

Fabrication of nanopipes using vertically aligned carbon nanofiber templates and their properties

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ABSTRACT

A method to fabricate nanoscale structures suitable for fluidic transport is reported. Vertically aligned carbon nanofibers grown by plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition are used as sacrificial templates for nanopipes with internal diameters as small as 30 nm and lengths up to several micrometers that are oriented perpendicular to the substrate. This method provides a high level of control over the nanopipe location, number, length, and diameter, permitting them to be deterministically positioned on a substrate and arranged into arrays.

Keywords: Nanofluidics, porous membrane, carbon nanofibers, microfabrication

1 INTRODUCTION

Fluidic structures with submicron dimensions have potential applications for sorting DNA molecules [1], electroanalytical sensing, and detecting and characterizing single molecule events [2]. The fabrication of devices that function on the nanometer scale requires new approaches when standard microfabrication techniques cannot be scaled down. One such approach, the use of the materials such as carbon nanotubes (CNT) and carbon nanofibers (CNF) that self-assemble into nanostructures, has been successfully applied in nanoelectronics. Vertically aligned carbon nanofibers (VACNFs) that can be synthesized highly deterministically [3] have been integrated into a variety of devices such as VACNF-based electrochemical probes designed for intracellular characterization [4] or gated cathode field emitters [5]. Another nanofabrication approach that has been proposed for construction of

nanofluidic devices is to use templates made of sacrificial materials defined by electron beam lithography [6]. In the work reported here we combine these two approaches to demonstrate the use of carbon nanofibers as self-assembled sacrificial templates for the synthesis of nanopipes, which are extended hollow structures that can be as long as a few micrometers with internal diameters as small as 30 nm. Such nanopipes can be implemented as functional elements in gas- and liquid-phase fluidic devices. Several applications of nanopipes can be envisioned including high-throughput sensing, analysis of molecular species, and fluidic interfaces to live cells. In this work, vertically aligned carbon nanofibers have been synthesized on Si₃N₄ membranes. They have been used as templates for nanopipes made of SiO₂ in subsequent microfabrication steps. We have explored the macromolecular transport and electrochemical properties of membranes with nanopipes.

2 FABRICATION

The nanopipe fabrication process is depicted in Fig. 1. Thin (80 nm) low-stress Si₃N₄ membranes were used as a substrate so that the access holes to the nanopipes could be opened from the backside of the chip [6] [Fig. 1(a)]. Electron beam lithography was used to define catalyst sites for deterministic growth of VACNFs [Fig. 1(b)]. The nanofibers were grown [Fig. 1(c)] in the glow discharge dc plasma consisting of an ammonia/acetylene gas mixture at 700°C [3]. A scanning electron microscope (SEM) image of the resultant array of fibers is shown in Fig. 2. In the next step [Fig. 1(d)] the nanopipe walls were formed by coating the nanofibers and chip surface with a 100-nm-thick layer of SiO₂ using a silane-based plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition process. Resist was then spun-on and the tips of the nanopipes were opened by reactive ion etching. The Ni particle was removed in nitric acid, providing

