

Kasi Althaus, Elena Peters Arnolds, Kathy Hepburn, Laura L. LePere, Aude Levère, Andrea Victoria Paradiso, Denise Pinnell, Christin Rothe, Suzie Sullivan, Amy Sutryn, Rosana VanHorn, and Philip Wiegard, *Sunset Suites*, 2021. Mixed-media polymer clay paintings, dimensions variable. (Details)

xxx (Detail: Suzie Sullivan)

xxx Philip Wiegard, *How To Make A Polymer Clay Sunset*, 2021. YouTube video, HD, 28:38 mins.

(Detail: Aude Levère)

xxx (Detail: Elena Paters Arnolds)

xxx (Detail: Amy Sutryn)

xxx (Detail: Laura L. LePere)

Oddly Satisfying Calla Henkel

“My lifelong passion for art and craft work began as a child in UK, and throughout my life I have always had craft projects on the go, but I could only have dreamt where it would lead. I have always had a fascination for Ireland and so in 2001 I moved to County Mayo with my husband Steve. I love what Ireland has to offer—music, culture, and the wide-open spaces with their ever-changing light—and all of this is reflected in my work . . . a never-ending joyful journey.”

Suzie Sullivan



I want to destroy Philip Wiegard’s polymer mosaics with my mouth. First my incisors, then my molars, havocking the careful boundaries between colors and shapes, then I’d like to move on to clawing, enjoying the growing pressure of clay under the crescents of my fingernails as I tear them apart. What is this material rage? This want to ravage? To eat. To consume. My first real memory of this feeling is when I was nine and received a squishy green alien-key-chain as a birthday gift, its rubber body filled with some mysterious goo. I was overtaken with the need to know what was inside. I poked and prodded and chewed—but knew that to know would mean to murder. After a week I gave in and chopped the alien’s head off with my mother’s good fabric scissors. Out squirted a clear, disappointing cummy liquid that tasted sweet, like rubber cement. And that was that: I threw away the keychain. Mystery solved. Alien murdered.

When I first saw Philip Wiegard’s works, I didn’t realize they were made out of polymer clay. I thought they were simply oil paintings made with lots of blue painter’s tape and anal precision. Then I came across Wiegard’s Instagram and understood what they really were; not painted or printed, but essentially baked, made with the same widely commercially available clay we all squished in grade school to make brightly-colored beads for mom and swollen-hearted BFF necklaces. But Wiegard works with extreme precision, borrowing from the tradition of mosaic, or intarsia, assembling his images from slices of three dimensional “canes”—logs of polymer clay in which a design runs through the entire length—a method originally used in glass manufacturing, and later adopted for other materials like ceramics, candy or polymer clay. Back on Instagram, Wiegard’s entire grid, and presence, is devoted to the production of these clay works; he talks to the camera with startling earnestness, describing the process, providing tips and tutorials to his viewers, the camera cutting to his hands as they build up the squishy graphic blocks of cane that eventually form his mosaics.

Wiegard's tutorials recall the *oddly satisfying* genre of video that has flooded the net in the past five years; kinetic sand, slicing soap, pressure washers cleaning sidewalks, slime passing through manicured fingers, or my personal favorite—the hydraulic press. These videos are a release, a moment of child-like concentration on abstraction and physics: *How far can it stretch . . . ? Can you mix . . . ? What happens when . . . ?* They are very much the answer to my youthful alien keychain dilemma, providing a gooey release sans murder. But I often wonder about what's off camera: the mess, the trash can overflowing with cast-off slime, glitter bottles, and wasted bars of perfectly good soap. And maybe that's part of the added satisfaction of Wiegard's Instagram, that he shows the studio—the controlled process, the *how-to* behind the visual release.



But Wiegard did not invent this earnest studio genre. The polymer clay community is robust, extremely vocal, and thriving on social platforms like Facebook, where the biggest group is 16K strong, or YouTube, where channels like PolymerClayTutor have over 120K subscribers. Wiegard also has his own channel, *Phimo Tutorials* (2.32K subscribers), where he hosts his strangely calming YouTube videos, opening with an undulating graphic and spurt of light electronic keyboard. Even if one has no intention of ever touching polymer clay, one can easily spend twenty-five minutes with Wiegard as he calmly explains how to make a cartoonish bow-tie-pasta or Chesterfield couch cane. The videos are always framed from above, shot downward onto a sea-foam green cutting mat, his fast-moving hands paired with careful explanations, with cleverly sped-up demonstration sections set to electronic music. It is all so palatable. So digestible. And if the comments are any indication, others agree:

