

# artist profile

**Name**  
Elise Winters

**Specialty**  
Polymer clay jewellery

**Based**  
New Jersey, USA

**Contact**  
www.elisewinters.com

All work was photographed  
by Hap Sakwa.

Polymer clay has an image problem according to artist, Elise Winters. Pigeon holed by some to the world of hobbyists and DIY craft TV shows, Elise has spent more than a decade opening the art world's eyes to the true complexity and potential of this medium. Her own work - iridescent, luminous and colour rich - has done as much to illustrate the point as her studious lobbying of museums and galleries, as well as the establishment of the Polymer Collection Project.



Nine Sautoir



Cool Jewel Ruffle Brooch

"Serendipity brought me to polymer," says Elise who had, over the years, found success in both ceramics and photography. "I had bought a pair of earrings from (art jewellery makers) Steve Ford and David Forlano and was wearing them at a party. An acquaintance saw them and asked where she could do a polymer clay class. The next week I saw an ad for workshops locally. I needed a purple necklace for a kindergarten class I was teaching and thought this would be a perfect medium to teach it in so I went along."

For a woman whose work has been seen at SOFA (the critically acclaimed Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Fair), the Philadelphia Museum of Art Fine Craft Show and in the highly regarded *Ornament* magazine, it seems quite amusing that she initially came to polymer with such low aims.

"I had quit ceramics for various reasons and tried a few other things but was not a natural," Elise says. "My reaction to polymer was instantaneous. Within days the dining room table was covered in it. We have always been big entertainers but for a year we had no one over for dinner - all because of this clay."

Elise says her work in ceramics and her experience in photography gave her a true understanding of colour and colour theory and a concern for light has under-pinned every phase of her artistic career.

"An underrated advantage of getting older (I am just over 60) is you can bring your experiences together," she says.

Whether it's the patterns she created in translucent porcelain by manipulating thickness and texture or the delicate shifting colours of an evening sky she observed as a photographer, Elise says polymer clay "affords me the opportunity to merge all these". She uses specially formulated metallic acrylic paints and iridescent glazes to create her distinctive colour effects.

Another thing Elise likes about polymer



follow your passion

Elise Winters  
(photograph by  
Guy Brown)

is its practical nature. "It's not a time sensitive material," she explains. "You can leave it for an hour or a few days and come back, pick up and start working again."

**"We have always been big entertainers but for a year we had no one over for dinner - all because of this clay"**  
- Elise

"I have a dedicated area now to work in with a (convection) oven I use specifically for the polymer. It is, at the end of the day, an art material and I don't like the idea of it being in close proximity to where food is prepared. But it is a medium that employs a lot of kitchen tools." This may be one of the contributing factors to works in polymer clay not being taken 'seriously' by the arts community generally.

"Initially I was still working full time (as a teacher) and selling my polymer work on the side," says Elise. "I soon realised this was kind of nuts because you could never get much money for it. It needed to be taken seriously as an art form. It suffered even worse discrimination than textile art."

Not one to wait for others to change the status quo, Elise decided to start changing the perception of polymer through her own stealth activities. Her goals included seeing the creation of a centre for the study of polymer art in one of the USA's leading craft museums and ensuring that same museum mounted a major exhibition of polymer art objects. She also wanted to participate in the writing of a museum catalogue which would document the historical development of the art form and honour the most influential and accomplished professionals in the field.

Back in 1994, according to Elise, even the finest polymer examples, sold in Julie Artisans' Gallery in Madison Avenue, New York, were priced at only US\$60 or so. "If the best artists were getting that, how could a newcomer like me make any money or elevate attitudes towards this material?" she asks.

"I've been like a dog with a bone," she says of her mission. In 1997 she organised the Masters' Invitational Polymer Clay Exhibit (MIPCES) with the express goal of introducing the medium to serious craft collectors and curators in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

"This was our first real effort to get attention outside of the enthusiasts'

Red Cascade Ruffle Neckpiece



Red Ruffle Rouche



Ruffle Brooches



circle," she explains. "I thought I was doing it for the other artists but then they invited me to be part of it too. Honestly I wasn't sure I really belonged in their calibre but I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I decided not to let fear get in my way. And, in the end, it was a great success and I felt I was amongst my peers."

