



Diamond-like carbon films deposited on three-dimensional shape substrate model by liquid electrochemical technique



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ABSTRACT

Diamond-like carbon (DLC) films were deposited on three-dimensional (3D) shape substrate model by electrolysis of 2-propanol solution at low temperature (60 °C). This 3D shape model was composed of a horizontally aligned stainless steel wafer and vertically aligned stainless steel rods. Morphology and microstructure of the films were analyzed by scanning electron microscopy (SEM), atomic force microscopy (AFM) and Raman spectroscopy, respectively. The results suggested there were only differences in film uniformity and thickness for two kinds of samples. The hydrogenated amorphous carbon films deposited on horizontally aligned substrate were smooth and homogeneous. And the film thickness of DLC films gained on the vertical substrates decreased along vertical direction. It is believed that bubble formation could enhance nucleation on the wetted capillary area. This experiment shows that deposition of DLC films by liquid phase deposition on 3D shape conductive substrates is possible.

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1. Introduction

DLC films have widespread applications in the fields of optical windows, magnetic storage disks, car parts, biomedical coatings and micro-electromechanical systems (MEM) because of their excellent physical and chemical properties, such as high mechanical hardness, low friction coefficient, wear-resistance and chemical inertness [1–5]. The practical applications usually request DLC films to be deposited on the substrates with complex surface or structure. Electrolysis of organic solution under atmosphere at low temperature (<100 °C) is a new method besides conventional vapor techniques. It becomes possible to deposit DLC films on 3D shape substrates because electrochemical reaction owns the advantage of employing complex substrates, such as spherical or cylindrical substrates. However, the publications about DLC films liquid phase deposition mainly concentrate on either one side or double sides of wafer substrates [6–9]. The research works about complex substrates deposition using liquid method is rarely reported. In this paper, we divided complex substrates into horizontal part and vertical part, investigating DLC films deposition on this simple 3D shape substrate model by liquid electrochemical technique.

2. Experimental details

The deposition system used in this work was self designed [10]. The substrates were placed in two ways. Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram displaying the relative position of anode and substrates. The horizontally aligned substrate is a stainless steel wafer ($13 \times 12 \times 0.5 \text{ mm}^3$), facing to the graphite anode with a distance of 6 mm. The vertically aligned substrates were stainless steel rods in diameter of 3 mm and parallel to the anode with a space of 24.5 mm. Prior to deposition, the substrates were ultrasonically cleaned in 2-propanol and deionized water for 10 min, respectively. Analytically pure 2-propanol was chosen as electrolyte owing to its high dielectric constant, small viscosity and methyl bonding to the polar group, which is identified as ideal candidate reactant for liquid deposition of DLC films [11]. The deposition process lasted for 2 h under the applied potential of 1000 V (frequency 10 kHz, duty cycle 50%). Water cooling to the wall of a quartz reactor was used to control the solution temperature.

Dektak 6 M Stylus Surface Profilometer was used to measure film thickness. Surface morphology of the films deposited was observed by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) using Quanta 400 FEG and Hitachi S-4800. Atomic force microscopy (AFM) measurement was carried out with the help of Veeco 3100 using tapping mode. Microstructure of the DLC films was investigated using a micro-Raman system Jobin Yvon with a laser source wavelength of 514.532 nm.

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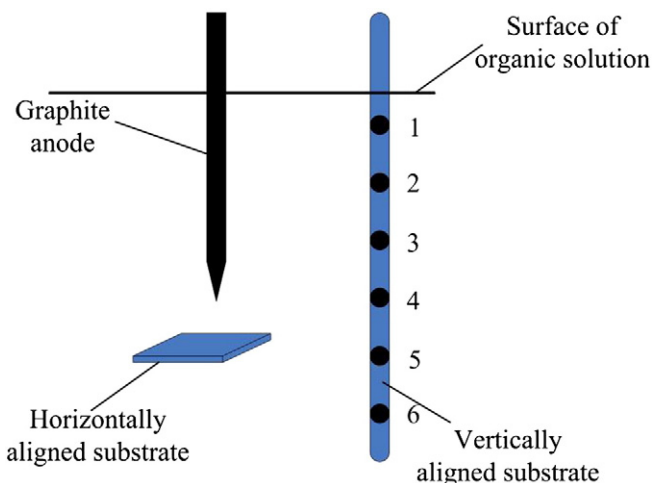


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of 3D shape substrate in the liquid electrochemical deposition system.

3. Results

1) Horizontally aligned substrate

The horizontally aligned stainless steel substrate is covered with a gray film after deposition. The film thickness is 1300 ± 50 nm and the average film growth rate is approximately 650 nm/h. The film is continuous with uniform morphology under the observation of SEM. A typical image is given in Fig. 2a. In addition, AFM is applied to obtain more morphology information, as shown in Fig. 2b. The film has a homogeneous morphology, free of defects. The RMS (root mean square) roughness is 12.4 nm analyzed by software V531r1. From the morphology characterization it can be clearly indicated that a smooth film could be deposited on the horizontally aligned substrate.

