

Joining the Virtual Polymer World

By Barbara Forbes-Lyons

The Tallahassee Polymer Clay Art Guild was founded in 2006 by me and Ellen Rumsey Bellenot after Karen Woods set us up on a polymer 'blind date'. We hold two Retreats a year - one in February and another over the U.S. Labor Day weekend. Due to the restrictions and challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, we decided to utilize online video conference software to hold the September retreat event (called Clay-bor Day Retreat).

Normally a three-day event, we held the 2020 event virtually over two days. The event had demos, show & tell moments, a scavenger hunt, and design challenge with an [inchies](#) swap related to the challenge. There was plenty of unscheduled time built into the schedule so participants could socialize, share tips and tricks, and clay together as a group. In total, we had 68 registered participants and we were able to offer honorariums to all the guest teachers.

There were [four extended demos by guest artists](#) over the two days of the event, two demos each day. The topics were a mix of techniques including sculpting, imitative finishes or materials, and using liquid clay in a new way. The scheduled demos ranged in length from 90 to 120 minutes. Our guest teachers were [Amy Sutryn](#), [Kelly Russell](#), [Jana Roberts Benzon](#), and [Randee Ketzel](#).

All the feedback was positive across the board - the attendees were thrilled to learn from the artists, and all the artists were excited to dip their feet into live online teaching. With permission from the artists, we recorded the demos and uploaded them to Vimeo, where we could restrict access to attendees and/or members only.

Chilly Clay Retreat

After the success of our first online Retreat, we saw no reason to postpone our February event, the member only Chilly Clay Retreat. We did scale back somewhat, with fewer demos and shorter days than we planned for Clay-bor Day. On Saturday, we had a long demo / class overview with [Ann Mitchell and Karen Mitchell](#) of Ankara Designs. From Ann's patio in sunny California, the talented sisters walked us through their Inspiration, Design, and Construction class which utilizes photo collages, textures, and unique solutions to the design and construction process.

On Sunday, Maria Alexandrou from Nicosia, Cyprus, showed how to make her [Snowing White Necklace](#). Inspired by a walk in the mountains, Maria showed how to construct the pendant using some unusual tools and also her clever wire-wrapped bail which allows you to swap the pendant between different necklaces. We also got a quick lesson on what has got to be the easiest image transfer method ever, and coloring on clay with pencils. Maria has a video on [YouTube](#) that shows you how to make the pendant. Guild member Maurine Kramerich showed the group how to make a box out of cardstock or decorative paper as well as a lively and hilarious hour of her Top Ten (Twenty? Thirty?) tips and tricks.

If your group is looking to host a virtual event, here are some of the things we learned in the process. As they say, we made the mistakes for you already, so you don't have to! 😊

Plan Ahead

Putting together a virtual event takes as much, if not more, planning than an in-person event. While you aren't encumbered by things like menus and how many bathrooms are near the workroom, you do need to have a team that is familiar with the online platform of choice because you will need co-hosts that can assist less tech-savvy attendees, mute the Talky Tammys, and give the main host a break when they need it most. Here are some things to consider:

- First and foremost, your group needs to decide what kind of event they are hosting. Will it be casual with demos and show & tell, or a formal class with lunch- and stretch breaks. Will you have a swap or other game? Do you want to limit attendance? What artists do you want to invite to demo/teach?
- Have a backup plan if a guest artist needs to cancel last-minute. Don't overlook the opportunity to share a screen and watch some favorite videos online. Our group watched some product premier videos online and got some great ideas from the video host and each other. Tip: remember to share your computer sound when you share your screen, otherwise the others in the meeting won't hear the soundtrack.
- The event host needs to have a stable and high-speed internet connection and have a solid knowledge of the controls in Zoom or whatever platform is selected. This is also true for anyone that co-hosts with you.
- You will need a paid account with whatever platform you decide to use – free accounts won't cut it as they will usually restrict meeting length, number of attendees, or both.
- Are you going to utilize breakout rooms? If so, you will need breakout room monitors and the hosts and co-hosts will need to know how to move people in and out of the rooms.
- How to handle questions during the demos? We had attendees post question in the chat and the host asked the artist the question.
- How to insure only registered attendees dialed in? We used a waiting room and required everyone to use their real name on sign-in.
- Practice with the teachers in advance. We had one teacher that had to relocate her studio to have decent internet throughput, and all of the teachers needed to improve their lighting and camera setups. Not something you want to find out the day of your event.
- People are willing to pay a fee to attend a virtual event - don't think you have to do this for free in order to have people sign up. We thought we'd have a couple dozen attendees, max. We had 68 plus the 4 teachers for Clay-bor Day.
- If you want to record demos, get permission first. You then need to consider what you are going to do with those recordings. Video editing is not easy for most people, and then you have the issue of where to store the files and how to enable access without compromising the intellectual property of the guest artists.
- Build breaks into your schedule but be prepared to leave the meeting room open during breaks for those that want to socialize.
- Make sure you spell out the ground rules beforehand - how to ask questions during a demo, code of conduct, etc. We made sure to use a light tone in our [communications](#) to everyone. It made a big difference - the information was accepted in a positive light and with good humor.

Benefits of Going Virtual

The biggest benefit was the ability to offer attendance to anyone in the world! We had participants all over the United States, plus Mexico and Norway. Truly a global event and a big step for our little guild in Tallahassee. Because we recorded the demos, with the artist's permission, we could post the videos to a private video channel and the participants could review the techniques and skills that they saw live. We also charged a nominal fee for the event and that allowed us to offer an honorarium to the teachers to compensate them for their time. It also covered the cost of the Zoom account, so that was a bonus. We gained a number of new members, too, from areas far outside of Tallahassee. I'd say we increased our membership by 1/3 or more. Because we are holding our events virtually for the near term and have committed to live streaming our meetings once we resume in person events, the new members felt the value to them was worth the financial support.

Between the two virtual events, we've doubled our membership and it's wonderful to have the new faces on our monthly calls and have them participate and provide demos and programs through the year.

Other guilds and groups have also embraced the virtual meeting format during this time, as have many teachers. In mid-February, the New Jersey Clayathon event was held virtually and had 300+ attendees online for demos by Carol Blackburn, breakout room discussions, and 'fireside chats' with a number of polymer artists and teachers. Teachers were selected to offer live classes online before and after the main event, too.

If you haven't attended a virtual meeting, find a guild that has been meeting virtually and ask to join them for a meeting, or sign up for an online live class or retreat. Learn about the experience, then move ahead with planning your own!