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## Trina's Excellent Adventure: Comparing Clays by Trina Williams

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I'm not sure whether this is a comparison of three brands of clay or a perils and pitfalls of trying to duplicate a certain pattern. Whatever the outcome it was certainly an adventure. It probably would have been more scientific to do something fairly simple.

My original idea sprang from the Sarah Shriver class I took, in which the following occurred: the users of Premo seemed to be struggling (except for Marie Segal who can cane with butter), the participants were all whispering about the Kato Polyclay, and I was using Fimo, as recommended by the instructor. With these three clays in such close proximity, I wondered: how do they compare to each other?

In my profiles of artists, I try not to give away too much information about technique, as these artists are making their living teaching. However, and as I pointed out in my article on Sarah Shriver, I wouldn't be able to do a step-by-step replication of Sarah's techniques to save my soul. Other people feel the same way: Lori Greenberg of Arizona commented, in a recent online discussion, "I could give a whole class on [my technique] and I can almost guarantee that it couldn't be done with the same precision or consistency as I do it myself." Certainly that supports my observation.



**Trina's fish pins, made with her Sarah Shriver cane**

Therefore, for the sake of demonstrating the differences between the clays, I will be using some techniques I learned in the Sarah Shriver class. But trust me, what techniques I reveal here don't come close to what a workshop with Sarah can teach you.

I am going to use a design element that consists of triangles formed into a kaleidoscopic design. For the purposes of this article, I will just deal with the triangular elements, not the end results, although you may see the end results in some of the photos from my original cane from Sarah's class.

### **FIMO**

Like many of you, I have a stash of old Fimo. I have been using Premo for most things since it was in beta testing. Because Sarah suggested Fimo in her supply list and this was to be an intricate design, I dug out my Fimo. Between the food processor, diluent, Mix-Quick and my Pasta Machine with motor it took the good part of two weeks to get my clay ready. It was close to four pounds. I did a few extra colors in case I changed my mind or had time to do two canes (haha).

My clay had been conditioned in large sheets and it took only a few passes through the pasta machine to get it ready for doing the Skinner blends. The clay remained cool and firm and took some coaxing to seal the edges of the blends together. As usual, I was doing my own thing when it came to color selection and didn't heed Sarah's recommendation to avoid complimentary colors. I didn't exactly get muddy colors but my contrast left a lot to be desired.



Once I got my colors stacked and started reducing I was pleasantly surprised by how supple and responsive the cane was. But you can tell by looking at the two Fimo slices in Photo 1, which one is Sarah's and which one was made by more wobbly hands.

The original class was in January of this year. When I started working on this article a few weeks ago, I took out my canes to do some more reducing and get them ready for photographing. They were still very supple. The black clay used for outlining was still well conditioned and only needed one pass through the pasta machine.

## **PREMO**

Several people in our class did their canes with Premo. They seemed to be having some problem with uniformity and got long unwieldy looking cane, but when assembled, their designs looked pretty good. More experienced caners, like Marie, had no problem with Premo.

So my second cane for the article was with Premo. I was trying to follow Sarah's written instructions and suggested colors. I didn't have any white so I used Pearl for my light color and it got very mushy. However, the blends went very easily. The stickiness of the clay helped the colors adhere to each other, making the blended sheets fold without seam separation.

After I stacked my sheets and started reducing them I found it hard to control the Premo, and I got a lot of distortion in the ends. At this point it was easy to trim the ends without losing the design. But after I went to the next step, forming triangles, the mushiness got to be too much and I decided to start over. At this point I went out and bought some white Premo.

I decided to use blue, yellow and white in the new Premo cane. The only blue I had was an old package of CFC (Clay Factory Clay) that had been around since the development stages of Premo. Unlike the old Fimo, this clay, although a little dry, was immediately conditionable. I was able to put slices right into the pasta machine with no crumbling.

By the time I was doing my blends, the Premo was beginning to get a little too soft again, so I leached it on some plain paper. This helped a little but it got softer as I worked it and



Photo 2: uneven lines in the Premo cane

gave me distorted ends. In Photo 2 you can see the uneven lines in the Premo canes as compared to the Fimo shown in Photo 3.

