

FAMILY

Creative uses for shrinky Dinks keep growing

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The basic idea behind Shrinky Dinks hasn't really changed in the 38 years they've been around: The flexible sheets of shrinkable plastic can still be cut, colored and popped into an oven to shrink one-third in size, becoming hard and unbendable.

But what was designed as a toy for kids has grown into a creative medium embraced by adult crafters, artists, even scientists.

The Shrinky Dinks line has grown from the original frosted sheets to include white, clear and — the newest addition — plastic sheets for ink-jet printers. That means photographic images now can be made into Shrinky Dinks.

The sheets are sold 10 to a package and also come in preprinted kits: monsters, pirates and sports motifs, to name a few. A similar shrink-plastic product, PolyShrink, is sold by the company Lucky Squirrel.

Some Shrinky Dinks get turned into the usual kid-friendly magnets, photo frames, ornaments and dog tags. Others are being fashioned into stylish jewelry.

"It's certainly a material people who grew up in the '70s and '80s remember with nostalgia, but always with that kitschy association," says Kathy Sheldon, a crafts book author. "These new jewelers are using shrink plastic to make fresh, attractive jewelry you want to wear."

Sheldon wrote the upcoming "SHRINK Shrank shrunk!" (Lark Crafts, 2012), which features 16 jewelry designers, including Jessica Poundstone of Portland, Ore., who works exclusively in Shrinky Dinks material. She likes the freedom of creating her own designs and having control over the quality of her material.

"I don't have to go out and depend on wholesalers for components," she says. "I can just make it myself."

Other crafters stretching this plastic medium beyond its original, youthful use include June Gilbank of Cape Town, South Africa. A crochet pattern designer who has dabbled in shrink plastic, she found success with a simple ring. Her "shrink plastic ring tutorial" is posted at her blog, Planet June.

Anna Boksenbaum, a public defender in Brooklyn, N.Y., incorporates monograms, text and vintage images into homemade shrink-plastic jewelry that she sells from her Etsy shop, Brass Isaac. And Giuseppina "Josie" Cirincione of Phoenix has gotten so successful making jewelry out of shrink plastic that she teaches "Shrinky Dinks" classes at an art center, and says professional photographers often show up as students.

"For them it's another way for showing their work," says Cirincione. "It's another medium."

Artists who dabble in Shrinky Dinks include James Jaxxa of New York City, who created "Hopeful Tree" for a Shrinky Dinks show in 2007 at Seattle's Zeitgeist Coffee. He likes the slightly unpredictable quality of the material: "With Shrinky Dinks, you're really out of control," says Jaxxa. "You can put it in the oven . and it might twist in some way that you didn't know would happen. The material itself almost forces another level of creativity that other materials don't."

Zeitgeist owner Bryan Yeck holds the exhibit every couple of years; last year's Seventh Annual Shrinky Dinks National Exhibition & Auction included works by 90 artists from around the world.

As for the sciences, shrink plastics are used by the dental industry to embed identification numbers in dentures.

And they have inspired innovation in the field of biomedical engineering. Michelle Khine turned to her childhood craft when she didn't have the lab tools she needed in her research job at the University of California at Merced. Playing around with Shrinky Dinks in her kitchen, Khine created a low-cost alternative to silicon molds for microfabricated chips that had required sensitive, million-dollar equipment.

Now an assistant professor at the University of California at Irvine, Khine has created other lab tools — including cell culture platforms for stem cells — with Shrinky Dinks plastics, and has launched a company, Shrink Nanotechnologies Inc.

The mother of Shrinky Dinks is Betty Morris, who came up with the idea as a Cub Scout leader in Brookfield, Wis. She and co-leader Katie Bloomberg read in a magazine that a plastic lid could be written on with permanent marker and shrunk in the oven. Later, when the boys were fighting over scraps of plastic, Morris and Bloomberg knew they'd hit upon a novel idea.

Morris persuaded her skeptical husband, Chuck, to float her \$600 for the first 1,000 pounds of plastic to launch the company.

"I would never ever have imagined that Shrinky Dinks would still be on the market after all these years," says Morris. "I was just excited we were doing it for two weeks."

Bloomberg later dropped out of the business for other work — she was mayor of Brookfield for 16 years — and Morris continued to run the company alone. Popular in the 1970s and '80s, Shrinky Dinks fell out of favor in the 1990s — until artists and crafters devised new uses for them. The ink-jet printer plastic, created in 2004, opened the crafting medium even wider.

"We've had a lot of ups and downs," says Morris. "But it's always been on the market."

Today, there are 300 Shrinky Dinks kits sold in 42 countries, says Morris, and a children's Shrinky Dinks oven, made by Big Time Toys of Nashville, Tenn., is planned.

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