satin-buffed. Scumbled or degraded surfaces reflect the artists' gritty North Philadelphia surroundings, but also a need for beauty. Neighbor and metalsmith Jan Yager found tiny flowers surviving in cracked concrete and abandoned lots. Ford and Forlano defy the urban fortress with irrepressible color, as if harnessing the sunlight that bakes the courtyard behind their warehouse studio.

Ford and Forlano were trained as painters, and in some ways they still are. The large "flowers" and "Mother and Child" series are proof that cubism still has currency. Using the silver frame as line, much as cloisonné wire defines color fields in enameling, Ford and Forlano create what critic John Berger has called the metaphorical model of cubism, that is, "the diagram: . . . a visible, symbolic representation of invisible processes, forces, structures."² Through the

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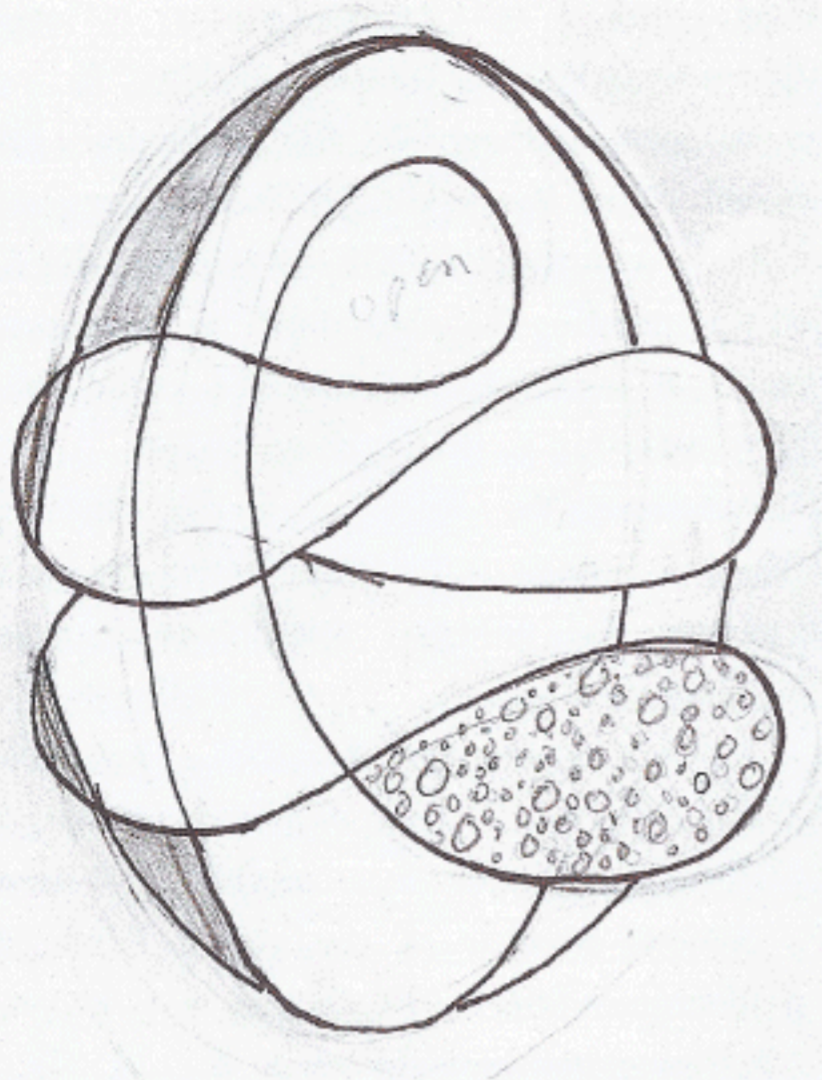
Gradually the artists became more involved with textures, using "toothbrushes, sugars, and salts, and things we could push in and rinse out, layering opaque and translucent . . ., trying to give each section its character."¹ Their willingness to degrade what is usually a smooth finish puts them at odds with conventional handling of polymer clay. Like Susan Kasson Sloan, who mixes epoxy resin with pigments and other

fractured surface and seemingly transparent planes, the "figure or landscape becomes the construction."³ Here, frame really does equal structure. Because they can actually remove material to create negative space instead of merely suggesting it as one might do in a painting or enamel, "the space between objects is part of the same structure as the objects themselves."⁴ And by combining the properties of metal and

