The instant invention involves a process used in preparing fibrous tows which may be formed into polymeric plastic composites. The process involves the steps of (a) forming a tow of strong filamentary materials; (b) forming a thermoplastic polymeric fiber; (c) intermixing the two tows; and (d) withdrawing the intermixed tow for further use.

16 Claims, 2 Drawing Sheets
METHOD OF FORMING COMPOSITE FIBER BLENDS

This invention was made with government support under contract No. NAS1-15749 awarded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The Government has certain rights in this invention. This is a continuation of co-pending application Ser. No. 589,929 filed on Mar. 15, 1984.

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

This invention relates to processes for preparing fibers useful in forming composite articles. More particularly, this invention relates to fiber blends containing strong reinforcing fibers which are useful in preparing composite articles.

Fiber-reinforced products have been known for several years. See, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 3,914,499, 3,969,171 and 4,214,931, as well as U.S. Pat. No. 4,341,835.

Also, it is known to intermix two similar or different types of fibers, particularly to obtain high bulk. See, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,219,997, 4,218,869, 3,959,962, 3,968,638, and 3,958,310. And the combining of different types of fibers has been facilitated using various types of fluid jets. See, e.g., the '310 patent and Pat. No. 589,929 filed on Mar. 15, 1984.

U.S. Pat. No. 4,226,079, issued Oct. 7, 1980, discloses the combining of two different types of fibers, in order to produce a bulk yarn. The fibers are intermixed in a jet intermixing zone. However, the fibers disclosed in the patent are polyester and polyamide. No disclosure is made in the combining of carbon and thermoplastic fibers.

U.S. Pat. No. 3,175,351 discloses a method of bulkling continuous filament yarns. In addition, it is disclosed that the two yarns which are combined may be of different compositions. However, none of the compositions is a carbon fiber.

U.S. Pat. No. 3,859,158 discloses the preparation of carbon fiber reinforced composite articles by forming an open weave of a carbon fiber and coating with a carbonaceous material. U.S. Pat. No. 4,368,234 discloses complex woven materials used for reinforcement which are formed from alternating bands of graphite fibers and low modulus fibers. However, the woven materials disclosed in this patent are subsequently impregnated with a thermosetting resin and cured.

Commonly assigned U.S. patent application No. 368,491 to Buckley and McMahon, discloses an improved woven fabric comprised of fusible and infusible fibers wherein the infusible fibers include graphite or carbon sheets, and the fusible fibers are thermoplastic in nature. According to the patent application, fusible and infusible fibers are woven into a fabric and thermally bonded together by heating above the melting point of the fusible fiber. This patent application does not disclose, however, the preparation of linearly intermixed fiber tow products or that such products are useful in forming composite articles. The patent application also does not disclose the preparation of such materials using a gas jet intermixing means.

In the prior art, there were two distinct methods of forming fiber-reinforced composites. The first and older method involved simply forming a tape or fabric prepreg by painting or coating reinforcing fiber tows or fabric with a solution and/or low viscosity melt of a thermosetting material which was then cured. The second process involved the extrusion of reinforcing fiber tapes impregnated with high melting, thermoplastic polymers. These tapes or fabrics were then used in forming the composite. However, the prepreg formed by both of these processes were somewhat difficult to handle. Specifically, prior art thermoplastic tapes were stiff and "boardy" and could not be draped across intricately shaped molds. While thermoset prepregs were somewhat more flexible, they were often quite tacky and difficult to handle. As a result, the use of both types of tapes was limited.

Accordingly, it is an object of this invention to prepare fibrous blends which are useful in forming fiber-reinforced composites.

It is another object of this invention to prepare materials, e.g., fabrics, which may be formed into composites. These and other objectives are obtained by employing the process of the instant invention.

SUMMARY OF INVENTION

Basically, the process of this invention involves (a) forming a fiber tow from a multitude of strong filamentary reinforcement materials; (b) forming a thermoplastic polymeric fiber tow; (c) intermixing the two tows; and (d) withdrawing the intermixed tows for use. The filamentary reinforcing material is preferably non-thermoplastic. The intermixed tows may then be employed in forming various fiber-reinforced composites.

