

Rockfish Boxes

By Joanie Croyder



Supplies you will need:

- 2 oz black clay
- Approximately 2-4 oz of various clay colors of your choice, for embellishment (amount will vary with the size of your fish & the type of embellishment layer you choose to use)
- smooth rock, in a size of your choice
- tissue blade
- Exacto knife with fresh blade
- cornstarch
- Pasta machine (optional)
- Sobo (white glue)

This project calls for using a strong clay. Fimo is my personal preference, unless I want to use metallics for embellishment. I use the Premo for that. I find that Premo seems to shrink a bit more than Fimo. That's just my personal experimentation, but it seems pretty evident when you're doing a project like a notebook cover where the holes need to stay aligned. Premo has worked well with the smaller notebooks, but when I do a larger notebook I've found I have to use the Fimo, although it does shrink a bit as well. Otherwise I can't get the holes to line up with the paper.

In that same vein, when I'm encasing a good-sized object, like these rocks, I've found that I get some cracking with the Premo. I surmise this is from shrinkage because the cold water bath doesn't pull these cracks back together for me. The repair/disguising on those boxes can be a real headache.

For these reasons, I recommend the Fimo. Please don't take this as knock on Premo; it's a wonderful clay & I do use it for other types of projects!

When you bake, be sure you bake at the recommended time and temperature for the brand that you choose.

Rock Choices & Applying The Base Layer



These are the rocks I personally use to build my fish boxes with. They're called Mexican River Rocks, and I got them from a place locally that supplies rock & stone to landscapers. You can probably find something similar in your yellow pages under Rock or Stone. These rocks are really smooth but not polished. The regular beige-ish river rock you're probably more familiar with should work just as well, and the polished ones too for that matter.

Pick rocks that have no extreme dips, curves, crevasses, or dimples. Those type of things can trap the clay onto the rock

when it's time to cut it off and is most frustrating.

I use cornstarch as a release agent on my rocks. To apply it, throw some cornstarch in a baggie, toss the rocks in and shake them up. Then tap most of the loose cornstarch off before adding the clay layer.

You could just as easily brush the cornstarch on or apply it with your fingers. Alternatively you could use one of the pearlized or iridescent powders as a release for a nice interior effect if you'd like.

Foil would not be my choice of release on small boxes such as these. It will introduce more problems with air pockets than it's worth on this project.

For the base layer I choose black clay because it's harder to see interior flaws on dark clay and the seams do tend to show a bit. You can use any color though and, in fact, lighter colors might lend themselves better to decorative treatments on the interior, such as a glitter-filled layer of Liquid Sculpey!

You may also choose to cover one side of your base layer with canes, or mokume gane, in order to *spark* up the interior. In that case, the decorated layer would lay against the rock when you cover it.



Step One:

Cover the rock, with your base layer, just like you would a pen. I have a seven-setting atlas pasta machine, #1 being the widest setting. I use a #3 thickness for both the base layer & the embellishment layer. I find this doesn't bulk it up too much, while still giving me a nice strong wall.

Lay the rock on top of your clay sheet. Bring one side over the rock to about the center of your rock and trim it if you have to.



Step Two:

Bring the other side gently up over the first. Softly rub where the seam will be with your finger, then lay the clay back onto the table. This should create a guide mark.



Step Three:

Use your tissue blade to cut along the guide mark.



Step Four:

Bring your clay back up onto the rock and your seams should butt nicely together.



Step Five:

Smooth the seam out with your finger.



Step Six:

Pinch the clay closed on both ends of your rock. Try to get as much air out as you can.



Step Seven:

Use your tissue blade to trim away excess clay on one end. It's okay if you trim the seam close to the rock and it opens up. Just butt the seam back up together, patting out any air.

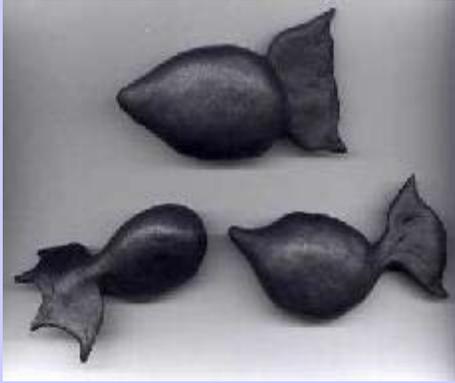


Step Eight:

Smooth the seams on the end you just trimmed. Make sure the rock is snugged into the end tightly. Then trim & smooth the other end in the same fashion.