She has organised other exhibitions and in late 1999 presented an educational slide presentation at the American Craft Museum to educate curatorial staff about the artistic merit of work being done in polymer clay.

Elise has also been collecting and preserving slides, print materials and other ephemera related to the history and development of polymer clay art work. This collection of artefacts and data can now be used as source material for curators and collectors and forms the basis of the Polymer Art Archive ([www.polymerartarchive.com](http://www.polymerartarchive.com)) and the Polymer Collection Project.

On this website professional artists working in polymer can find inspiration and museum and gallery curators can access historical and background information, while serious collectors can discover windows to new works and learn about the medium's most collectable artists.

**Racine Art Museum (RAM) will become the national centre for the elevation, exhibition, and academic study of polymer.**

In addition, through much hard work, face-to-face visits across the country and promotion of polymer art works, Elise has also managed to convince some of the USA's most prestigious museums to exhibit polymer in their permanent collections. And, as is declared on the Polymer Art Archive site, "The polymer community has found a national champion in Bruce W.

Pepich, Executive Director and Curator of Collections at the Racine Art Museum (RAM) in Racine, Wisconsin. Bruce is currently planning a major museum exhibition complete with hardcover catalogue to accompany the establishment of a permanent collection of polymer art at RAM. When his vision is realised, RAM will become the national centre for the elevation, exhibition and academic study of our chosen artistic medium." At the end of this month Elise will be speaking about this project at the International Polymer Clay Association's national conference ([www.npcg.org](http://www.npcg.org)).

With such superhuman effort taking place on behalf of the polymer community at large one can, however, be distracted from the continually evolving beauty and artistry of Elise's own work. There is a regal lushness to it; the shapes are curvaceous, begging to be touched and the originality of her jewellery would make any wearer stand out.

"Yes I have to admit my own work has suffered a bit attention-wise while I've been doing all this but I am getting back to it now. In January 2009 my work with museums and so forth went from being a little red engine to a runaway train," Elise says. "I have a process where I reassess my priorities every 12 to 18 months and I'm going through that now."

At present, with a "full blown" studio in her home, Elise is able to adapt her creative habits to fit her life. "I tend to work glacially," she says. "If I am based at home I can work for a little while then go off and potter with something else, then come back to it. I do more concentrated blocks of work after dinner, often for four to five hours. That's when the distractions of 'real life' lessen."

Her efforts relating to museums and galleries plus her work on the Polymer Collection Project have opened doors for her, contributing to her need to plot new goals and priorities. "Up until spring of last year (March to May in the USA) I was doing mostly retail and craft shows, making stuff to wear and doing a little bit of wholesaling. I was only submitting things for juried competitions when asked to," she says.

"Now I think I'll cut back on that lower end work. I've started making ruffle pieces and they've been really well received. I am thinking of placing them in higher end jewellery galleries where they can fetch around US\$2500 per necklace. That's just a hunk of change for them but it means a lot to me." Elise also sells work from her website where her work is presented in stunning photographs by Californian photographer, Hap Sakwa.

Elise says polymer has many qualities that make it attractive and describes it as being "especially seductive" to the newcomer because it is so accessible and can be worked on at home without an expensive array of tools.


"But with 20 years of practice we now have real masters producing work," she stresses. "For me the appeal is in the abstract work you can produce. I love

the medium for its colour, its plasticity and malleability. It allows me to capture a certain kind of energy in form, colour and light.

**"It allows me to capture a certain kind of energy in form, colour and light" - Elise**

"In all my work I think this is what I am after ... the subtle shifts in colour, the way things grow, like the energy that comes from leaves changing colour. I'm pretty excited about my current work."

And if newcomers wish to try their hand at polymer Elise recommends attending a class or workshop. She says there seems to be heaps of information on the Internet at the moment and recommends two sites in particular – Polymer Clay Daily [www.polymerclaydaily.com](http://www.polymerclaydaily.com) and Daily Art Muse [www.dailyartmuse.com](http://www.dailyartmuse.com).

"The one thing I would say to people is, don't think you have to sell your work to call yourself an artist," Elise says. "I don't believe in talent, I believe in drive and perseverance. Anyone who has that drive, who can just keep at it and work, because it is work, can do it." 

follow your passion



Citron Cascade Ruffle Neckpiece



Pentala Brooch

Tropic Brio Necklace