Mother and Child 3, 2001
graphite, ink on paper
6 3/4 x 7 1/4"

Mother and Child 3, 2001
polymer clay, sterling silver, glass
3 7/8 x 3 1/8 x 1/2"





polymer clay, fine particles of polyvinyl chloride are suspended in a plasticiser and colored with pigments. It is not clay, yet in many ways it behaves like clay, in that it can be rolled, molded, formed, kneaded, and best of all, fired at a low temperature (212-300°F, depending on the manufacturer), making it ideal for the home crafter. It retains its vivid color after firing, allows the transfer of appropriated images and text, and has a low “degree of difficulty.”

Although a few pioneers employed polymer clay as a fine-art medium in Europe, most of the credit for its popularity in the United States must go to Pier Voulkos for her bold and witty use of this new material. When Voulkos began in the 1970s, she quickly established a presence with her large and colorful jewelry, using the garish colors to great advantage. Polymer clay eventually became a craft chameleon, used to create the look of turquoise, ivory, and other “natural” materials. Use spread rapidly, as traditional glass caning and mosaic techniques were easily learned. Despite its enormous distribution as a craft material, by and large its design techniques have not evolved, and it remains mainly a medium for hobbyists. Almost

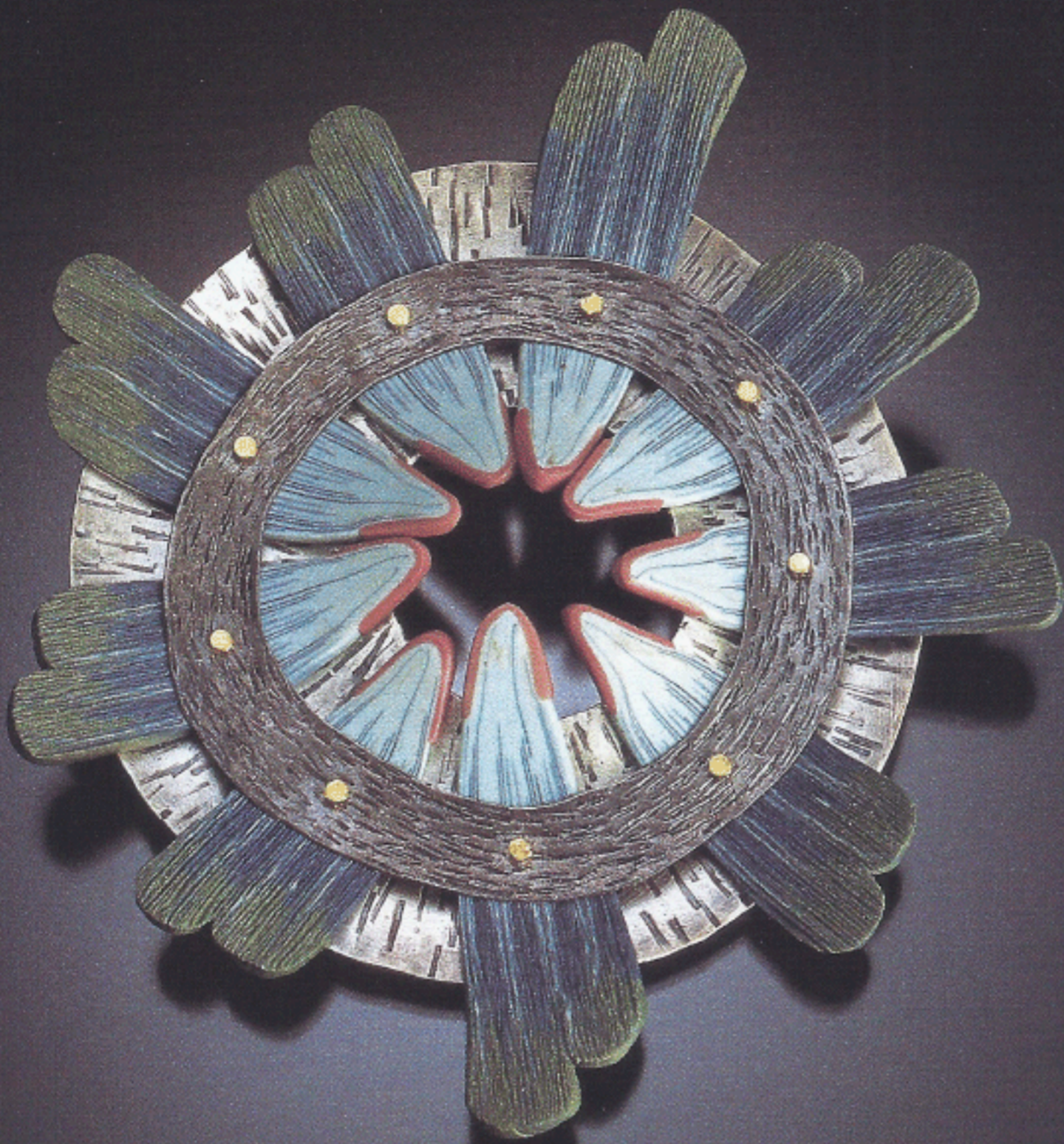
clay, color becomes both the form and the surface.

