

Sense and Nonsense: The Mind of Sarah Shriver

A profile by Trina Williams

photographs by Trina Williams

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[Editor's Letter](#) | [Letters to the Editor](#) |
[Beginners' Corner](#) | [Questions and Answers](#) | [ACC Baltimore 2002](#) |
[Trend Spotting](#) | [Sarah Shriver Profile](#)
| [Party Favors](#) | [Vessels with an Attitude](#) | [Email Us!](#) | [Home](#)

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I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. --Dr. Seuss

"Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

Everyone laughs. The tension is broken and Sarah Shriver goes on with the intricacies of her method. For instruction in a mind-boggling cane technique, you can't beat Sarah's teaching methods -- her humor keeps things in perspective.



Delighted to have the opportunity to take a Sarah Shriver cane workshop, I once more set off for San Diego, this time armed with lots of old Fimo I spent an eternity conditioning, and with my fellow guild member, Myra Katz, in tow.

It was a weekend of laughing and building and coming up with something quite satisfying to most of us. Basically, Sarah uses a kaleidoscope cane construction that is a little bit of Natasha bead (the mirroring), a little bit of faux fabric (the inclusions), and a whole lot of precision.



Notable among the other students was Judith Skinner, who was there on kind of a busman's holiday and to learn new ways to use her blend. She said it was nice to take a class from someone else for a change.

We learned to "read" a blend and be able to determine our colors from the percentages in the blend (or so the fine print says). And on Sunday, Marie Segal joined us. (She, of course, used Premo, as did several other students.)

It was interesting to see the results between the Fimo and Premo. For next month's Polymer Clay Polyzine, I am going to do a cane comparison article between Fimo, Premo and the new Kato Polyclay.

Anyhow, back to the workshop. Sarah's basic philosophy is that if one image is good, sixteen are better. And she is known for her detailed, precise designs. A product of Southern California, she studied at San Diego State College and UC Davis, where she received a degree in art. She has lived in the Bay area since 1983. Her "neighbors" are Barbara McGuire, Pier Voukos and Gwen Gibson.

Sarah was working at Mendel's and Far Out Fabrics, a San Francisco craft store, in 1985 when she was introduced to polymer clay. She told me the employees used to take products home and play with them to develop projects. It was at this time that she also saw the work of Martha Breen, another of our PC pioneers.

Myra gets some help



"I started making beads and buttons and often looked to the History of Beads book for inspiration," says Sarah. "I made face canes after looking at the ancient Hellenistic glass millefiore beads in the book."

Originally Sarah thought she would like to work in glass and took some of her beads on a trip to the island of Murano outside of Venice. "I met up with some glass workers," she said. "They took me on a picnic on another island with some of the glass masters. Humbly, I presented a small handful of my beads to one of the masters who said 'this is not glass, this is s---!' So I began to rethink the glass option".

It was at this time, fortuitously, that Sarah also realized that the things she was interested in, like repeat patterns, had a lot less flexibility in glass.



Nan Roche's book *The New Clay* introduced Sarah to other people working with polymer clay -- Sarah's fish bone necklace appears on page 58. At the time there was a whole corps of polymer clay artists in the Bay area, including Jamey Allen, Ruth and Michael Grove, Martha Breen and Pier Voukos. Sarah met Gwen Gibson at a sewing workshop and they are neighbors in San Rafael, CA.

Several years ago when the Embellishment conference was in Sacramento, CA, Sarah was commissioned to design the commemorative bead. Only fifty of the poppy beads were made. As you can see by the picture, there was a lot of preliminary work involved.

Some valuable advice: saving various stages of your cane allows its use in post cane manipulation and tweaking of the design. Sarah recommends saving a part of each stage of the process for future reference.



Now, in the workshop, as we proceeded from making blended sheets and stacking them for the first manipulation, Sarah circulated among the students offering help. A simple number system allowed her to get around to everyone (some of us many times!).

At one particular juncture she warned us that many students placed their inclusion elements in the wrong direction. Guess who did that? Luckily, the Fimo was fairly easy to take apart and fix at that point.

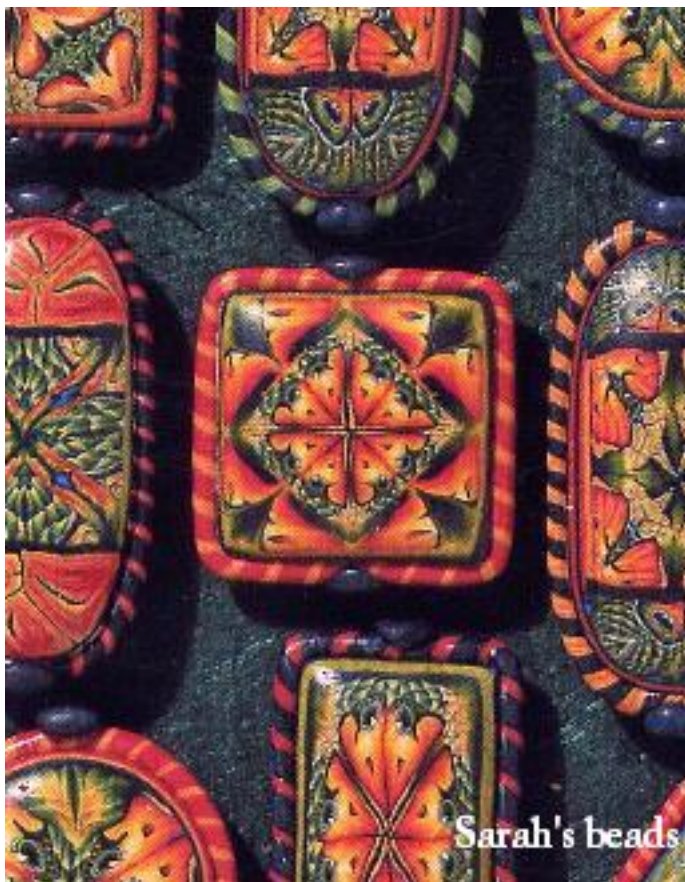
One of the color tips Sarah gave us was to stay away from complimentary colors, as they tend to get "muddy" in the reduction process.



I had bought a pair of Sarah's earrings at Ravensdale 2000 and was glad she brought along a wide sampling of her work. She did a brisk business during the workshop (as most of us knew we would never be able to make anything as precise!).

(One of the directions in her handout says, "Unless you are a natural with spatial relations...." which prompted Myra to comment later "Her mind doesn't work like the rest of us".)

Besides at her workshops, Sarah sells her work at craft fairs and around the country when she gives classes. The Celebration of Craftswomen, a large, well-known craft show in San Francisco is one of her favorites.



Most of Sarah's beads are sanded and buffed to a high sheen. She has two employees who help with the finishing. Some of her work is left in the matte finish, which results in quite a difference in price, owing to the work involved.

In her necklaces Sarah prefers a mix of beads, as you can see in this scan from her postcard. All of these designs sprang from the same original cane, which has been combined and recombined in different configurations (which is why we had so much cane to work with).



I was a little nervous on Sunday when Sarah took a part of my much-agonized-over cane and said "tweak it like this" and proceeded to do just that. But I took that tweaked piece and made a cute little fish.

One of the important lessons we took away from this class was that with a lot of care and attention to detail you can produce a cane that will be useful to you through many permutations. Wish me luck on repeating this process for my comparison article next month!

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