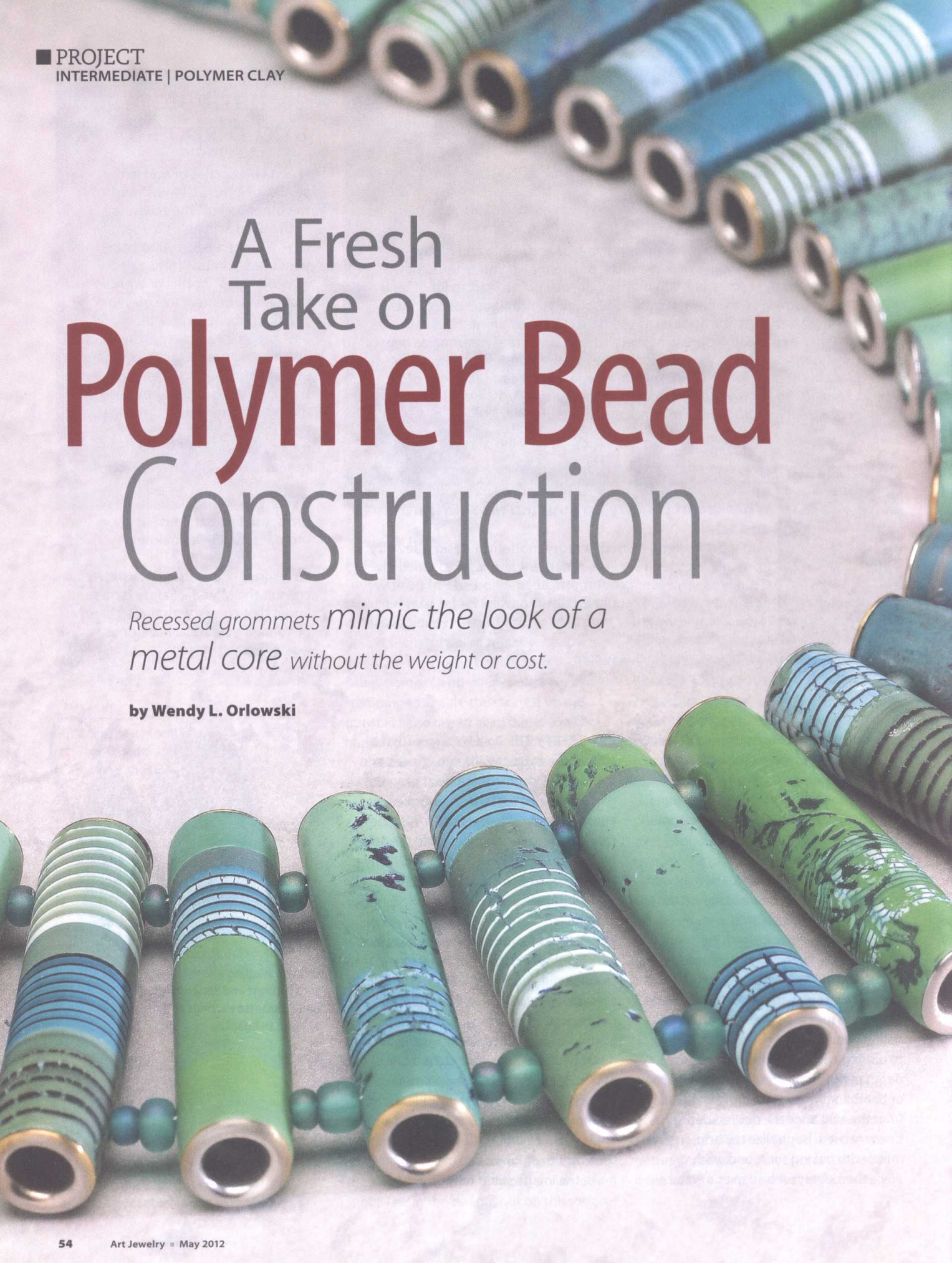


A Fresh Take on Polymer Bead Construction

Recessed grommets mimic the look of a metal core without the weight or cost.

by Wendy L. Orlowski





Grommets give these 1 1/2-in. (38 mm) beads a sophisticated look without a lot of weight.