What we call polymer clay originated in Germany in the 1930s, where it was used primarily by dollmakers for its pliability and translucency. Marketed as Fimo by Eberhard Faber (of eraser fame), it was subsequently manufactured in the United States as Sculpey. In

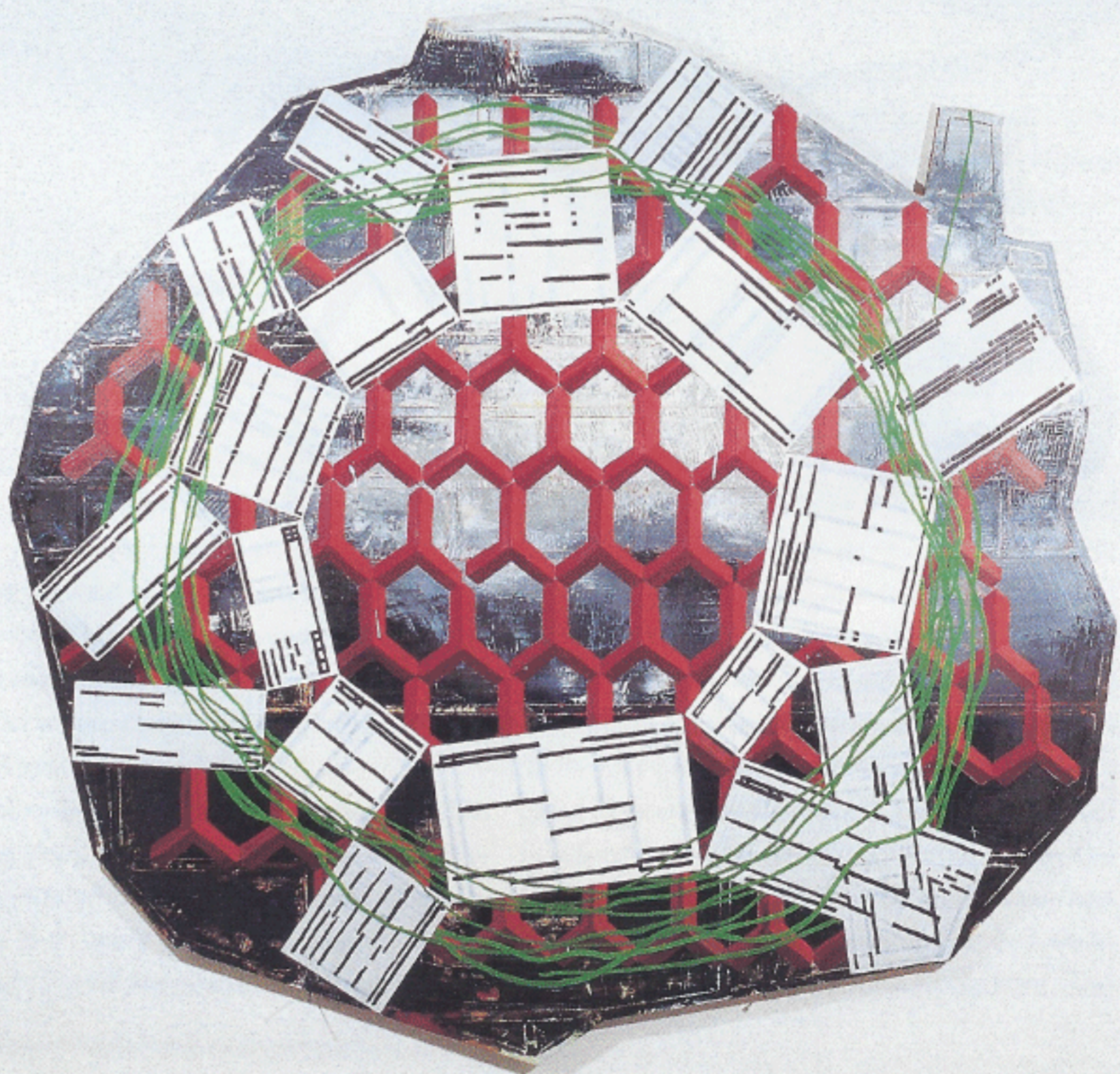


