

Profile of an Artist: James Lehman by Deirdre F Woodward

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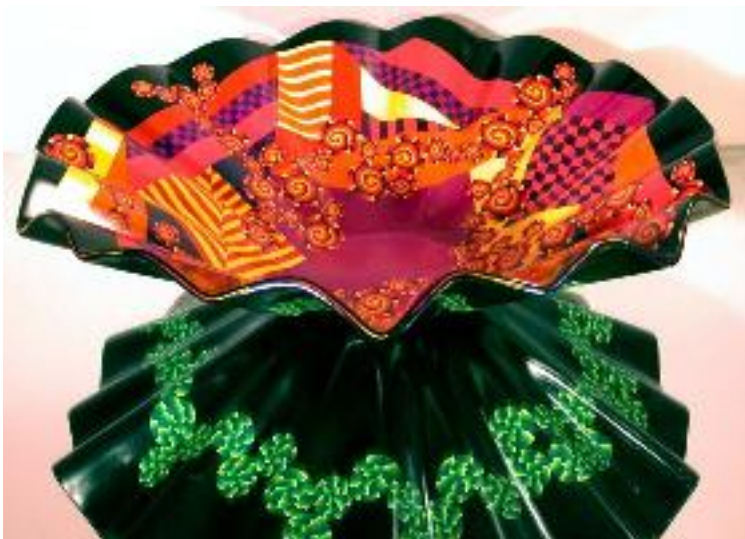
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I've been involved with polymer clay long enough to know that while projects and objects abound, it's not often that someone creates something so entirely different, so entirely new, so unbelievably exciting in its use of color and form, that the polymer clay community's collective jaw drops.

Guess what -- time to pick your jaw up off the floor.

[James Lehman](#), a 37-year-old musician turned web developer turned artist from Akron, Ohio, has taken polymer clay to new levels of artistry with his use of color and form to create sculpted bowls of vibrant color.

After James posted his website to a polymer clay newsgroup, I went to take a look. Intrigued by James' website, [Painting In Space](#), and amazed by his work, I wanted to know more, so I e-mailed him a list of questions. Here are his answers:



1. *What is your background?*

I have no formal education in art or design.

In grade school, I was the guy who mixed up the tempera paint to make flesh-tone for the other kids who wanted to paint people. I've always been a huge fan of color and the science behind it.

I was into art when I was in high school and I did some neat stuff then.

At one time, I was a very accomplished rock-n-roll musician. I wrote a lot of original music, played and recorded all of the instruments, sang all the parts and produced a solo CD of 22 songs called James Lehman 11:16:64, released in 1990.

During my college years, I played around with photo copy and cut paper designs, but just for fun.

I used color photocopy cut paper for the front of my CD and a photocopy manipulated image of a tie dye T shirt for the back.

Through many years of personal exploration of computer graphics and programming, I have learned a considerable amount about different systems of color synthesis and two dimensional spatial design.

Engineering and the art of how to make something plays a greater role in my mind than what to make.

2. When did you start working with polymer clay?

I first saw items made from it in counter culture, probably in the late '80s; lots of beads, pendants, and yes, those amazingly decorated pot pipes!

As soon as I saw the decorations, I knew



that it must be hardened colored clay.

I didn't find the stuff until sometime in early 93. I made a lot of beads and I still have most of them. I'm not really a bead person, but that is what I thought would complement the other items that I was making and selling at outdoor festivals.

Then I put my attention to using polymer clay to make the artwork for what was supposed to be my next CD.

I had just finished those pieces and was still enjoying the buzz of having made really neat art, when a good friend, who I hadn't seen in a while, came by to visit.

He brought a book with him that he saw and thought was "so me" that he had to get it for me. It was *The New Clay* by Nan Roche.

Then I showed him the piece that I had just made. He had no idea that I was already into polymer clay. I guess he knows me pretty well. We both had a good laugh. I really enjoy having the book, too!

I got carried away with other projects, like building an entire surround-sound speaker system, and I never got back to working with polymer clay until this June [2001], while I was off work, recovering from a hip surgery.

That is when I made the large 17-inch flat disk that hangs on the wall in my workspace and can be seen in my [Gallery 1](#).

After that I made a half-translucent, half glow-in-the-dark three-wave fan, also seen in [Gallery 1](#).

Then, I made another translucent piece that has 16 blue LEDs lighting it from the back.

When I made the square-ish, free form bowl that has the crazy quilt pattern on the inside and the even parallel, metallic stripes on the back, seen as the first piece in [Gallery 2](#), that is when my artist friends said this is something that could be sold in galleries.



3. What techniques do you favor/What innovations have you made?

When I first saw objects decorated with cane slices, I was fascinated by the detail and excited by the possibilities. But, I like big art and most of what I saw was very small.

So it seemed natural to me to want to decorate large surfaces with polymer clay. That is when I used oven-cooking bags to work large sheets of polymer clay and cook them.

Large flat sheets led to wavy sheets and wavy sheets led to bowls.

My work right now is largely in two categories: sculpture that is made as a flat sheet, distorted into a three-dimensional form and cooked, and sculpture that is made on a three dimensional form, cooked and removed from the form.

None of my work is based on surface texture. All of my pieces are sanded as smooth as I can get them.

I like the idea of making large structural forms out of 100% polymer clay.

