

Jennifer: Polymer Clay Art and Techniques

Summary

Artist Jennifer provides a hands-on demonstration and discussion about creating intricate patterns with polymer clay. She explains the properties of the clay, the tools required—most notably a pasta roller—and the step-by-step process for creating complex patterns. The lecture covers mixing custom colors, blending them into a gradient using a "Skinner blend" technique, and shaping the clay into a "cane" with an internal pattern. Further techniques like twisting, squaring, and reducing the cane are shown to create smaller, more detailed, and unique designs. Jennifer shares her personal journey into polymer clay art, offers tips on finishing techniques like sanding, and showcases the wide variety of functional and decorative items that can be made.

1. Introduction to Polymer Clay Art

- **Artist's Background** - Jennifer began her art journey about 20 years ago, starting with painting and drawing for 15 years before transitioning to photorealism. - She was introduced to polymer clay about 7 years ago and has been working with it since. - She found the medium appealing because the entire process, including baking, could be done in her own apartment without needing an external kiln. - The pandemic significantly increased the time she spent on her craft, and she engaged with an international community of polymer clay artists on Facebook.
- **Polymer Clay Properties** - Polymer clay is a plastic product, not a natural earth clay. - It is not food-safe and should not be used in a microwave or dishwasher. Finished bowls can be used to serve dry items like candies or crackers, but not for anything moist like cereal. - The clay comes in various forms, such as 1-pound blocks or smaller 2-ounce blocks. A wide variety of colors can be found online at stores like the "Polymer Clay Superstore." - Jennifer typically starts with primary colors (red, yellow, blue) plus white and black to mix her own custom colors. - Different brands and lines of clay (e.g., Sculpey) have varying textures and characteristics; some are brittle, some pliable, and some very sticky. - The clay is breakable, but as a plastic, it is less fragile than ceramic. Thinner pieces are more prone to breaking.
- **Baking Polymer Clay** - The clay is baked to harden it. Jennifer bakes her pieces at 275 degrees for 20-25 minutes in a dedicated

toaster oven. - It is crucial not to use the same oven for both clay and food because the clay releases gases during baking. - For larger pieces, they can be placed in a metal mixing bowl, covered with foil, and then baked in a regular oven. - Paper, fabric, and metal items can be safely included in the oven during baking, as the temperature is well below their burning point.

- **Essential Tools** - **Pasta Roller:** The most important tool, used for conditioning, mixing, and blending colors. - **Slicer/Scraper:** A blade used for slicing the clay and scraping it off surfaces. A guillotine slicer can be used for even slices. - **Roller:** Used for rolling out clay. - **Needle Tool:** Used for poking out air bubbles. - **Knife:** For general cutting. - **Graph Paper:** Taped to the work surface to help with measuring.

2. Techniques for Creating Patterns and Shapes

- **Cane Creation** - A "cane" is a log of clay with a pattern running through its entire length. It is made by combining and manipulating different colors of clay.
- **Technique 1: Skinner Blend Cane** - **Color Blending:** To create a gradient, different colored pieces of clay are laid out to overlap. This layered clay is repeatedly folded and fed through the pasta roller about 17 times to achieve a smooth "Skinner blend." The clay should always be fed into the roller with the fold side down to push out air. - **Patterned Sheet:** The resulting rectangular sheet with a color gradient is cut, stacked, and rolled through the pasta machine again to create a long, thin strip. - **Constructing the Cane:** The strip is rolled into a cylinder, which is then cut into quarters. The pieces are reshaped and reassembled to form a triangular prism with an internal pattern. This process can be repeated with other colors to create multiple triangular canes. - **Assembling the Cane:** Two different colored triangular canes are placed together (one reversed) and joined. The combined piece is cut in half, flipped, and rejoined to create a symmetrical, butterfly-like pattern. This final assembled block is the "cane."
- **Technique 2: Twisting and Squaring** - A piece of clay (like a triangular cane) is pushed into a round, circular shape. - The roll is twisted tightly while pushing the ends in to prevent spreading. - The twisted roll is then re-shaped into a square or rectangle with sharp corners. - Slicing this new block reveals a

complex, unpredictable pattern, with each slice having a mirror image on its other side.

- **Reducing and Slicing the Cane** - "Reducing the cane" is the process of squeezing and pulling it to make it longer and smaller in diameter. This makes the internal pattern smaller and more detailed without changing it. - Slices from the cane can be used to create patterns. For example, six equilateral triangle slices can be assembled into a hexagon in multiple ways to create distinct designs.
- **Creating 3D and Curved Shapes** - To create curved pieces like concave earrings, the raw clay is pressed into the inside of a spoon and then baked. - To make a bowl, clay can be pressed into a ceramic bowl, baked, and then popped out.
- **Multi-Part Assembly** - Baked pieces can be attached to each other using raw clay, which is then baked again to fuse them. This is useful for complex items like a lidded box.

3. Finishing and Application

- **Sanding** - After baking, pieces are often sanded to become smooth. - A progression of sandpaper grits is used, starting with a rough grit (e.g., 80 or 100) and moving to progressively finer grits (up to 2500).
- **Making Jewelry** - To make earrings, a hole is pushed through the clay piece before baking. After baking and sanding, metal hooks and loops are attached.
- **Creative Applications** - Jennifer has made a wide variety of items, including: earrings, pendants, brooches, bowls, tissue box covers, a sofa-arm caddy, soap dishes, light switch covers, and custom car cup holder covers. - Leftover "scrap" clay can be used as a base for new items. - A unique application involves taking a picture of a flat clay pattern, importing it into software to create a repeating design, and printing it as custom wrapping paper and a matching card.
- **Learning and Inspiration** - Jennifer is self-taught, learning from YouTube videos (e.g., by Fiona Able-Smith), Facebook groups, and books. - Inspiration can come from anywhere, such as a pattern on a blouse.