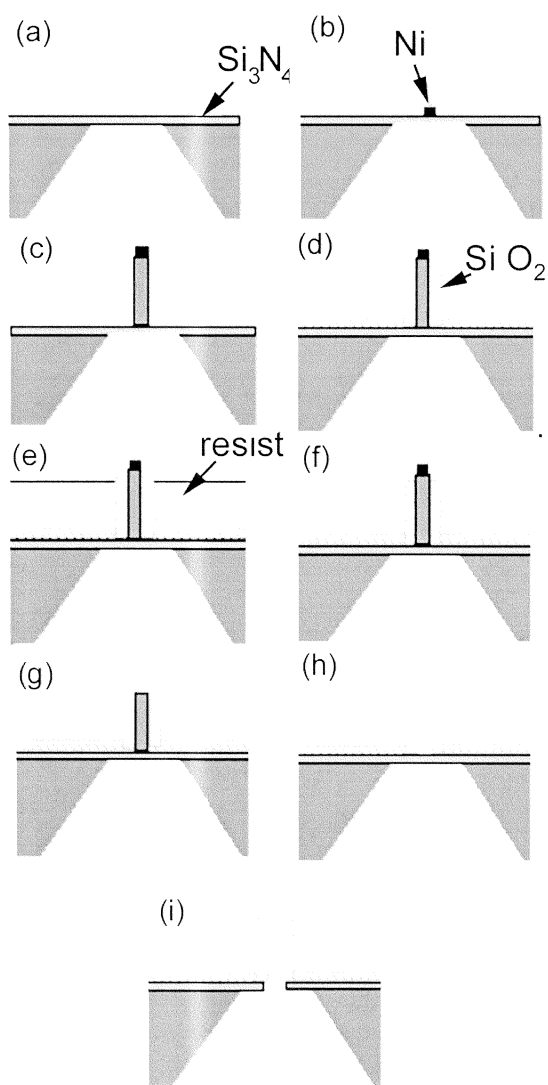


Figure 1. Steps for fabrication of nanopipes on a thin membrane: (a) Si_3N_4 membrane on Si substrate with backside-etched window; (b) Ni particles are created via e-beam lithography and lift-off technique; (c) VACNFs are grown by plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition; (d) the VACNFs and substrate are coated with SiO_2 ; (e) resist is spun on; (f) SiO_2 is removed from the tips by reactive ion etching and the remaining resist is removed; (g) the Ni particle is removed in an HNO_3 wet etch; (h) the carbon nanofiber is etched away in an O_2 plasma; (i) the Si_3N_4 membrane is etched from the front side, through the nanopipes, by reactive ion etching.

access to the carbon nanofiber [Fig. 1(e), (f), (g)], that successively were etched away from the nanopipe interior in an oxygen plasma [Fig. 1(h)]. Finally, the openings through the silicon nitride membrane were produced by exposing the chip to SF_6/O_2 -based plasma etch, with the newly formed nanopipes serving as a mask thereby assuring

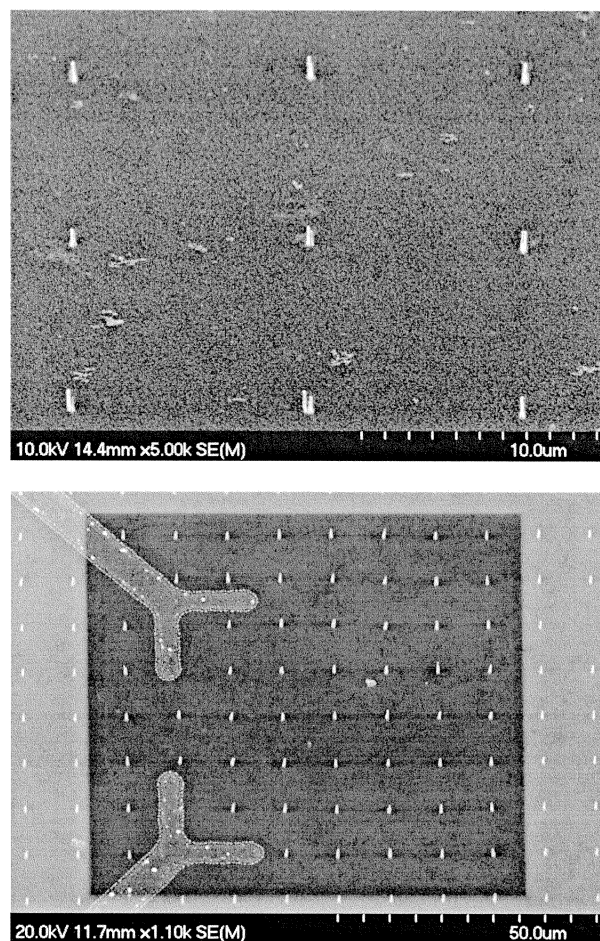


Figure 2. Scanning electron micrograph of an array of VACNFs grown on top of a Si_3N_4 membrane (30° view, 10 μm spacing, 1 μm average height, 100 nm diameter). The evaporated Ni catalyst dots were sufficiently large that most of them separated into two distinct nanoparticles during sintering at 700°C , so that two VACNFs were grown at most locations.

self-alignment of the backside holes with the nanopipes [Fig. 1(i)]. The SEM images of the final structure are presented in Fig. 3. To produce structures presented in this paper the catalyst dot size was larger than 400 nm in diameter due to the limitations of electron beam lithography tool used, thus multiple fibers (2-3) were produced on each dot [Fig. 2] [3].