Flower 3, 2001
polymer clay, sterling silver,
mixed media
4 3/4 x 4 1/2"

Flower 14, 2001
polymer clay, sterling silver, brass
diameter 4"



Steven Ford
Untitled, 1991
oil on canvas
78 x 74"



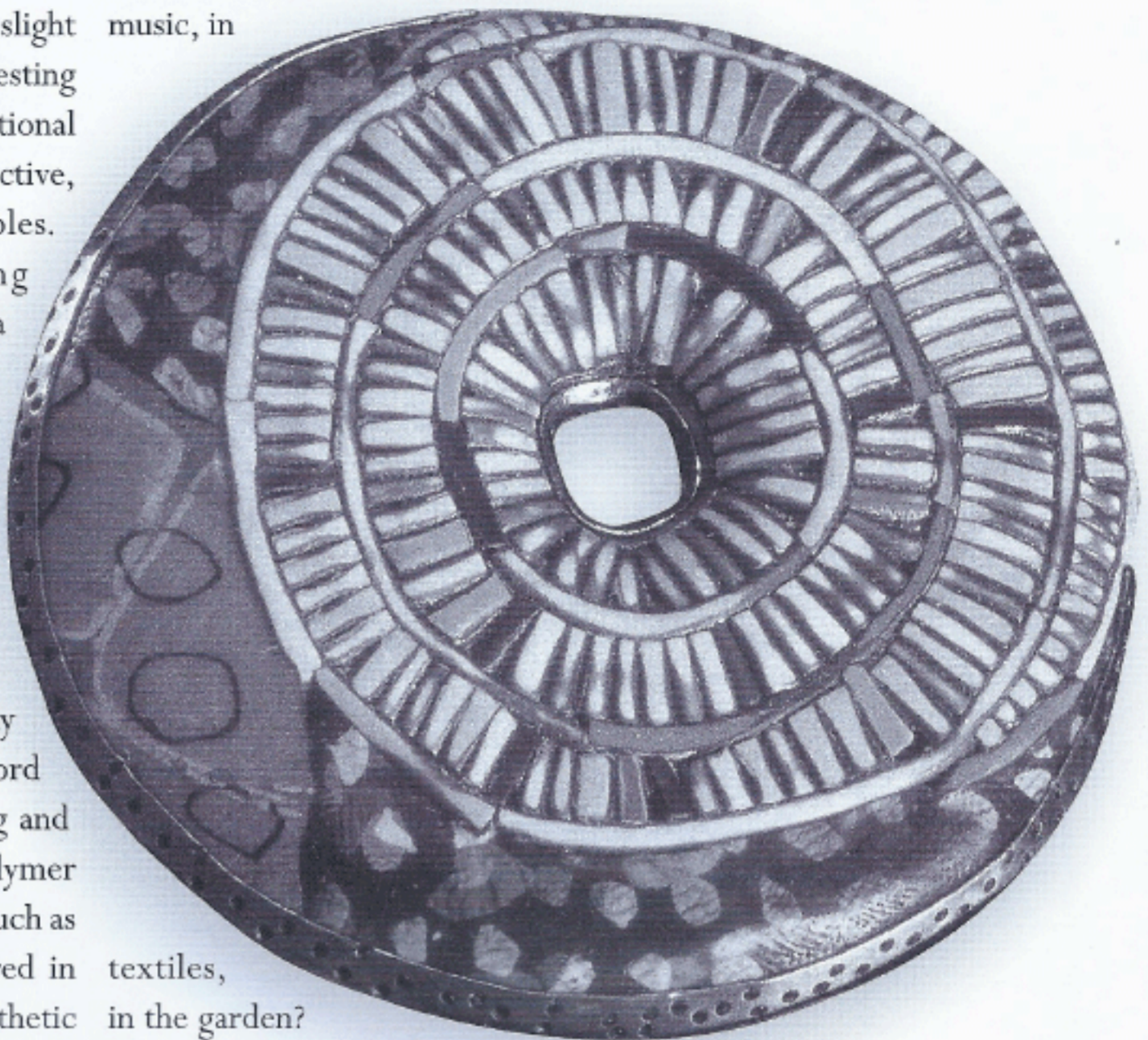
they have had to think about what they're doing in a new way.