While I was working on a steampunk-themed series of jewelry pieces, I went on a raid for small, shiny bits of metal that could be repurposed. My own stash, my husband's workbench — nothing was safe! The resulting collection was impressive.

One day, while sitting at my clay table, I picked a few grommets from the stash, sure that I could figure out a new way to use them. After trying a few different things, I slid the grommets onto a paintbrush and positioned a piece of scrap clay with an embedded striped cane between them. I liked the idea so I kept playing until I perfected it: a polymer bead with the illusion of a metal core.

materials

- Polymer clay: 2 colors, 4 oz. each
- Grommets: 52 for 26 beads
- Beading wire (nylon coated) (optional)
- Spacer beads (optional)

toolbox, page 74

- Polymer clay

additional tools & supplies

- Mandrel: scribe, knitting needle, paintbrush, etc.
- Old paintbrush
- Acrylic paint
- Cyanoacrylate glue (optional)
- Drill press, flex shaft, or Dremel tool with drill bits (optional)

Find out where to buy supplies, *page 79*
See Safety Basics, *page 74*



Use short beads for earring or bracelet components.

BASICS & VIDEOS

Learn fundamental techniques in these bonus tutorials:

Conditioning polymer clay

B




Making a Skinner blend

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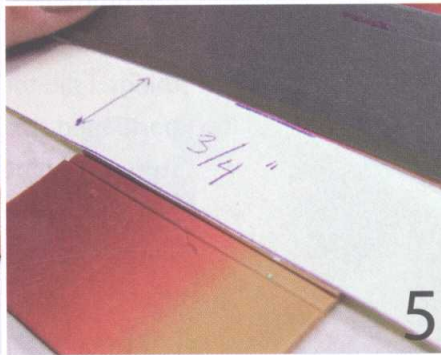
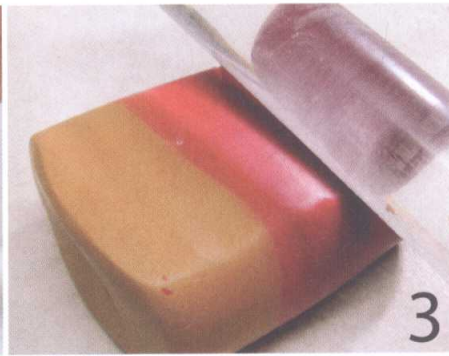
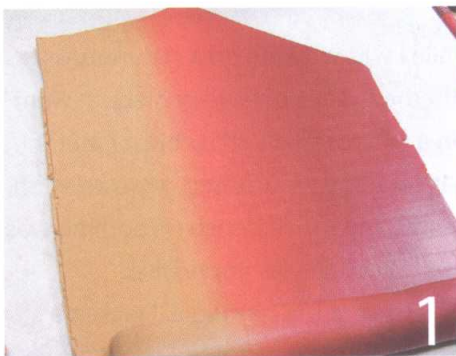
B Basics, *page 71*

 Videos, www.artjewelrymag.com/videos

ONLINE EXTRAS





Download free tutorials and learn **How to Make a Striped Cane** and **How to Make Your Own Texture Sheets** at www.artjewelrymag.com/resources.



A note on colors

I never like to use colors straight out of the package. To make the beads in the process photos, I mixed my own base colors, which I named "oxblood" and "ochre," then combined them in a Skinner blend. You can, of course, use whatever colors you like. (See "Wendy's Colors," right, for my color formulas.)

Make the beads

Make a Skinner blend. Condition  your two colors of clay, and make a Skinner blend  using about 2 packages of each color.

Make a plug. Your finished beads will be 1¾ in. (44 mm) long, but a Skinner blend is too wide for that; both colors need to fit on a bead. The solution is to make a "plug." I learned this technique from Donna Kato. It's a great way to make a narrow Skinner blend and to store blends for later use. If you need a blend, you can take a slice from the plug.

To make a plug, lay your Skinner blend sheet on your work surface so that one color is on the left and one is on the right. Roll up the sheet from bottom to top, squeezing in on the sides as you roll [1]. Roll tightly to avoid trapping air bubbles.