3 FLUIDIC FUNCTIONALITY

The functionality of nanopipes has been demonstrated by observing fluidic transport between two fluid regions that were physically separated by a membrane containing the nanopipe pores. To observe fluid transport, we exploited the fluorogenic property of propidium iodide, a nucleic acid stain that is fluorescently enhanced by a factor

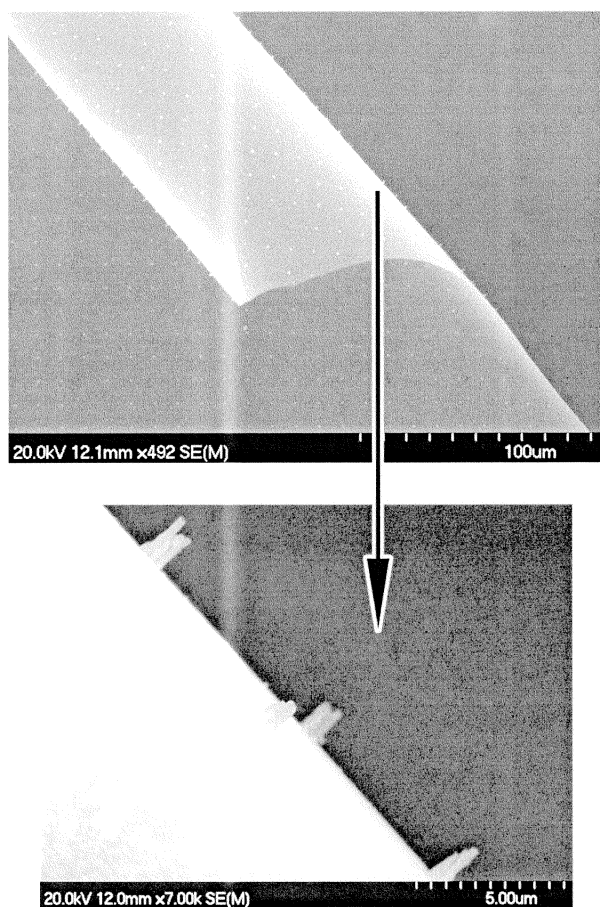


Figure 3. (Top) Scanning electron micrograph of a membrane that was torn out from the Si frame with nanopipes displayed on one side and array of corresponding orifices visible on the other side. (Bottom) Magnified view of the area where the arrow originates

of 20-30 upon its intercalation between the bases of double stranded DNA. By placing a solution of this dye on one side of the nanopipe membrane, and a solution of double-stranded DNA on the opposing side, the transport of material through the pipe could be observed by an enhanced fluorescent response in the regions where the fluids mixed. To enable visualization of this interaction using fluorescence microscopy, a fixture was fabricated that elevated the nanopipe membrane approximately 1 mm above the surface of a glass microscope slide. Approximately 10 μl of the two solutions (6 μM propidium iodide and 0.5 $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$ plasmid DNA – pgreenlantern-1) was then placed on the top (propidium iodide) and bottom (DNA) surfaces of the membrane, respectively. Prior to loading the dry nanopipe array was imaged in transmission mode using white light illumination [Fig. 4(a)]. After loading, the diffusive transport of material between the two solutions was observed using two-dimensional images acquired with an optical microscope with an epi-fluorescence attachment, a cooled CCD camera and a