Photo 3: even lines with Fimo and Kato clay



Photo 4: Saving the Premo cane by making it round

One of the keys to Sarah's precision is in making sure the contrast lines (she uses black) match as you are putting your design pieces together. I found the matching to be more difficult to achieve with the Premo than with the Fimo. However, I was able to salvage the earlier red/yellow cane by folding over the triangle peaks and turning it into a round cane. See photo 4.

The new Premo cane with blue, yellow and white went together relatively well after I let it rest a couple of days. When cutting it with the blade there was a higher degree of blade drag, which was easily corrected with talc.

After I reduced the triangle to get six sections for a kaleidoscope, the Premo cane was getting soft again, and when I took a slice for photographing there was quite a bit of blade drag and smooshing of the cane. A trip to the refrigerator would have helped. See photo 6 for a comparison of the Premo and Kato kaleidoscope cane.

## KATO POLYCLAY

It was very exciting to work with the new Kato Polyclay. The plastic smell everyone has been talking about was evident but not bothersome. I think that some people have higher sensitivities to odor. I kept smelling it to try to figure out what it reminded me of and it was just "new" plastic, not unlike opening up a new plastic tablecloth or some of the vinyl equipment covers out there.

As I was cutting slices and putting them through the pasta machine, the slabs stayed cool and pliable without getting overly warm. The Kato yellow is very lemony compared to the Premo Cadmium yellow.

The blending process was similar to the Fimo but with less pressure needed to seal the color edges together. I think most of us have found by now that if you have gaps in the edges you can reapproximate them in the first fold and still get a good blend. A little more patience and work with the brayer to begin with solves this problem nicely.

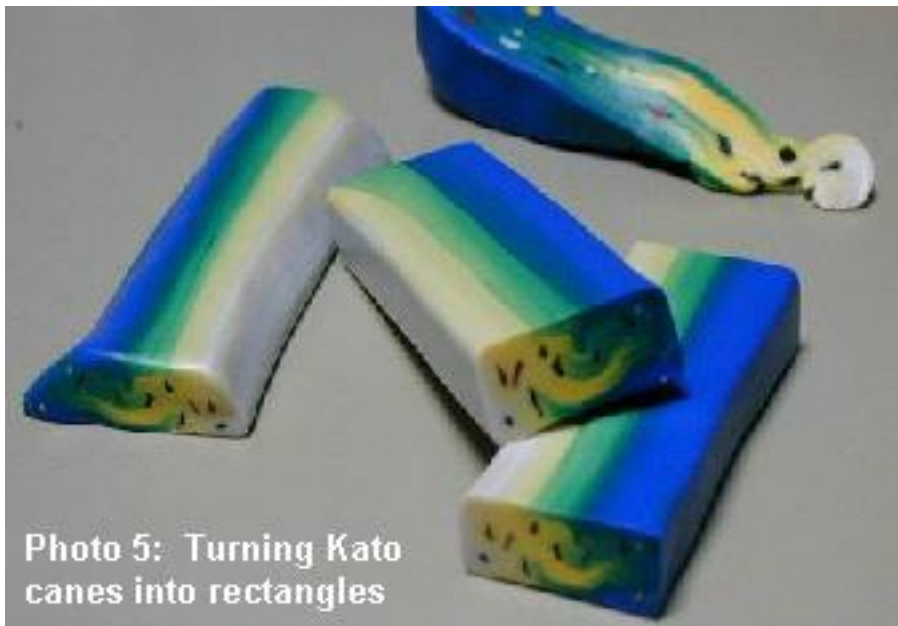


Photo 5: Turning Kato canes into rectangles

After piling up the slabs of blend and adding some contrasting inclusions, I reduced the cane to the rectangles you see in Photo 5. This was very similar to the Fimo process. The lines stayed neat and the cane was rather silky and responded to the stretching much like the Fimo does. Again there was little or no distortion of the ends. All of the colors stayed the same consistency.

