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Flexible, transparent, and conductive defrosting glass

Jingjing Wang [a,1], Zhiqiang Fang [b,1], Hongli Zhu [b], Binyu Gao [b], Sean Garner [c], Pat Cimo [c], Zachary Barcikowski [b], Alice Mignerey [a], Liangbing Hu [b,*]

[a] Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, United States
[b] Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, United States
[c] Corning Incorporated, Corning, NY 14831, United States

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ABSTRACT

Flexible and transparent electronics play a predominant role in the next-generation electrical devices. In this study, a printable aqueous graphene oxide (GO) ink that enables direct deposition of GO onto flexible glass substrates is demonstrated and its application on fabricating a transparent, conductive, and flexible glass device by solution coating process is investigated as well. A uniform GO layer is formed on the flexible glass through Meyer-rod coating followed by an annealing process to reduce GO into graphene. The obtained thermally reduced graphene oxide (RGO) flexible glass has a transmittance of over 40%, as well as a sheet resistance of ~5 × 10^3 Ω/sq. In addition, a defrosting window fabricated from the RGO coated flexible glass is demonstrated, which shows excellent defrosting performance.

1. Introduction

Flexible glass is a promising substrate for transparent conductive electrodes (TCEs) since high flexibility allows efficient and scalable roll-to-roll manufacturing of thin films [1]. In the past few years, extensive research was based on the utilization of common plastics such as polyethylene terephthalate and poly(ethylene naphthalate) (PEN) to fabricate flexible TCEs [2,3]. However, they cannot withstand thermal annealing above 200 °C during device fabrication, which limits the device performance in terms of electrical conductivity. As an example reported recently [4], a flexible transparent heater was fabricated using PEN as the substrate. However, a failure mode related to temperature was encountered since PEN substrates were prone to tearing after heating. This drawback sets an obstacle for its large-scale application in TCEs. To overcome this challenge, common glass was employed as an alternative substrate to obtain better mechanical stability under heat treatment [5]. The low flexibility of typical glass substrates (>0.3 mm thick), however, cannot satisfy the requirements for flexible TCEs. From this perspective, flexible glass is a more suitable substrate as compared with plastics and rigid glass substrates. Its transparency, low thickness, heat-resistance, and mechanical reliability features make it promising to be used in large-scale production of TCEs.

Currently, the deposition of graphene on flexible substrates has been widely investigated due to its superior electrical conductivity, mechanical stability, and ultra-high transparency [6–11]. Direct deposition of uniform graphene nanoflakes by scalable methods is still challenging, which hinders its application in thin film industry [12–14]. The advancement of roll-to-roll coating processes provides a route in solving this issue since it is efficient, simple and controllable [15,16]. The utilization of Meyer-rod coating opens an alternative route for large-scale production of TCEs since it enables a uniform deposition of conductive material by roll-to-roll production. For instance, transparent silver nanowire electrodes with superior optoelectronic performance were recently obtained by Meyer-rod coating on flexible plastic substrates [7].

In this study, we utilize Corning® Willow® Glass as a flexible substrate to fabricate transparent, conductive, and flexible graphene oxide (GO) films using Meyer-rod coating processes. The flexible glass substrates were 100 μm in thickness and 100 mm × 200 mm in size. An efficient and uniform solution coating process is demonstrated with the addition of surfactant to the aqueous GO ink. After annealing directly on the flexible glass substrate, the as-prepared reduced graphene oxide (RGO) film shows improved conductivity and high optical transmittance. Its performance in terms of sheet resistance and optical transmittance is investigated. In addition, we demonstrate a concept of flexible thin film heaters using conductive RGO film. It shows great potential to be window defrosters due to its excellent heating performance.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: binghu@umd.edu (L. Hu).
[1] These authors contributed equally to this study.

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2. Experiment details

2.1. Synthesis of GO powder

All chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich and used as received. Graphene oxide is prepared using a modified Hummer's method [17]. A mass of 1 g $NaNO_3$ is added to 2 g Johnson Matthey graphite powder in 46 mL concentrated sulfuric acid. The mixture is stirred in 0 °C ice bath. Then 6 g $KMnO_4$ is added very slowly while the reaction container is kept in the ice bath. The temperature is increased to 35 °C and kept for 30 min after removing the ice bath. A volume of 90 mL de-ionized water is added to the paste and the temperature is allowed to reach 98 °C for 12 h. A volume of 280 mL warm water is used to dilute the products and 50 mL 30% H_2O_2 is added. The solution turns golden and the solid particles are dark brown. The filtration is done using a Büchner's funnel and filter paper. The solid is washed by 100 mL warm water 3 times and dried in vacuum overnight. The obtained powder is brown.

2.2. The preparation of GO ink

The GO ink is prepared by dissolving 150 mg graphite oxide in 150 mL distilled water. The solution is then sonicated using the horn sonicator for 30 min and water bath sonicator for 2 h. After that, the centrifugation is done at 6000 rpm for 30 min. The supernatant is collected. A commercial surfactant Zynol (DuPont) was added to the GO ink to reduce its surface tension enabling the aqueous GO solution to easily spread on the surface of the glass. The surfactant (0.01 wt.% based on GO) was added to GO ink (0.5 mg/mL) by pipette to reduce the surface tension of GO ink, and was then dispersed with the aid of bath sonication for several minutes.