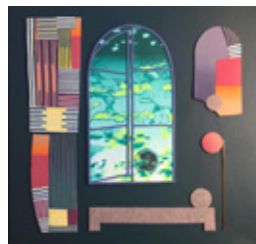
GrittyKitty50: *Another great tutorial with clear, concise instructions.*

DanielWang: *Crazy and brilliant and somehow very funny - because you explain this unusually intricate process in such a clear simple way, as if you were baking a pie. Hehee :-)*

"Having discovered the endlessly versatile medium of polymer clay in early 2012, I have since been prompted to fulfill a childhood dream and become an artist by profession. The journey began with jewelry, but I quickly found a knack for sculpture. This wonderful adventure has led me to some very exciting and unexpected places. On my way to making my dream a business, I have become intimately acquainted with my iMac, taught myself photography, learned the "ins-and-outs" of social media, resurrected my writing skills for composing copy and backstories for several of my sculpts, and, most importantly, connected to the wonderful community of polymer clay artists around the world."

Andrea Victoria Paradiso

Aude Levère is an artist, designer, and creative director. She is the founder of Maison Levère: Rare and Fine Jewelry as well as one half of the creative studio Moire Machine.



"I'm from England and moved to Southern California in 2010. My new neighbor and now good friend Kathy Hepburn introduced me to polymer clay sometime in 2011–12. I have an engineering degree and worked as a project manager and business analyst after graduating. Although I only studied art until I was sixteen, I have always been creative and was always making something. I now sell my polymer wall art and wine charms in a local gallery."

Denise Pinnell

"I was raised by 'makers' in Pennsylvania—my mother a professional seamstress and my father a passionate woodworker. Fearless in their project undertakings, they influenced and supported my lifelong passion for art and craft. My profession was in the field of child development and mental health, publishing research and training materials. I live in California, am a member of the San Diego guild, and have been working with clay for twelve years making jewelry and home goods."

Kathy Hepburn

Helen Weinberg: *Clearly you are a fine and patient artist and the incredible results show it in spades!!! Just when I was thinking of giving up this hobby that has consumed me for many years, I stumbled upon you. Many thanks for your generosity in sharing what you have learned*

Due to Wiegard's willingness to share his process without paywalls, something which is not always common, he seems to have firmly established himself within the polymer community, developing a healthy following and engaged fan base with his videos receiving thousands of views. It feels particularly wholesome, like a knitting circle of schoolteachers who all take the time to complement each other's work as they network and market their skills. Not only do they market their final, oven-fired pieces—but canes, still wet, wrapped in Saran and tucked into hand-labelled boxes are also advertised on their websites and blogs. These un-fired canes are then available for use (or slicing) by other artists, creating a blurry chain of labor and intellectual property.

If you look through the comments on any of the socials, or dig into the history of polymer clay, it is clearly a nearly all-female sport. Polymer clay was invented in the 1930s and first used by Käthe Kruse, the famed German doll-maker, who tested out a new waste oil by-product called *iglett*. Käthe loved it as a material, but it didn't hold paint, so she abandoned the leftover drum in storage. A decade later, Käthe's daughter Sofie ("Fifi") discovered the remaining *iglett*, and immediately recognized its potential, and thus FIMO clay was born, just as the term "D.I.Y." was taking off. What made FIMO clay so unique was that it required no kiln or specialized training—it was advertised as "oven clay," and anyone could use it from the comfort of their home. This domestication of production cemented FIMO as a medium for kids and moms, which over time became an image that has stood in the way of the polymer clay community being taken seriously. There is a clear, almost desperate, desire for polymer clay to be recognized as a *real* craft or *real* art, and not just a hobby, which is evinced in Facebook group threads where "domestic" is a dirty word. This desire to be seriously recognized likewise vibrates through the communities choice of language: a YouTube tutorial by a self-described "polymer guru" suggests her viewers refer to the pasta press, commonly used in polymer modeling, as a clay *conditioning machine*, "because it sounds more artsy."

This hunger to be seen as a proper art form is confounded by the recent advent of polymer clay on TikTok, where the how-to videos slide into the tornado of *oddly satisfying* content. If you search *polymer clay* on TikTok, the algorithm serves up Wiegard in the top four videos, in which he trades his feel-good-Bob-Ross monologuing for Lil Nas X's "Montero," compressing three hours of work (making a barbed wire cane) into fifty seconds. Wiegard's TikToks are fun, well lit, and edited to the beat of the music, and several have gone viral, boasting over 350K views. It is clear that polymer clay is perfectly suited to this format, reaching huge new audiences—entranced by the absurd materiality of the medium, salivating at the eventual slicing of the cane—"the money shot"—which falls like a knife through a dense loaf of bread.