As in the original Premo cane, I used Kato Polyclay Pearl (mixed with some translucent) because I had not received any white and couldn't go out and buy any. There was no mushiness and the cane sliced beautifully with no blade drag. I was able to slice it right away with no resting.

The colors stayed true during the curing process. There was a sheen to the sliced pieces that probably doesn't show in the pictures. In another project I was working on, I found that I spent a lot less time sanding and buffing.



When I put my six triangles together I got a very crisp cane, which you can see in photo 6.

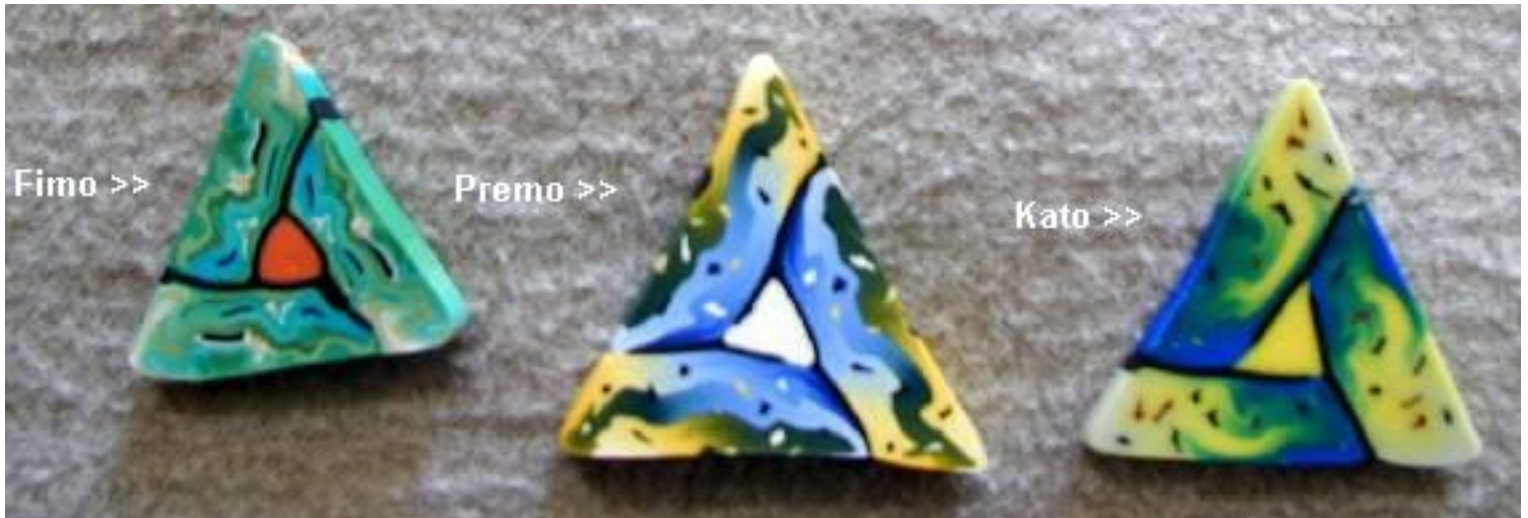
## CONCLUSIONS

I did not set out to prove which clay was the best, only to give you an idea of some of the comparative features. Detailed canes need firm clay; the Fimo and Kato clays would fall into this category. These canes can be cut right away. For ease of conditioning Premo and Kato are close. In holding true color after curing the only difference I could see was that the Premo Pearl tends to darken. But oven placement may influence that effect. My own convection oven keeps the truest colors if I use the bottom rack.

However, results are not always dependent upon the clay. Practice does make perfect. By the time I had repeated this process four times, I could see a great improvement from my first (the green/orange) to my last the (blue/yellow with yellow center). See the photo with the three triangles.

I would expect that those of you new to caning would have better results with the firmer clay. Since the Kato Polyclay conditions so much easier than Fimo, it appears to have the edge. But the clay you choose is greatly a matter of choice and by working with all of the clays you will find one that suits your purposes.

As for me, now I have several pounds of cane. I could make little fish pins into the next millennium. Anyone have a Volkswagen I can cover?



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