Caution! Be **very** careful to make sure you haven't left any air bubbles under the clay before baking. If you find any, you can poke them with a blade or needle and pat the air out at the same time as you pat the hole closed. This can be a frustrating time in the life of your fishy project, but rest assured it gets easier with a little practice. Keep in mind, air **must** find a way to escape if it is trapped between your rock and your clay! So take care to get all the air bubbles out before you move on to

the embellishing stages.



Step Nine:

Add some fishy *shape* to your base now, just to get a basic shape. You'll refine your shape when you add the embellishment layer. You can see from the photo how varied the shapes can become. Sometimes I point the face a little; sometimes I save that area for more refined shaping when I add the embellishment layer.

Keep in mind that you **will** be adding another layer. It's very easy to go overboard at this stage and end up with areas that are too thick at the finished stage.

Once your base layer is complete, bake it. One important thing, if you're making these as freestanding pieces, is to make sure they **do** stand up well. Bake them in the upright position to insure it. They should stand without support!

Embellishment Layer & Detailing



Now you add your embellishment layer. You can see that I've chosen to use a nineblock cane on this one. You can add extra clay at this stage, if you want to, in order to change the shape of the fish body or lengthen the tail, perhaps. Or, you can cut pieces off the tail if you went overboard in the initial building stage.



You can change the shape of the face area too. It's really all up to you, and you can't really make a mistake with this. No decisions you made in the form-building stage need be final.



When adding the detailing layer I start off by adding a pad of face color.

Next, add things like eyes, mouth, & fins. I think a Skinner blend bull's eye cane makes a **great** eyeball! Where & how many fins you add is up to you. Sometimes I add

spots at this stage too. Have a blast with it!

Bake them again.



In this photo you can see three other treatments for this embellishment layer. You can use any technique that suits your fancy for covering your fishies: canes, mokume gane, Skinner blends, you name it. You can't see it here, but the little blue fantail one Skinner blends down the sides and belly to a foamy greyish green color. Way cool. Note how I've added texture to the tails and on the body of the little blue fish. Let your playful side come out here; play with colors, texture, add wire even! Use it as a way to experiment with a surface treatment you haven't tried before.



This pictures shows the three fishes sanded & buffed. They are shinier, but I don't think the scan can possibly show the added depth this stage adds to the colors.

When I sand, I start with four sanding sponges I get through Polymer Clay Express. Then I move to wet/dry sandpaper in 800, & 1000 grits. Sometimes I go on to a 1500 grit and even give it a final rub with sanding film, which I've gotten in the past at Michael's.

I'd like to thank my good pal Irene Yurkewych (pronounced your-KEV-itch) for instructing me in the joys of sanding & buffing. Her precision & eye for detail have made quite an impression on my own work habits! You all keep an eye open for that name now, and remember, you heard it here first!

Cutting The Fishes Off The Rock

Now I'll cut the fish off the rock using a fresh, sharp, Exacto blade. I'll do this while they're still hot! I know other people do it differently. If you can get the clay off when it's cooled, without stretching or splitting it, by all means, go for it! Some people may prefer to take the clay off the rock at the BASE clay stage. Then they can do repairs on any splits they may make and then cover the repairs up with the embellishment layers.

I think I get a tighter, more seamless, fit the way I do it, and I find it easier to apply the embellishment layers with the rock still inside to press against. It makes it easier to keep air bubbles out from between those two layers too, I think.

You should do whatever works best for you after experimenting a bit. You can even

leave the rock in -- these guys make wonderful paperweights!

The inclination, when cutting, is to cut the fish into two uneven sized pieces, one short and one long. However, uneven pieces create one side that wants to fall forward, which creates a visible gap where the fish pieces join together. To avoid this, I usually try to cut my fishes more or less up the middle, with only a slightly smaller *head* side.

I also don't try to make my cuts straight. I cut a gently curvy cut. It's easier to cut curvy than straight and I believe the curves help to lock the pieces in place when the fish is assembled.



Step One:

Coat your hands with cold water, pick up the fish, and **quickly** bring it back under the running water.

The water acts as a barrier to the heat. If you hold the fish on one surface too long, it will begin to feel hot of course. When that happens, just rock the fish around & let the water run between your fingers and the hot spot for a second. (This becomes second nature in no time, you won't even think about it.)



Step Two:

Begin your cut in the middle of the bottom pad. That way, if you don't meet up exactly (but you will), it won't show.

The clay will cut very easily, but be sure you make the cut go all the way through to the rock the first time you cut. If you have to go back in and recut an area, you'll likely have a jag on your inner lip when you're done. If you try to trim the lip, you'll likely end up with a gap where your fish parts come together.



Cut in one continuous motion for the best results. If you **do** feel you have to stop, don't lift the blade out! Hold it in place, reorient yourself, and continue the cut.