The fiber blends prepared according to the instant invention are flexible and handleable and have good draping properties, so that they can be used to form intricately shaped articles. In addition, because of the intermixing of the two fibers, good wetting of the reinforcing fiber by the thermoplastic material is obtained when appropriate heat and pressure are applied to the mold. Good wetting is obtained in large measure because of the substantially uniform distribution of the thermoplastic fiber and the reinforcing fiber within the fiber blend. Specifically, the products of the instant invention find particular utility in end-use applications where a small radius of curvature in the final product is desired. For example, using the prior art tapes, it was not possible in many instances to prepare articles which had 90° bends, because the tapes would crack or deform at the bend line. However, the processes of the instant invention may be employed with radii of curvature as low as 0.002 in.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a diagramatic view of the various devices used in carrying out one of the processes of the instant invention.

FIG. 2 is a diagramatic view of the various devices used in carrying out another version of the processes of the instant invention.

FIG. 3 is a perspective view of the gas spreading means used in carrying out a part of the process of the instant invention.

FIG. 4 is a perspective view of the same device with the top removed.

DETAILS DESCRIPTION OF INVENTION

The thermoplastic polymers which are useful in carrying out the instant invention constitute virtually any type of relatively high molecular weight thermoplastic
The foregoing ring systems, except for R₂ as indicated below, are also intended to include one or more substituents, e.g., chloro, bromo, fluoro, or lower alkyl (1-4 carbon atoms) on the ring or rings. The R₂ aromatic ring systems should preferably be unsubstituted when only one kind of unit I and one kind of unit II are used, i.e., when a homopolymer is formed to ensure obtaining oriented fibers. In the case of copolymers, it is preferred that the R₂ aromatic ring systems be unsubstituted because of thermal or hydrolytic instability and/or cost of the R₂-ring substituted copolymers.

Also included are those (co)polymers wherein up to 25 mol %, preferably up to 5 mol %, based on the total I, II and III units, are aromatic polymer-forming units (i.e., units wherein the chain extending functional groups are attached to aromatic rings) not conforming to those described above and which do not interfere with the anisotropic melt forming capability of the polymers. A non-limiting list of these units includes...
The (co)polyesters, as mentioned above, may comprise units I and II in substantially equimolar amounts or may comprise unit III or may comprise a combination of units I, II, and III and, of course, more than one kind of unit (I, II and/or III) can be present in the polymer.

Preferred (co)polymers of the invention consist essentially of units I and II. In such polymers, it is preferred that \( R_1 \) is selected from the group of 1,4-phenylene; chloro-, dichloro-, bromo-, dibromo-, methyl-, dimethyl- and fluoro-1-phenylene; 4,4'-biphenyl; 3,3', 5,5'-tetramethyl-4,4'-biphenylene and \( R_2 \) is selected from the group of trans-1,4-cyclohexylene; trans-2,5-dimethyl-1,4-cyclohexylene; trans-vinylenebis(1,4-phenylene); 4,4'-biphenylene; 2,6-naphthylene; and 1,4-phenylene and with the proviso that more than one kind of unit I or II are present. Of such copolymers, two types are particularly preferred because of properties and cost. In the first type, the polymers consist of essentially of the recurring units

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{O} \\
\text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \\
\text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \\
\text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \\
\text{O} \\
\end{array}
\]

wherein \( X \) is selected from the group of chloro-, bromo-, fluoro-, and methyl radicals; \( n \) is 1 or 2; and \( Y \) is selected from the group of 4,4'-biphenylene and 2,6-naphthylene, the ratio of

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{C} \text{-} \text{O} \\
\text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \text{O} \text{-} \\
\text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \text{C} \text{-} \\
\text{O} \\
\end{array}
\]

The (co)polyesters are prepared preferably by melt polycondensation of derivatives of dihydric phenols
and aromatic-aliphatic, aromatic and cycloaliphatic dicarboxylic acids or their derivatives. A convenient preparative method is the melt polycondensation of the diacetate of a dihydric phenol with a dicarboxylic acid. Alternatively, phenolic carboxylic acids or their derivatives may be used as coreactants in the preparation of polyesters and copolyesters.

A list of useful dihydric phenols, preferably in the form of their diacetate derivatives includes hydroquinone, chlorohydroquinone, bromohydroquinone, methylyhydroquinone, dimethylhydroquinone, dichlorohydroquinone, dibromohydroquinone, 4,4'-oxydiphenol, 4,4'-isopropylidenediphenol, 4,4'-thiodiphenol, 4,4'-biphenol, 3,5,5'-tetramethyl-4,4'-biphenol, 3,5,5',5'-tetrachloro-4,4'-biphenol, 2,6-dihydroxynaphthalene, 2,7-dihydroxynaphthalene, and 4,4'-methylene diphenol and the like.