Once you've rolled up the entire sheet, the cylinder will still be too wide. Continue

to squeeze in on the sides and roll the plug to maintain its cylindrical shape until the plug is approximately 1¾ in. (44 mm) wide. If necessary, stand the cylinder upright and press down with the flat of your hand [2]. Then lay it back on its side and roll it to restore its cylindrical shape.

Make Skinner blend sheets. Put the plug on your work surface so that one color is on the left and the other is on the right.

wendy's colors

I use mainly Kato clay in the Skinner blends because it is firmer than the Premo and holds its shape better when working with it.

oxblood

3 oz. Kato red
¼ oz. Kato ultra blue



ochre

2 oz. Kato yellow
1½ oz. Kato brown
½ oz. Kato gold
1 oz. Premo ecru



These formulas will make enough to give you approximately 26 beads with some clay left over.

Using your hands, begin to flatten the plug, keeping it as close to 1¾ in. (44 mm) wide as possible.

NOTE: If the clay is stiff or your hands are weak, use an acrylic roller to start flattening the plug [3].

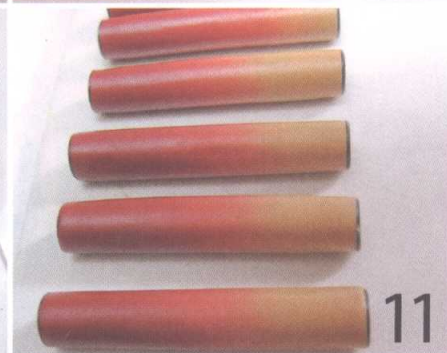
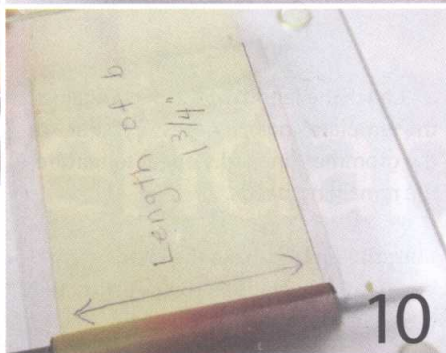
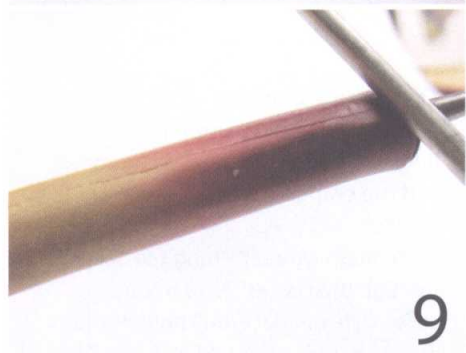
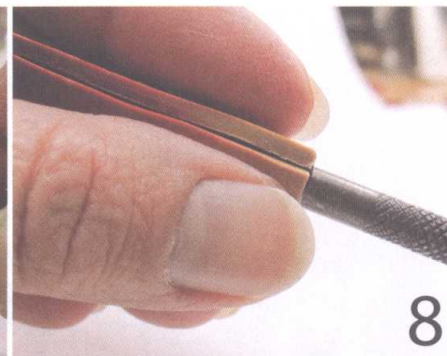
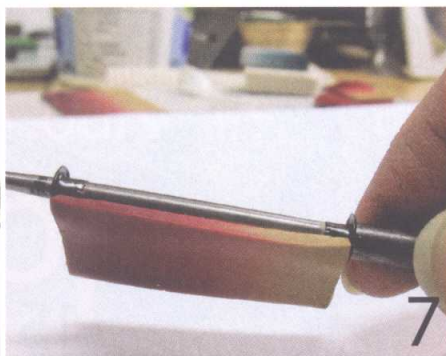
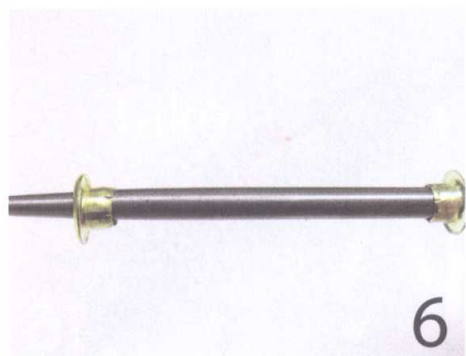
Run this slab through your pasta machine on the thickest setting. You will have a very long Skinner blend sheet; cut it into two or three pieces that will be manageable on your work surface [4].