Step Three:

Once you make the cut, gently wiggle the pieces under the water to see if they will come right off. Usually one side will wiggle off easily. If it doesn't, it's likely you didn't cut through cleanly to the rock somewhere. Recut where necessary.



One side is usually tighter than the other. Gently loosen the clay from the rock sides, with your fingers. Let some water run down inside the clay. Gently wiggle the rock around again, going gently back & forth till the rock comes out.

If the clay is **really** stuck, you can give it a bit of help by sliding a thin blunt tool under the edge. **Don't** use your Exacto blade; you don't want to cut, chip, or split the clay.

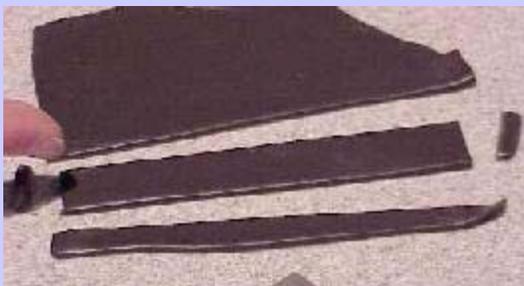


Step Four:

Once both pieces are out, the clay will still be warm. Fit the two pieces back together, adjusting them so the seams fit perfectly. Hold them together under the cold water, till the clay cools and hardens into place. This **REALLY** helps you get a nice tight fit for on finished piece.

Adding The Inside Lip

The next step will be to add a collar of clay, on the inside rim, of one side of the fish. This is what will keep the two parts of the fish from falling apart.



Step One:

Cut a strip of clay 1/2" to 3/4" deep for the collar. A deeper collar will give a more dependable hold.



Step Two:

Apply a little glue all the way around the inside of the rim. Rub on just a thin coat and let it dry a bit while you're getting the collar ready to apply.



Step Three:

Gently lay the collar into the rim. Don't pat it into place yet and try not to handle the top of the strip. You'll want that nice, clean-cut edge to remain unblemished.



Step Four:

Trim the collar strip so it fits all around the rim's interior and butts up together at the ends. Pat the collar down into the glue.



Step Five:

Gently blend the seam, still trying not to handle the top edge very much. You can hold a finger on the inside as a firm surface to smooth against.



Step Six:

Now reach inside the body of the fish and apply pressure all the way around the bottom edge of the collar to make the collar adhere to the body of the fish.



Step Seven:

Gently apply cornstarch around the outside of the collar. I just use my fingers, but you could use a brush if you like.



Step Eight:

Check where the collar meets the body of the fish to see if any gaps have developed. If you see any gaps, apply a little pressure to the inside of the collar to close them up.



Step Nine:

Very gently stroke the edges of the collar so that they lean inwards just enough so that you can fit the second half over the first without squishing the collar.



Step Ten:

Ever so carefully, begin to fit the two sides together, starting at one end. Be very observant of what's happening while you do this. If the collar bows outward too much at any point, stop right away and readjust it.

Don't force the two pieces together! You don't want to squish or scrape any part of the collar or else you'll have gaps when you fit the two pieces together. Even a tiny bit of squished clay will interfere with the closure. You want the collar to fit perfectly into the second piece.



Work gradually, adjusting as you need to, until the two halves fit perfectly together.



Step Eleven:

After you are sure the fish has a seamless fit, gently pull the two pieces apart and bake. I like to bake both sides, even though there is raw clay only on one piece. That way, if there are any color shifts due to baking, the two sides will still match, and they are easier to refit when they are both warm.



Step Twelve:

After the two sides have baked, take them

to the sink, right out of the oven. Place the two halves together again in a perfect fit and hold the fish under the cold running water till the clay is cool and hardened into place.

Voila, you're essentially done!



Here's my project fish, all finished up.



Here's a photo of the other three fish finished up.

Tip

Sometimes, despite my best efforts, I have a fish that just insists on falling open. When that occurs I rub a thin coating of Sobo glue onto the collar and let it dry thoroughly. This gives it just a tiny bit of extra thickness... and a rougher surface for holding itself closed.

This has always been successful for me, so I've never felt compelled to look beyond it. However, while at the Muse recently, the wonderfully sweet & talented Heather Roselli made an innovative suggestion to me -- use a thin coating of TLS onto that rim for the same effect.

Of course it would take another baking, but the finish would be nicer, don't you think? And if it bound up anywhere, it could be sanded. I haven't tried this yet, food for thought.

I hope you enjoyed learning how to make the fish boxes but don't feel restricted to building fish! My RockFish were born out of the inspiration generated by a rock purse swap. They might just as easily be other things: turtles, bunnies, kitties. They would all be built in the same way.

Have fun with it, and be sure to [e-mail Polyzine](#) with your finished fishes, because I want to see them!