In addition, it is possible to prepare anisotropic polyesters by polymerizing methylacryloxy benzoic acid utilizing an alkali metal hydroxide and free radical initiators as described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,112,212, 4,130,702 and 4,160,755.

Useful phenolic-carboxylic acid derivatives include p-acetoxybenzoic acid and p-acetoxycinnamic acid and the like.

A nonlimiting list of various polyesters and copolyesters includes: poly(methyl-1,4-phenylene, 2,5-dimethyl-trans-hexahydroterephthalate); copoly(methyl-1,4-phenylene trans-hexahydroterephthalate/terephthalate) (8/2); copoly(chloro-1,4-phenylene trans-hexahydroterephthalate/isophthalate) (9/1) and (8/2); copoly(ethyl-1,4-phenylene terephthalate/6,6-naphthalate) (7/3); copoly(tert. butyl-1,4-phenylene/-3,3',5,5'-tetramethyl-4,4'-biphenylene/isophthalate) (7/3); copoly(1'-chloro-1,4-phenylene/-3,3',5,5'-tetra chloro-4,4'-biphenylene terephthalate) (7/3).

The liquid crystal polymers including wholly aromatic polyesters and poly(ester-amide)s which are suitable for use in the present invention tend to be substantially insoluble in common polyester solvents and accordingly are not susceptible to solution processing. As discussed previously, they can be readily processed by common melt processing techniques. Most suitable wholly aromatic polyesters are soluble in pentafluorophenol to a limited extent.

The wholly aromatic polyesters which are preferred for use in the present invention commonly exhibit a weight average molecular weight of about 2,000 to 200,000, and preferably about 10,000 to 50,000, and most preferably about 20,000 to 25,000. The wholly aromatic poly(ester-amide)s which are preferred for use in the present invention commonly exhibit a molecular weight of about 5,000 to 50,000, and preferably about 10,000 to 30,000; e.g., 15,000 to 17,000. Such molecular weight may be determined by gel permeation chromatography and other standard techniques not involving the soluting of the polymer, e.g., by end group determination, and particularly on compression molded films. Alternatively, light scattering techniques in a pentafluorophenol solution may be employed to determine the molecular weight.

The wholly aromatic polyesters and poly(ester-amide)s additionally commonly exhibit an inherent viscosity (I.V.) of at least approximately 2.0 dl./g., e.g., approximately 2.0 to 10.0 dl./g., when dissolved at a concentration of 0.1 percent by weight in pentafluorophenol at 60°C.

For the purposes of the present invention, the aromatic rings which are included in the polymer backbone of the polymer components may include substitution of at least some of the hydrogen atoms present upon an aromatic ring. Such substituents include alkyl groups of up to four carbon atoms; alkoxyl groups having up to four carbon atoms; halogens; and additional aromatic rings, such as phenyl and substituted phenyl. Preferred halogens include fluorine, chlorine and bromine. Although bromine atoms tend to be released from organic compounds at high temperatures, bromine is more stable on aromatic rings than on aliphatic chains, and therefore is suitable for inclusion as a possible substituent on the aromatic rings.

It is emphasized that an important aspect of the present invention which complements the concept of sub-
stantially uniform distribution of intermixed fibers is the combination of compatible thermoplastic materials with non-thermoplastic materials or materials having a sufficiently high melting temperature, whereupon effective bonding and integration can be achieved by application of heat and pressure sufficient to melt the thermoplastic material but not sufficient to melt the reinforcing material. Thus, the use of relatively high melting thermoplastic materials are contemplated as reinforcing fibers of the present invention, although such materials are referred to as "non-thermoplastic" throughout the specification and claims solely for the sake of brevity.

The reinforcing fibers useful herein are metallic or ceramic, amorphous, polycrystalline or single-crystal reinforcing fibers or filaments. Common examples are carbon, glass, boron and boron nitride, ceramic fibers, such as silicon carbide, silicon nitride and alumina, aromides, ordered polymers, etc.