Mrgymtowels: I don't know what it is or what it means.

But now I'm hungry..

benfcknten: is it edible?

Cheesegollam: Thought you were pushing the cheese out of a hot dog.

bythefae: SOO THATS HELLA IMPRESSIVE

hannaharleman: forbidden taffy

And there is some irony to all of this. After any random scroll through the halls of TikTok, one realizes that the majority of videos are filmed at home; makeup tutorials in overlit bathroom mirrors, dances performed in remodeled basements, while bath-bombs and slime are produced and hawked with household products (baking soda, starch, glue, shampoo, body gel) in the kitchen sink—the “domestic” is the platform, and there is no shame. The house is the new factory. The oven is the fountain of fortune, the focal point, as manicured hands remove pans with freshly baked miniature polymer clay cupcakes and SpongeBob earrings, while an off-camera teenage-ish voice describes what it means to be “a small business owner.”

Obviously Wiegard's TikToks function far beyond the realm of the *tutorial*. There is no way to parse his methods in mere seconds. They are pop. Squishy. Even sexy. And at their core, they are *the teaser* that begins Wiegard's polymer clay social media cycle, moving from TikTok to Instagram, then to the actual tutorial on YouTube, and finally to a post on a polymer Facebook group or an appearance in a one-to-one Zoom meeting or workshop. Wiegard's polymer practice is a melding of many worlds—art and kitsch, product and process, commercial and craft—and after staring at his videos on TikTok and YouTube, one has to ask: Who is Philip Wiegard? Is he taking this seriously? What is this middle-aged German man doing? Did he accidentally develop this polymer-clay-persona? Or is it all a performance? Does virality constitute success? And what does it mean if he brings this format of working into a museum context?

In preparation for the show at HKW, Wiegard has posted a video to his YouTube channel titled: “How to Make a Polymer Clay Sunset,” and in his usual, earnest, and calm demeanor he explains—as the title would imply—how to render a purple and orange gradient sunset, relying on the pasta press (yes, he calls it a pasta press). The tutorial was paired with an email he sent to those who showed interest.

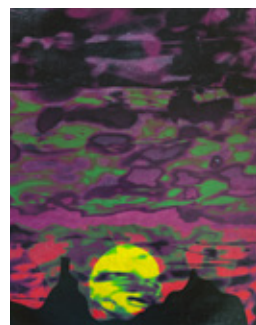
Dear Fellow Clayers,

I would like to invite you to submit an original polymer clay painting made by you after the Bob Ross Sunset tutorial from my channel. To view the video, please click this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yrqc5rmU-08w&t=255s>

“I work as a designer/artist. I like to bring together classic crafts with atypical materials. Currently, I make handbags from silicone. The appearance is unusual, but the process is rather old school and systematic. You could compare it to the profession of a molder or last maker. I like the twist: for me as the creating person this is in the process, but for the people who see or use it, it's about the sensual experience.”

Christin Rothe

Elena Peters Arnolds does not identify as an artist per se, but inspired by the Art Brut movement she likes to experiment with different crafts and techniques as a form of therapy since many years. Primarily working in photography and visual art, working with polymer clay became a favored tool of choice in this field, as a medium that emerged at first in her early childhood and was revived over time.



“Born and raised in San Diego, CA. I reside with my very loving and supportive husband of nineteen years and our two dogs (who are my heart). I have earned my MBA and currently work as an accountant at a local community college.

I love to travel: experiencing and celebrating other cultures and history. I use art as a way to express my creativity and rebel against my ‘day job’. I would love to live on a ranch with a rescued animal sanctuary and creative artist retreat. I love anything that sparkles and is colorful.”

Kasi Althaus

“Music, art, and tropical islands make me the happiest when I'm not doing some kind of job in business operations for a manufacturing company. I like to play guitar and sing, and enjoy sketching and monoprinting when not working with polymer clay.”