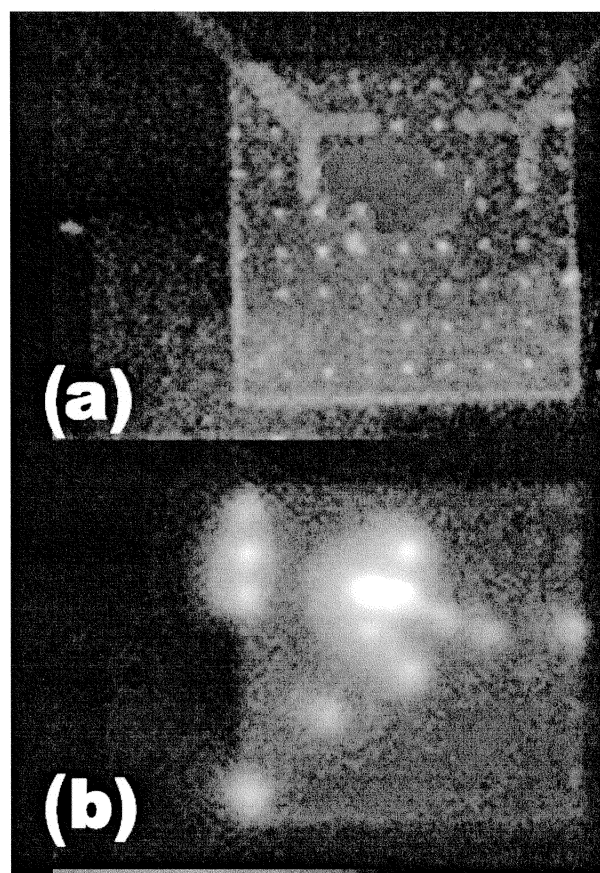


Figure 4 Observation of fluidic transport through nanopipe membranes by diffusive mixing and electrokinetic interaction of two membrane-isolated solutions (propidium iodide and DNA). Upon interaction, the propidium iodide fluorescence increases dramatically as it intercalates with the DNA. (a) A dry array of nanopipes viewed in white light illumination; (b) fluorescence image taken 1 min after application of propidium iodide and DNA solutions, respectively;

TRITC filter set (545nm excitation/620 nm emission). Immediately upon loading, plumes of fluorescence could be observed in the DNA solution at some of the nanopipe positions as propidium iodide diffused through the nanopipes and intercalated into the plasmid DNA [figure 4(b)]. After a few minutes these plumes tended to decrease and stop, possibly due to the large structure of the plasmid tending to diffuse into and clog the nanoscale pipe pores. Over time, the fluorescence at the pipe positions was noted to increase, perhaps indicative of the presence of increasing amounts of propidium iodide -stained DNA within the nanopipe.

Following demonstration of diffusive transport between the propidium iodide and DNA solutions, the fixture was modified to enable electrical connection to the fluid droplets on either side of the nanopipe membrane.

Voltages were applied between the two solutions, with the positive electrode in the propidium iodide solution and the negative electrode in the DNA solution. Under these conditions, there will be electrophoretic mobility of the propidium ion (positively charged) towards the negative electrode in the DNA solution as well as DNA (negatively charged phosphate backbone) migration to the positive electrode in the propidium iodide solution. Further, as the nanopipe is composed of silica, the negative surface charges on the silica will support electroosmotic flow (see for example ref. [7]) due to cation stacking and their subsequent migration towards the negative electrode in the DNA solution. The fixture was mounted on the fluorescent microscope platform and solutions were applied as described above. Following initial plume formation due to diffusive transport, the plumes dispersed, and no additional plume formation was observed. Application of a 5V potential between the two fluids resulted in the sudden generation of a large plume from a few nanopipes that subsided after about 5 min. Both the diffusive- and electrokinetically-induced plume generation could be reproduced after thorough rinsing of the device in nanopure water.

4 SUMMARY

In summary, a concept of nanofabrication based upon the synthesis of sacrificial self-assembled nanostructures (VACNFs) grown at predetermined locations as templates for the formation of nanopipe structures has been demonstrated. The functionality of nanopipes for diffusive and electrokinetic transport of small molecules has been confirmed.

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