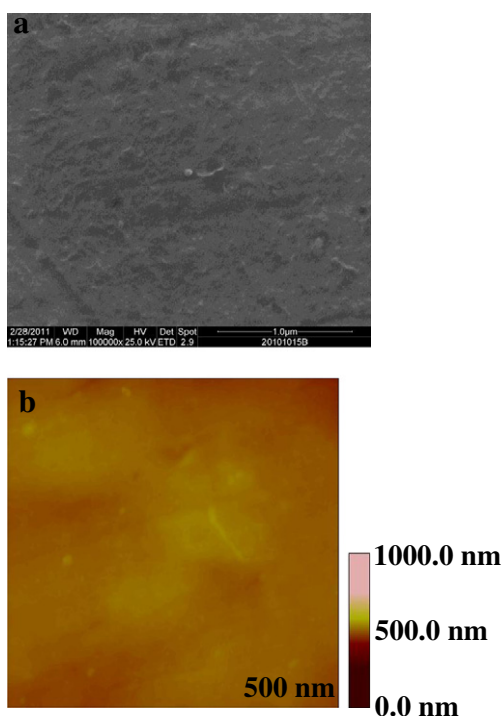


Fig. 2. SEM image (a) and AFM image (b) of films deposited on horizontally aligned substrate.

Raman spectroscopy is the most widely used technique to investigate the state of carbon [3]. Diamond has one sharp peak at 1332 cm^{-1} , and graphite has only one peak at 1580 cm^{-1} , called G peak. The disorder or fine graphite crystals have another peak at lower wave numbers around 1355 cm^{-1} , called D peak [12]. Raman spectra taken from different local areas across the films on the horizontally aligned substrate are quite similar. A typical Raman spectrum is shown in Fig. 3. On one hand, two broad peaks around 1335 cm^{-1} and 1595 cm^{-1} are related to D peak and G peak, respectively, indicating the existence of sp^2 amorphous carbon phases [13–15]. Raman scattering is more sensitive to sp^2 carbon phase than to sp^3 carbon phase, and the intensity of the sp^2 carbon phase is much larger than sp^3 carbon phase in the spectra excited by 514.5 nm [13]. Thus, the Raman spectra of the electrolysis carbon films mainly show graphite-like features in most cases, this phenomenon has also been observed by other researchers [7–9]. On the other hand, the slope of the photoluminescence background in visible Raman spectra can be used to estimate the H content [16]. According to the simple quantitative formula for the hydrogen content given by Casiragh [16], there is at least 20 atm.% bonded hydrogen in the film. This hydrogen must come from the liquid organic solution which contains plenty of hydrogen. Liquid electrochemical deposition of carbon films is a very complicated process, nevertheless, the film growth process contains several key steps. Certain chemical bonds are broken under high applied potential; organic molecules are polarized into positively charged and negatively charged groups; the positively charged groups tend to move towards cathode/substrate; the activated groups turn to carbon phase which will grow into continuous carbon film and other products through electrochemical reaction. Although part of hydrogen may form gas or water gets rid of the film, however, there is still a large amount of hydrogen bonded with carbon atoms, becoming bonded hydrogen. As a result, hydrogenated amorphous carbon films are deposited on the horizontal substrate.

2) Vertically aligned substrate

Meanwhile, the vertically aligned stainless steel rods were also covered with coatings. However, non-uniform film along vertical direction was easily visually observed. Color of the films nearby liquid level to the immersed part gradually changes from dark to light, and then almost bare at the bottom. In order to characterize the deposits on vertical substrate, six marks (No.1–No.6) in every 5 mm were chosen along the depth direction, as shown in Fig. 1. Fig. 4a, b and c provide morphology information at the marks of No.1, 3 and 5, respectively. The film performance changes a lot by comparison of SEM images. Continuous film with a rough surface is shown in Fig. 4a. The film with holes and slight scratches in Fig. 4b is not continuous. More deep scratches as can be seen in Fig. 4c come

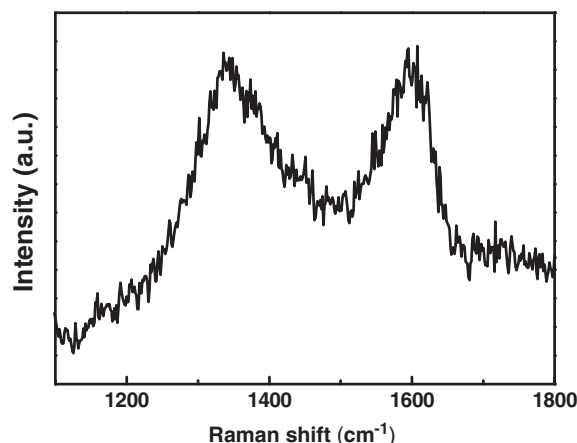


Fig. 3. A typical Raman spectrum (b) of films deposited on horizontally aligned substrate.

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