Using a tissue blade, trim the Skinner blend sheets so they're 1¾ in. (44 mm) wide. (The width of the sheets will determine the length of your beads.)

Make a bead template. You'll use a template to make sure all of your beads are the same size. Based on the previous step, you know your beads will be 1¾ in. (44 mm) long. To determine your beads' width, wrap a strip of paper around the narrow part of a grommet and mark the paper where it overlaps itself; the distance from the end of the paper to this mark is the bead width. Cut a piece of paper to your length and width. My template is 1¾ x ¾ in. (44 x 19 mm).

Cut clay rectangles. Using your template, cut the Skinner blend sheets into individual rectangles [5], beveling each cut at the same angle (about 45°) so the edges of each bead will join flush.

Choose a mandrel. You'll need to use a mandrel to build your beads. I use a scribe as my mandrel, but knitting needles and small paintbrushes work well, too. Just make sure that the grommets can slide far enough onto the tool to accommodate the length of your bead. The grommets should



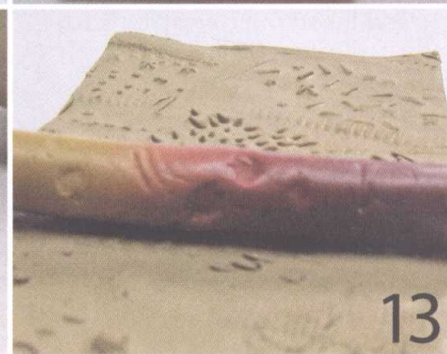
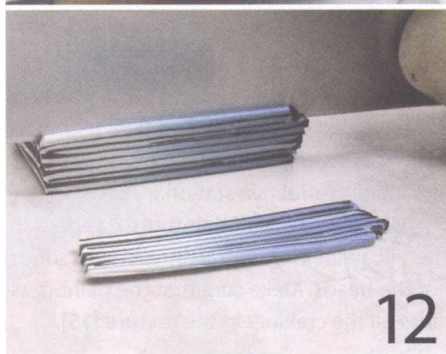
fit closely but not tightly on the mandrel; if the grommets are too loose, your bead may sag in the middle. If the grommets are too tight, you may distort the clay when you remove the bead from the mandrel.

Form the beads. Slide two grommets onto your mandrel [6]. Use your template to position the grommets at the correct width to accommodate the clay rectangles, then mark the grommet positions on the mandrel with a dark marker or something you can easily check.

Carefully lift a clay rectangle. Place one long edge on the mandrel between the grommets. Gently press each end onto a grommet [7]. Using your thumb, gently hold the first long edge in place. Wrap the rectangle around the mandrel. Don't stretch the clay; it should be the perfect size. Allow the inner edges of the rectangle to connect first [8], then join the outer edges. The beveled edges should make the fit fairly smooth.

Use your fingers or a small roller (a knitting needle works well) to smooth the seam [9]. Squeeze the grommets slightly inward to make sure the clay has connected to both grommets.

To remove the bead from the mandrel, hold the bead stable and twist the mandrel slightly. Use gentle motions and light pressure to avoid distorting the bead.



Smooth the bead and check the length.

Tape your template to a hard surface (I use a ceramic tile). Lay your bead on the template. Place a piece of clear glass or rigid plastic on the bead, and gently roll over the bead to smooth it [10].

If your bead stretches beyond the template, squeeze both grommets to coax the bead back to the correct length, then gently reroll it on your surface to smooth the shape if necessary.

I complete all of my beads up to this point and lay them in a row so that I can see that they're the same size [11]. This also allows the clay to become cool again and easier to work with.

Add embellishments

Add canes. Cut several slices of a cane of your choice; I used a striped cane [12]. Set your pasta machine to its thinnest setting. Run a cane slice through, short

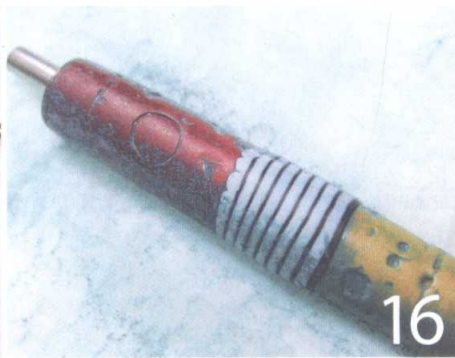
end first, in the same direction as its stripes. Trim one end of the cane, beveling the edge.