Amy Sutryn



*Your submitted painting will be shown this September in a big group exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), which is a major cultural institution here in Berlin. It will be exhibited alongside my own work and as part of a collection of other paintings that were all sourced through this open call. The entire collection will be presented as one installation with a shared authorship of all participating artists. **The institution will cover the shipping of your piece and will produce a custom made wooden frame for you to keep.** Additionally i would like to offer you 50% on a potential sale of your piece during a suggested consignment period of 2 years.*

Wiegard also posted this invitation to participate on TikTok, hoping his newfound virality would create a hurricane of responses, but without the usual money shot and poppy music, the algorithm was not in his favor—and he received the least views of all his videos. In the end, Wiegard found most of his participants through a polymer “Coffee/cocktail hour Zoom meeting,” hosted by the International Polymer Clay Association (IPCA). And that is the eternal return, in the end it is Philip himself. He is not presenting some slick-crafty-drag-version of himself. To truly work with the community, he has to show up. This is where his work becomes the most interesting and complex, and starts to deal with the politics of networked production, of what it means to work in collaboration with other artisans.

Questions of intellectual property and crediting have long been debated by the polymer community. In 1998 Nan Roche, a pioneer of the medium, penned a text titled “A Word About Copying” that attempted to break down what was and wasn't kosher—a difficult task, when the material depends so much on the sharing of techniques. But, Roche states,

It is the publication of the artists *complete concept* that associates *that* work with *that* artist [...] The techniques described are now public domain, free for you to use in your work. It is generally considered appropriate to attribute a technique when teaching or writing about a technique you learned from someone else.

In his own works, Wiegard toys with the logic of the *complete concept*—testing the squished meaning of ownership. At HKW the terms of the artist's participation have been baked into the invitation, it is clearly laid out, and not only will their work be featured under their own names, but their names will be included in the official artists list. Meanwhile, in *Another (feat. Cordialiyours, ikandiclay, LaylmcDill)* Wiegard has rendered a massive gray gradient backdrop that features slices of dog-shaped canes created by the title's aforementioned featured artists, all of whom willingly sold Wiegard their wares for around 10 Euros each, and were made aware of his plans to use the slices in his mosaic.

To look at *Another* (feat. *Cordialiyours, ikandiclay, Laylmcidill*) feels like staring down the fiber-optic barrel of the internet, a matrix of kitsch and banality, rendered into a slick and inexplicable commercial material—polymer clay. This strange slickness and awareness of the digital, feels evident in most of Wiegard’s works formed through gridded canes, like *Tender, Let’s Say* (feat. *bisenkan*) and *Hey You* (feat. *cathyharm*), which both harken back to the standard checkerboard transparency pattern on Photoshop. This gridded background gives off a faux-feeling of lightness, of not-there-ness, or the absence of presence—thus providing an extra weight to the images and canes inserted within, all while conjuring the sea-foam-green gridded cutting mat which rests under Wiegard’s hands in all of his tutorials and videos.

Wiegard’s mosaics move across the slippery terrain of digital performance, online identity, and attention economies—yet the works only refer back to their ecstatic origins with a stoic nod. They may be made of absurdist material, brightly colored and meant for children, but the mosaics take themselves seriously—not unlike Wiegard’s own demeanor in his videos. While sitting with Wiegard in his Berlin studio I asked him how he bakes his larger pieces. “In a commercial oven across the street. It took two years to figure out how to get the process right,” he replied wistfully, looking out the window. I was immediately hit with the image of Wiegard carefully crossing Skalitzer Strasse with a massive pan, like some sort of artisanal Keebler Elf. This procession to the bakery means he figured out how to industrialize the domestic—transforming it into something fit for a museum. And isn’t this what the polymer community has wanted all along?

What feels most true about *craft* is that it is a process, and as such it can be passed from person to person. Not unlike an algorithm conducting the tides of information, craft has moved through bodies based on migration, familial lineages, and old-fashioned workshops, and Wiegard’s mosaics—despite being commercially baked for a temperature-controlled museum—keep the hand-to-hand process close. The community—the chain of makers from TikTok, to YouTube, to Zoom—remains present.

“I am a multi-media artist and teacher from Columbus, Ohio. I have been working with polymer clay since 1992. I enjoy teaching and exploring new techniques, often combining other media in my creations.”

Rosana vanHorn

“I studied archaeology and geology, spent ten years living overseas, and love being outdoors. Creativity is a requirement—from work hand-drawing maps and in website design to textile arts, jewelry design, and mosaics for pleasure. In 2008, I found polymer clay and saw endless possibilities. Having earned a certification in nature art from the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Art Institute in 2019, I now teach polymer clay there. My focus currently is low-relief, nature-inspired, mixed media wall art.”

Laura L. LePere