I have stumbled upon many ways to get great control of where the individual colors go when working the clay. I pay a lot of attention to the clay and watch what it does. I let the clay be clay and I learn from that.

Many times I've seen patterns that I really like while I'm in the middle of going somewhere else. I will stop right there and use it.

A finished piece of my work rarely looks anything like what I had in mind when I started.

Yes, I do lay in bed at night and think about polymer clay before I go to sleep!

Every time I make a new piece of art I learn something new about how to do it better or different the next time.



4. *Why polymer clay?*

With polymer clay, I can accumulate my efforts towards making art. The time that it takes to make a cane can yield quite a lot of slices. I can leave it and come back to it and not lose any ground.

It seems to absorb a lot of positive energy from me. It doesn't take an extraordinary amount of care to preserve and protect unfinished work.

It allows me to achieve as much detail in my work as I am willing or able to attempt.

It offers me many opportunities to change my mind without destroying my effort.

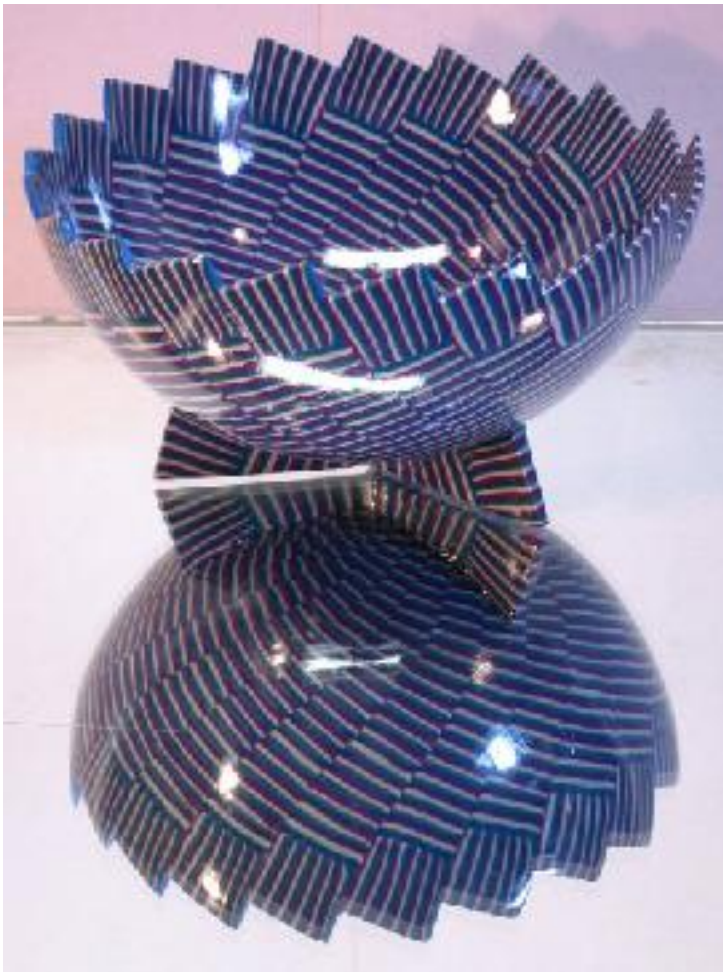
It also allows me to "Paint Space."

I'm not putting color on a flat surface, I'm putting color in space itself. There is no other medium of art that can do that.

Probably my favorite aspect of polymer clay is the way that it can so naturally and meaningfully illustrate principals of mathematics, three dimensional geometry and physics in beautiful vivid designs. To me, polymer clay is squishy math in my hands.

Plus the quality of the material that is available today is pretty fantastic. The way bright light penetrates the surface of a finished piece of clay and illuminates it from the inside is amazing to me. The colors couldn't be any better.

I'm very grateful that this stuff is here for me to use.



5. Do you sell your stuff/Where?/How much?/Over the web at all?

I'm really just getting started.

The bulk of what's on the Web as of this writing was done in August and September of this year.

I was in a gallery here in Akron, Ohio, for a show this fall [2001].

My pieces look good in groups. I'm working on accumulating as many finished pieces as I can for the greatest impact as a show.

If someone offered me the right money for a piece that they saw on the Web, I would gladly send it to them.

It is likely that I will be pricing each piece that appears on the Web fairly soon.



6. *Where do you see yourself going from here?*

I probably need to join several guilds and alliances that can put me into contact with the prominent people who help talent find the public.

Teaching is something that I think I might be interested in. Since I made my website known in the newsgroup rec.crafts.polymer-clay, I have had quite a few inquiries.

Hopefully, my designs will catch the eyes of leading home design & art magazines, and perhaps I will be featured as an artist outside of the realm of other polymer clay artists.

Maybe some of this attention will spread to other areas of my art, like my LED light sculptures, my high-end home speaker designs and possibly my music.

Eventually I would love to have a small group of galleries in major cities carry my work. I would love for my designs to be sought after by collectors.

I would love to have a large collection of my work "tour" North American major cities. My dream is to one day have original works of art on display in prestigious museums.

I have no doubt his "would"s will become "have"s. By the way, James sands his pieces until they are very smooth, then coats them with several layers of Flecto Varathane. James also participated in two chats at [Polymer Clay Central](#). The transcript of those chats can be read in the [guest chat archives](#) on Polymer Clay Central. -- Deirdre F Woodward