Slide a bead onto the mandrel. Press the trimmed end of the cane slice to the bead. Turn the mandrel to wrap the cane around the bead, pulling on the cane slightly to stretch it and make it thinner. The edges may tear a bit; I like this look for these beads. Trim the end of the cane and press it down to meet the first edge.

Place the bead on the template, and roll it under the glass or rigid plastic to embed and smooth the cane. Check the width.

Repeat to apply canes to as many beads as you wish. Leave some beads plain.

Add texture. Slide a bead onto the mandrel. Hold the bead on the edge of a texture sheet [13], and roll it across the sheet to texture the entire bead [13]. Don't push hard, or you may distort the bead.



adding holes

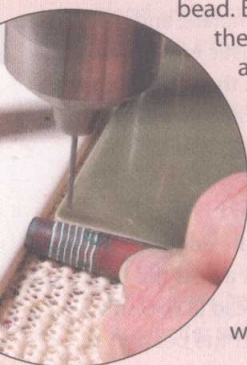
Because there are so many holes in my collar-style necklaces and because it's so important to get the placement accurate, I use a drill press to drill the holes for the stringing wire. You could use a flex shaft or Dremel tool as well; how you set things up for drilling is the most important thing.

Decide where you want the holes. For my collar-style necklaces, I needed to drill two holes in each bead. I drilled my holes $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6.5 mm) from each grommet edge. Mark the spot (or spots) on the bead where you will drill your holes.

Lay the bead on the floor of the drill press. With the drill off, lower the drill bit, and line up the mark on the bead with the bit.

Use ceramic tiles (or straight-edged scraps of wood) to brace the bead in position. Use C-clamps to secure your bracers.

Hold the bead firmly against the bracers, and slowly lower the drill, drilling through both walls of the bead. Back the drill out of the hole. Turn the bead around and drill the hole at the other end. Check to make sure you've drilled all the way through; redrill if necessary. Once you have the bracers in the correct position, this process won't take long at all.



Check the length of the bead against the template again; if necessary, squeeze the grommets inward. Repeat to texture the remaining beads.

Cure the beads. Bake the beads according to the clay manufacturer's instructions, then allow them to air-cool [14].

Paint the beads. Prepare a work station for removing paint from the beads. I layer paper towels on my work surface, cover them with a shop cloth, and tape the cloth down. I can spray the surface with water, making an effective stationary sponge.

Using an old, stiff paintbrush, apply acrylic paint in a contrasting color to some of the beads. Make sure that the paint gets into all the crevices in the texture [15].

NOTE: To keep my hands clean, I use a wooden skewer or metal rod to hold the beads when I'm applying the paint.

Drag the painted beads over the surface of the shop cloth to remove the excess paint [16]. Wipe each grommet end on a paper towel.

NOTE: Don't use a rough cloth to remove the paint; it will get into the crevices and remove the paint from the texture as well.

Check the grommets. After the beads have dried, check the grommets with your fingernail. Remove any loose grommets, and use cyanoacrylate glue to stick them in place.

To finish, you can string the beads through their cores. Or, to make a collar-style necklace, drill holes through the bead walls (see "Adding Holes," left) and string the grommet beads on two nylon-coated wires. Use only one spacer bead to separate the grommet beads on the top wire, and use two or three spacer beads to separate the grommet beads on the bottom wire so that the collar lies flat on the curve of the neck. **A**

Cane strips cut into small pieces make better accents on these smaller earring beads.



ASK THE ARTIST: WENDY ORŁOWSKI



What era of jewelry do you find most inspiring and why?

I am influenced by ancient, ethnic jewelry, especially pieces combining metals with found objects like stones, glass, bone, and animal hair. These objects were seen as gifts from the earth and made into something beautiful. Beyond showing status, this jewelry also related to the peoples' belief systems. Contact: theartofmyclay@gmail.com