The use of carbon fibers as reinforcing fibers are specifically described and claimed in co-pending application Ser. Nos. 589,817, 589,823, 589,825, 589,928, and 589,930, all filed contemporaneously herewith. Because of their low potential cost and attractive mechanical properties, could be seriously considered for use in composites. The two principal types of alumina fiber had been, however, the large diameter (>350μ) single crystal rods or alumina whiskers. The problems of handling and processing of whiskers and the very high cost of the single crystal fiber dampened the enthusiasm for their use in composites. In general, these fibers are produced by E.I. DuPont de Nemours, Inc., 3M Corporation and in the USA and Sumitomo Chemicals Co., Japan.

The DuPont fiber, referred to as fiber FP, is a round cross section, 20 μm diameter, continuous length yarn having 210 fibers per tow. It is available in two forms. Type I is pure alpha alumina while Type II is similar but coated with a thin layer of glass. Type II was originally intended for resin matrix composites and Type I for metal matrix composites; however, it is found by this invention that both are suitable for ceramic composites. Although the initial fiber strength is not particularly high, on the order of 1380 MPA (200,000 psi), it is very important to note that this strength is stable and not affected by handling and is not much different from that realized in composites reinforced with alumina rods of initially higher unhandled "pristine" strength.

The reinforcing fibers which are particularly useful herein have bundle or tow deniers in the range of from 1 to 100,000 and filament counts of from 300 to 300,000, preferably deniers of 1000 to 16,000 and filament counts of 3,000 to 24,000. The fibers also should exhibit a ten-
The thermoplastic fibers which are particularly useful herein have bundle cross-sectional areas ranging from about twice that of the reinforcing fiber tow to about one-half that of the reinforcing fiber tow. Bundle or tow denier will be in the range of 1 to 50 and the fiber count will depend upon single filament denier (higher counts are required with lower denier filaments). However, in general, from about 10 to 150,000 filaments, preferably 100 to 10,000 filaments, are employed. The modulus of the fiber should be in the range of 50,000 to 500,000 psi. The thermoplastic fiber also must exhibit a melting point of more than 50°F, preferably more than 200°F, above ambient temperatures. And of course, the fiber must melt and fuse at temperatures no higher than about 1,000°F, preferably no higher than 800°F, in order to be useful herein.

The weight ratio of the two fibers which are intermixed can vary widely. However, in order to prepare satisfactory composites, it is necessary that sufficient thermoplastic polymer fiber be employed to obtain complete wetting of the reinforcing fibers. Generally, no less than about 30 percent, by volume, of the thermoplastic polymer fibers may be employed. The maximum amount of thermoplastic polymer depends upon the strength properties which are required. In general, when less than about ten percent, by volume of the reinforcing fiber is present, the resulting composite products have strength and stiffness properties which are poor in relation to products containing higher amounts of reinforcing fibers and exhibit little or no improvement over unreinforced matrices. Preferably about 20 to about 60 percent, by volume of the reinforcing fiber material should be present in the combined tow.

In addition to the reinforcing fiber and the thermoplastic fibers which are used herein, it is contemplated to add carbon fibers to the fiber blends of the instant invention as reinforcing fibers. In the event additional carbon fibers are added, it is possible to reduce the amount of the reinforcing fiber which is used to as low as approximately 10 percent. However, the maximum combined amount of the added carbon fiber plus the amount of the reinforcing fiber which is employed should not exceed the upper limit specified above for the reinforcing fiber alone.

In FIG. 1 of the instant invention, a reinforcing fiber tow (1) is obtained having the properties specified above. The fibers from the reinforcing fiber tow are passed through a fiber guide (3) and onto a first Godet roll (4). The first Godet roll is synchronized with a second Godet roll (11) at rates of speed such that the second Godet roll revolves slightly slower than the first Godet roll. Hence, the fibers between the two Godet rolls, which are subsequently spread and intermixed during the process of the invention remain in a low tensioned (approaching tension-free) state which provides for effective fiber intermixing. Individual thermoplastic polymer fibers, such as polyethylene terephthalate fibers, are mounted on a bobbin rack (2) and the fibers are fed through a fiber guide (3) onto the first Godet roll (4). A tension comb may be employed after the fibers leave the bobbin and before they are brought into contact with the Godet roll. This tension comb serves to improve the contact of the fiber with the Godet roll and to increase the width of the fiber tow.