The artists make a point of referring to each piece as "one-of-a-kind," even in a collection that would be considered "limited edition," i.e., similar ideas repeatedly expressed with slight variation in color and texture. It's an interesting difference in nomenclature from a traditional jeweler's approach. From a painting perspective, each one is unique; prints are multiples. Conversely, in polymer clay, caning techniques make it too easy to replicate a single idea. Particularly for Forlano, every live performance is unique, especially with improvisation. But in craft, the multiple has legitimacy, even honor; making more than one means having the skills to reproduce it.

Ford and Forlano have clearly left the world of polymer clay behind, and not only because of their increased use of metal. Ford paid his professional dues through teaching and serving as president of the National Polymer Clay Guild. But in a world where projects such as "Bug Buddies" and "Silly Snakes" are offered in books, there is little room for the aesthetic choices they have made. They have used polymer clay for its best qualities—almost limitless texture, form, and color—to create wearable and exciting jewelry. Unconcerned with hiding or disguising the fact that they use polymer clay, they want their audience to respond to the design and not the material, so that after a moment the buyer returns to say, "By the way, what is that?" Like resin artist Peter Chang, whom they admire for his continued ability to confound and delight, they too have transcended their medium.

The pair's award-winning appearances at the elite craft shows introduce some intriguing questions for which there may not be ready answers. They have yet to embrace the world of jewelry in all its history and traditions, and this may ultimately make them the more interesting jewelers. Whereas craft students learn the history of painting, painters don't study craft. On one level, work is ultimately judged on design. Maybe we need new categories. What are reasonable expectations for inclusion into the field? Will Ford and Forlano begin to approach the body the way a jeweler does, to consider

philosophically whether something goes on skin or clothing, neck or breast? Does participation imply some kind of reference to the history of jewelry? Or is it sufficient to be open to influences wherever they present themselves, in music, in



Circle Pin, 2000
polymer clay, sterling silver
diameter 3"

textiles,
in the garden?

Despite at least one disgruntled former fan, who laments that they have taken a darker and more serious turn, Ford and Forlano have been highly successful in the marketplace. But the marketplace is not where they will experience a creative challenge. As long as they continue to make jewelry with the same level of care and probing intelligence, who cares what medium they use? The idea that value does not come from the material is not new in jewelry or in painting. If we want Ford and Forlano to continue to enrich the field, let us embrace and educate them, nurture and engage them. And they will do the same for us. ■

Marjorie Simon is a metalsmith and writer based in New Jersey.

¹ This and all other unattributed quotes taken from conversation and written communication with the artists, July 2002.
² John Berger, "The Moment of Cubism," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), p. 84.
³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.
⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.