2.3. Meyer-rod coating with GO ink on flexible glass

To coat the Willow Glass substrate, a volume of 80 μL of the GO ink was dropped on the gap between the Meyer rod (35#) and the edge of the flexible glass. The Meyer rod was then used to remove the excess solution on the surface of flexible glass. A uniform wet film was formed that was then oven dried at 50 °C to 80 °C for less than 1 min. Depending on the number of layers applied, the thicknesses of the dried films was in the range of 5–25 nm as measured by atomic force microscopy (AFM).

2.4. Thermal reduction of GO film

After coating with GO ink, the flexible glass samples were put into a tube furnace fitted with controlled gas flows. The GO films were thermally annealed with a ramp rate of 5 °C/min and kept at 650 °C for 5 h under Ar/H_2 gas (95%/5%) flow to form RGO film. The system was cooled down to room temperature during duration of 2 h. Upon removing the flexible glass samples from the furnace, no physical deformation of the substrate was observed.

2.5. Material characterizations

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images were taken by Hitachi SU-70 analytical ultra-high resolution SEM (Japan). The applied voltage of SEM is 10 kV. AFM images were taken by Digital Instruments (Veeco) Multimode AFM with nanoscope III controller10 micron scanner. Raman measurements were performed on a HORIBA Jobin Yvon LabRAM ARAMIS using a 532 nm diode-pumped solid-state laser, attenuated to give ~900 μW power at the sample surface.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1(a) shows the high flexibility of the Willow Glass used in this study. Such a flexible substrate is promising for the next generation flexible electronics and displays. Fig. 1(b) displays a schematic of a typical Meyer-rod coating of GO films on the flexible glass substrate. The transparency of GO films can be controlled simply by the amount of layers deposited on the substrate. Fig. 1(c) shows three GO films coated on flexible glasses by depositing different layers of GO ink. As more layers of GO ink were coated, it formed a thicker, darker, light yellow film on the flexible glass. The additional films were coated onto the flexible glass substrate after oven drying. The multi-layer films went through a single reduction step at the end. The transmittance of these three GO films was determined to be 70%, 50%, and 30% respectively. Their different transparent properties can be identified by the visibility of UMD logo underneath the glass.

The molecular structure of Zynol is illustrated in Fig. 2(a), which includes a stable C – F hydrophobic chain and – OH hydrophilic groups. Fig. 2(b) shows that as-prepared GO ink is a clear, brown aqueous suspension. Fig. 2(c) displays a typical coating that results when the GO ink droplets could not be spread to wet the whole glass. This phenomenon is ascribed to large surface tension of water-based GO ink. After the addition of Zynol surfactant to GO ink, a uniform coating is achieved as demonstrated by Fig. 2(d). The crucial effect of Zynol is thus revealed for the coating process. Zynol is a non-ionic surfactant and reduces the surface tension of GO ink. The Zynol molecules have strong affinity with water molecules, resulting in the decrease of interaction between water molecules on the surface and their surroundings. Therefore, Zynol surfactant controls the surface tension of water-based GO ink and a uniform coating can be achieved.

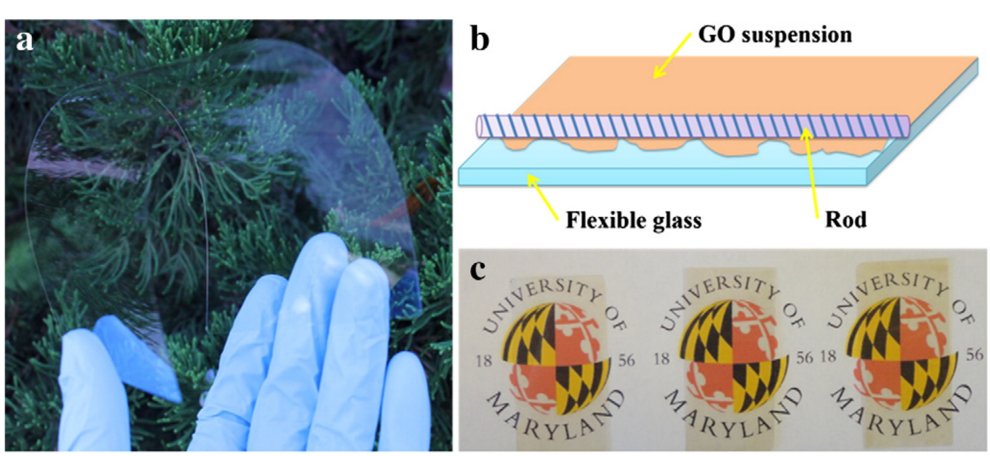

Fig. 1. (a) Flexibility of the transparent glass. (b) The schematic procedure of producing transparent and flexible GO coated glass by Meyer rod coating. (c) Uniform printing with GO ink on flexible glasses (transparency from left to right: 70%, 50%, and 30%). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

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