At this point in the process neither the reinforcing fibers nor the thermoplastic fibers are intermixed or in contact. Rather, both are wrapped separately around the first Godet roll (4) to provide tension control. After leaving the Godet roll, the individual fibers separately pass through a fiber guide (5) to maintain directional control. After leaving the fiber guide (5), the thermoplastic polymer fibers pass through a fiber comb (6). The fiber comb having a plurality of spaced-apart fingers acts to maintain as separate the various fine yarns of the thermoplastic polymeric fiber so as to preserve separation of the individual fibers. The reinforcement fibers, on the other hand, after leaving the fiber guide (5), are directed into a gas banding jet (7).

The gas banding jet showing in FIGS. 3 and 4 is used to uniformly spread the fiber tows. A gas "banding" jet can also be used as an intermixing means whereby the gas jet serves to uniformly intermix the two fiber tows. The banding jet consists of a gas box (40) into which compressed air or another gas is fed through a conventional adjustable gas metering means (41). The preferred pressure of gas flow into the gas jet is in the range of approximately 0.5 to 10 psi. One, or more than one, gas exit ports (44) are provided to cause gas from within the gas box to impinge in a generally perpendicular fashion upon the fiber tow which passes across the exit ports. Preferably, the exit ports are V-shaped and pointed in the direction of movement of the fiber tow across the box.

As shown in FIG. 4, the gas banding jet is provided with shims (46) or other means to allow a gas box cover (48) to be attached, so that a flow channel for the fibers is provided. The gas box cover is held in place by convenient attachment means, such as clamps (49).

In an alternative process shown in FIG. 2 both the thermoplastic fiber and the reinforcing fiber are subjected to gas banding jet treatment (26) and (27). However, particularly with lower molecule weight, less high melting polymers, such as polyethylene terephthalate, a fiber comb having a plurality of spaced-apart fingers, as described above, may be employed in place of the banding jet.

After the fibers are spread by banding jets or banding jets in combination with combs, they are intermixed using an intermixing means (8). In FIG. 1 the intermixing means is a pair of stationary rods or bars. The fibers from the spread reinforcement fiber tow and the fibers from the spread thermoplastic tow or yarns both initially come into contact together on the bottom of the first stationary rod or bar. The fibers then are deflected across the top of the second stationary bar or rod and, as a result, are intermixed. In order to ensure complete intermixing, it is necessary that both fibers be uniformly spread across their entire width and that the area within which both fibers are spread be virtually identical. Finally, it is necessary that intermixing be undertaken in a relatively tension-free state. If high tension is imparted to either of the fiber tows, full (or optional) intermixing may not occur. After passing over and under the stationary bars, the combined fiber tow may be further intermixed using an air entanglement jet as described above.

After intermixing, the fibers pass through a comb (9) to maintain dimensional stability and through twist guides (10) to impart a slight twist to the intermixed fibers. The twist is imparted in order to maintain the intermixing of the fibers. Instead of using an actual half-twist, false-twisting of the fibers using methods.
well known in the art may be employed. In the alternative, a fiber wrap may be used to hold the intermixed fibers together. The fiber wrap may be of any convenient type of fiber. However, it is preferred that the fiber wrap consist of a relatively small quantity of thermoplastic fibers.

The mixed fibers are then wound around a second Godet roll (11) which, as pointed out above, serves in conjunction with the first Godet roll to provide a relatively tension-free zone to allow fiber intermixing. The fibers are then taken up by a take-up roll (12) for storage. Of course, it is possible to impart false-twisting or actual twisting or to wrap the fiber tow with another fiber either before or after the Godet roll. In addition, the intermixed fibers may be made stable by application of an appropriate fiber finish which serves to hold the intermixed fibers together and enable easier handling in subsequent operations, such as weaving.

FIG. 2 is similar to FIG. 1 but is the process most preferred when a liquid crystal type polymer or other higher melting point polymer is used. In FIG. 2 a roll of reinforcing filamentary material (21) feeds fiber through tension comb (22) and onto Godet roll (25). Liquid crystal fibers from a roll (23) are fed through a guide (24) and onto the same Godet roll (25). Separation is maintained between both fibers on the Godet roll. As pointed out above, the first Godet roll (25), when used in combination with the optional second Godet roll (35), serves to maintain the fibers in a relatively tension-free state during the intermixing process. High tension during intermixing must be avoided to assure that complete intermixing occurs.

After the reinforcing fibers and the liquid crystal fibers leave the first Godet roll they are both fed into gas banding jets (26) and (27) through guides (28) and (29), respectively. In the gas banding jet the fibers are spread to a uniform width. The fibers then pass through a second set of fiber guides (30) and (31) and are intermixed using stationary, longitudinally extended bars shown at (32). In general, intermixing occurs as the thermoplastic bundle is fed onto the bar in the same area as the reinforcement fiber. At this point in the processing, the width of both tows is the same, and as they are brought simultaneously into contact with the same area of the bar, intimate intermixing occurs. In an alternative intermixing process, the two fiber tows are fed simultaneously into a gas jet or other gaseous intermixing device in a relatively tension-free state. In addition, the fibers may be fed into a gas jet for further intermixing after they have been treated on the stationary bars. In the gas intermixing means a jet of air impinges on the fibers, preferably perpendicular to their direction of flow.

Following intermixing, the fibers are fed through twist guides (33) to add at least a half-twist per yard to the fiber to ensure dimensional stability. Fibers then pass through a guide (34) onto a second Godet roll (35) and from there onto a take-up roll (36).

In use, the intermixed fibers may be filament wound, or otherwise assembled and placed on a mold, and heated under pressure to the flow temperature of the thermoplastic polymer to form composite articles which are useful in a variety of end-uses where high strength, high stiffness and low weight are essential. For example, the composites formed from products prepared according to this invention may be used in forming spacecraft, airplane or automobile structural components. In addition, the reinforced fiber blends of the instant invention find particular utility in those end-uses where complex, three-dimensional shapes are involved. As pointed out above, the compositions of the instant invention are particularly useful where there is a small radius of curvature requiring substantial bending and shaping of the compositions of the instant invention. The only limiting factor in forming reinforced fiber shaped articles using the compositions of the instant invention is the “bendability” of the reinforcing fiber itself. Therefore, utilizing the compositions of the instant invention, it is possible to prepare materials having a minimum radius of curvature of about 0.002 in., preferably as low as 0.003 in. However, with prior art thermoplastic tapes, the minimum radius of curvature is about 0.005 in. (Even then fiber directionality or alignment is distorted.) As structural elements formed from the fiber tows of this invention are heated under pressure above the melting point of the thermoplastic fiber, these fibers melt and fuse the fibers together forming a consolidated composite product containing well-dispersed reinforcing fibers. Using the fiber blends of the instant invention, it is possible to prepare intricately shaped articles, such as tennis racket frames, racquetball racket frames, hockey sticks, ski poles, fishing rods, golf club shafts and the like.

The fibers of the instant invention find particular utility in filament winding applications. As pointed out above, in the prior art it was extremely difficult to prepare composite articles utilizing the prior art fiber tapes. These tapes, which are prepared on extremely large scale, are difficult to handle on a small scale, and it is particularly difficult to form them into intricately shaped articles. While the prior art employed the filament winding process with success, this process was limited to use of reinforcing fibers in combination with thermosetting resins if long, thin rods were to be prepared. In the prior art process, the reinforcing fiber was wound onto a mold after applying a thermosetting coating or coated with the thermosetting material after winding. As a result, however, it was often difficult for the thermosetting material actually to penetrate and/or achieve good wetting of closely wound products.

Utilizing the process of the instant invention in a modified filament winding procedure, it is possible to prepare intricately shaped articles when the fiber blends are oriented in directions not parallel to the long axis of the article, utilizing thermoplastic polymers in conjunction with fiber reinforcements. This modified filament winding process begins with the use of the intermixed fiber tows of the instant invention. These tows may be fed directly to a filament winder. As the filament winder moves around or up and down the mandrel or form, the reinforcement fiber/thermoplastic fiber tow is applied directly to the mold and heated using a radiant heater or other suitable means for immediately melting and fusing the thermoplastic polymeric fibers within the reinforcing fiber tow. In other words, to prepare a filament reinforced thermoplastic fiber tow should be heated under pressure as soon as or soon after it meets the mandrel. After full melting and resolidification occurs, the mandrel either may be dissolved using a suitable solvent, may be pulled from the product, or the mandrel may actually become a part of the product.

Another unique use for the fiber blends prepared according to the instant invention is in forming woven fabrics utilizing standard techniques. According to this process, the tow of the instant invention is used either alone or in combination with other tows or fibers to
EXAMPLE 1
A liquid crystal polymeric (LCP) fiber tow based upon a copolymer prepared from 6-hydroxy-2-naphthoic acid and p-hydroxy benzoic acid is obtained. The LCP has a density of 1.4 g/cc, and the tow itself is formed of 660 filaments (2.25 denier per filament). The tow had an initial modulus of 5670 gms, a tenacity of 10.5 g/denier, and an elongation of 2%. The second fiber to be used for intermixing with the LCP fiber is E-glass fiber (204 filament count designated as ECG 150 1/0), having a density of 2.55 g/cc, a tensile strength of 300,000 psi, a tensile modulus of 10,500,000 psi and an ultimate elongation of 2.8%. The glass fiber is available from both PPG Industries and OCF.

Bobbins containing the LCP polymeric fiber tow and the glass fiber tow are spaced apart on a bobbin rack. Fibers from both bobbins are fed onto and separately wrapped around a Godet roll, so that upon mixing the tow had an initial modulus of 5670 gms, a tenacity of 10.5 g/denier, and an elongation of 2%. The second fiber to be used for intermixing with the LCP fiber is E-glass fiber (204 filament count designated as ECG 150 1/0), having a density of 2.55 g/cc, a tensile strength of 300,000 psi, a tensile modulus of 10,500,000 psi and an ultimate elongation of 2.8%. The glass fiber is available from both PPG Industries and OCF.

Utilizing the same process, a six-ply 34" X 10" composite panel is prepared having a glass fiber volume of about 60%, a panel thickness of about 0.035". The composites are evaluated and exhibit excellent tensile, flexural and compression properties.

EXAMPLE 2
Utilizing the same glass fiber as described in Example 1, an approximate 50% by volume polybutylene terephthalate (PBT)/glass fiber blend is prepared. The polybutylene terephthalate material has a density of 1.34 g/cc and a denier of 1520 g/9000 m. The polybutylene terephthalate has a draw ratio of 2.25-1, an initial modulus of 24 g, a tenacity of 5.3 g/denier, an elongation of 28%, a melting point of 227°C and a denier per filament of 2.7. Ten packages of 33 filament count yarn are employed on a creel, and all packages are merged into a single polybutylene terephthalate fiber tow on a Godet roll. Maintained separately, but on the same Godet roll, ten packages of 408 filament count glass fiber (Type ECK 75 2/1) to provide a total approximate blend of 50/50 by volume glass fiber/PBT.

The polybutylene terephthalate tow is fed through a fiber comb having approximately 30 teeth, while the glass fiber tow is fed through a gas banding jet operating as described in Example 1, at a pressure of about 2.5 to 3.4 psi. The two tows are then intermixed over and under parallel extending rods by feeding both tows into the same area on the bars. Intermixing is aided by the use of a second gas banding jet of the type described in Example 1, operating at 2.5 to 3.4 psi. After leaving the banding jet, the fibers are fed through a second fiber comb which was arranged parallel to the direction of flow of the fiber, so as to provide a tensioning path to aid in intermixing. After leaving the comb, the fibers are fed through twist guides to provide approximately a one-half twist per yard, so as to maintain the fibers in their intermixed state. The fibers are then wrapped around a second Godet roll and taken up at a speed of 7.8 m/min. In order to minimize tension during the intermixing process, the second Godet roll is operated at a slightly lower speed than the first Godet roll.

34" X 10" panel composites are prepared generally as described in Example 1 and evaluated satisfactorily.

A sample of the PBT/glass fiber blend prepared above is wrapped with 90 denier polybutylene terephthalate yarn as described above at four wraps per in. to form a compact yarn suitable for fabric weaving. The PBT fabric wrap is chosen, so that it would form a part of the matrix upon composite fabrication. The resulting wrapped yarn is then divided into 96 different yarn segments and placed on spools mounted on a special creel. A 6" wide fabric is then woven on a modified Draper XD loom, using a plain weave pattern. The resulting woven product has dimensions of 16 ends per inch X 15 picks per inch and weighs ca. 0.05 oz./yd². The fabric is ca. 10 mils in thickness, is soft but compact, and exhibits good dimensional stability. Satisfactory fiber composites having irregular shapes are prepared from the resulting fabric.

EXAMPLE 3
An approximate 50/50% by volume blend is prepared based upon the glass fiber described in Example 1.
and a polyether ether ketone (PEEK) thermoplastic polymer. The fiber prepared from the PEEK has a density of 1.3 g/cc, a melting point of 338° C., an initial modulus of 53 g/denier, a tenacity of 2.7 g/denier, an elongation of 65%, and in 10 filaments per package tow a dpf of 367 (g/9000 m). Four (10 filaments per package) tows are placed on a creel and the fibers are blended together on a Godet roll, but maintained separately from the glass fiber which is also wrapped around the Godet roll. The PEEK fiber is then directed through a fiber comb as described in Example 2 and into a gas banding jet. The glass fiber after leaving the Godet roll also enters a gas banding jet. Both jets are operating at a pressure of about 3 psi. After leaving the jets the fibers are intermixed above and below two parallel, longitudinally extended rods and are fed through a second parallel fiber comb, twisted to maintain dimensional stability, fed over a second Godet roll and taken up at a speed of 7-10 m/min. A satisfactory composition results.

What is claimed is:

1. A process for preparing a continuous, substantially uniform tow useful in forming composite molded articles which comprises:
   (a) forming a continuous tow of continuous non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers;
   (b) forming a continuous tow of continuous thermoplastic polymer fibers having a melting point of at least about 50° C.;
   (c) uniformly and continuously spreading the thermoplastic polymer fiber tow to a selected width;
   (d) uniformly and continuously spreading the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fiber tow to a width that is essentially the same as the selected width for the thermoplastic polymer fiber tow;
   (e) intimately, uniformly and continuously intermixing the spread non-thermoplastic reinforcing fiber tow and the spread thermoplastic polymer fiber tow in a relatively tension-free state by employing a gas box which directs a generally perpendicular gas flow onto the fibers and by bringing the tows into simultaneous contact with each other in substantially the same area such that there is provided a substantially uniform distribution of the thermoplastic fibers and the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers within an intimately intermixed tow; and
   (f) continuously withdrawing the intimately intermixed tow.

2. A process for preparing a continuous, substantially uniform tow useful in forming composite molded articles which comprises:
   (a) forming a continuous tow of continuous non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers;
   (b) forming a continuous tow of continuous thermoplastic polymer fibers having a melting point of at least about 50° C.;
   (c) uniformly and continuously spreading the thermoplastic polymer fiber tow to a selected width;
   (d) uniformly and continuously spreading the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fiber tow to a width that is essentially the same as the selected width for the thermoplastic polymer fiber tow;
   (e) intimately, uniformly and continuously intermixing the spread non-thermoplastic reinforcing fiber tow and the spread thermoplastic polymer fiber tow in a relatively tension-free state by employing a gas box which directs a generally perpendicular gas flow onto the fibers and by bringing the tows into simultaneous contact with each other in substantially the same area such that there is provided a substantially uniform distribution of the thermoplastic fibers and the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers within an intimately intermixed tow; and
   (f) continuously withdrawing the intimately intermixed tow.

3. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers are formed from the group consisting of metallic, ceramic, amorphous, and polycrystalline fibers.

4. The process of claim 3 wherein the non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers are formed from glass, boron, aramid or ceramic fibers.

5. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the tow of reinforcing fibers has a bundle denier of about 100 to 100,000.

6. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the tow of reinforcing fibers has a bundle denier of about 1,000 to 16,000.

7. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the tow of reinforcing fibers contains about 100 to 300,000 filaments.

8. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the tow of reinforcing fibers contains about 3,000 to 24,000 filaments.

9. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the thermoplastic polymer fibers are selected from the group consisting of polyethylene, polypropylene, polystyrene, nylon, polyamidimides, polyetherimides, polysulfones, polyether ketones and wholly aromatic polyester resins.

10. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the thermoplastic polymer fibers are liquid crystal polymer fibers.

11. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the thermoplastic polymer fibers are wholly aromatic polyester fibers.

12. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the denier of the individual thermoplastic fibers is in the range of about 1 to about 50 and wherein the tow of thermoplastic fibers contains from about 10 to about 150,000 filaments.

13. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the intimately intermixed tow contains about 10 to about 70 percent by volume of non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers.

14. The process of claim 13 wherein the intimately intermixed tow contains about 20 to about 60 percent by volume of non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers.

15. The process of claim 14 wherein the intimately intermixed tow contains about 60 percent by volume of non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers.

16. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein the intimately intermixed tow contains about 10 to about 70 percent by volume of non-thermoplastic reinforcing fibers selected from the group consisting of glass, boron and ceramic fibers and wherein the thermoplastic polymer fibers are selected from the group consisting of polyethylene, polypropylene, polystyrene, nylon, polyamidimides, polyetherimides, polysulfones, polyether ketones and wholly aromatic polyester resins.

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