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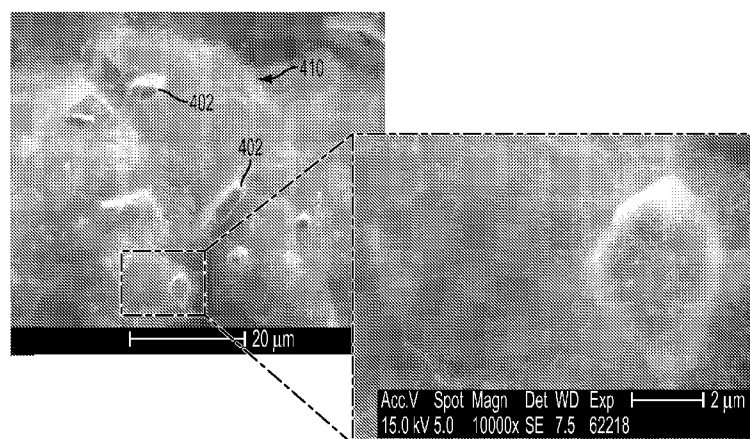


FIG. 10

(57) Abstract: A fluffy nano-material and method of manufacture are described. At 2000X magnification the fluffy nanomaterial has the appearance of raw, uncarded wool, with individual fiber lengths ranging from approximately four microns to twenty microns. Powder-based nanocatalysts are dispersed in the fluffy nanomaterial. The production of fluffy nanomaterial typically involves flowing about 125 cc/min of organic vapor at a pressure of about 400 torr over powder-based nano-catalysts for a period of time that may range from approximately thirty minutes to twenty-four hours.

NANO-MATERIAL AND METHOD OF FABRICATION**CROSS REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

[0001] This patent application claims priority from and is related to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/152,383 filed 13 February 2009, entitled “Nano-material and Method of Fabrication.” Provisional Patent Application No. 61/152,383 is incorporated by reference in its entirety herein.

GOVERNMENT RIGHTS

[0002] The U.S. Government has rights to this invention pursuant to contract number DE-AC05-00OR22800 between the U.S. Department of Energy and Babcock & Wilcox Technical Services, LLC.

[0003] This invention was made with government support under Contract No. DE-AC05-00OR22725 awarded by the U.S. Department of Energy. The government has certain rights in the invention.

FIELD

[0004] This disclosure relates to the field of composite materials. More particularly, this disclosure relates to composite materials formed with anchored nanostructures.

BACKGROUND

[0005] Nanostructures are objects that have physical dimensions between those of sub-atomic-scale (less than one Angstrom-sized) structures and microscopic-scale (greater than one tenth micrometer-sized) structures. Nanostructures are said to have nano-scale features. “Nano-scale” refers to a dimension that is between approximately one Angstrom (0.1 nanometer) and approximately 100 nanometers (0.1 micrometer). Nano-scale features may occur in one, two, or three dimensions. For example, nano-textured surfaces have one nano-scale dimension. That is, such surfaces have nano-features such as ridges, valleys or plateaus that provide surface height variations that range from about 0.1 to about 100 nanometers. Another example of a one-dimension nanostructure is a film that has a thickness that ranges from about 0.1 to about 100 nanometers. Nanotubes are examples of nanostructures that have two nano-scale dimensions. That is, a nanotube has a diametral dimension and a length. The diametral dimension of a nanotube ranges from about 0.1 to about 100 nanometers. The length of a nanotube may be greater than hundreds of microns. Nanoparticles have three diametral nano-scale dimensions. Each diametral dimension of a nanoparticle ranges from about 0.1 to about 100 nm.

[0006] Nanostructures may be formed from carbon, silicon, boron, various metal and metalloid elements, various compounds, alloys and oxides of those elements, ceramics, various organic materials including monomers and polymers, and potentially any other material. Nanostructures have potential use in various physical, chemical, mechanical, electronic and biological applications. Nanomaterials are collections of nanostructures. The formation, collection, and assembly of nanomaterials generally involve difficult and expensive processes. One major issue with nanomaterials is the difficulty of production of the nanostructures in sufficient quantity, purity, and uniformity of morphology to be useful. What are needed therefore are better systems and methods for manufacturing nanomaterials.

SUMMARY

[0007] In one embodiment the present disclosure provides a fluffy nanomaterial that includes a plurality of individual nanostructure fibers. The fluffy nanomaterial is characterized at approximately 2000X magnification as having the appearance of raw uncarded wool, with individual nanostructure fibers having lengths ranging from approximately four microns to approximately one centimeter. Further the fluffy nanomaterial has powder-based nanocatalysts dispersed therein.

[0008] Also disclosed is a method of manufacturing a fluffy nanomaterial that includes the following steps, which may be performed in any order. One step is heating powder-based nanocatalysts to about 500°C. A second step is exposing the powder-based nanocatalysts to a flow of organic vapor at between about 125 cc/min and about 150 cc/min and at a process pressure of about between about 200 torr and about 400 torr for a time period ranging from about 30 minutes to about 24 hours to form the fluffy nanomaterial.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Various advantages are apparent by reference to the detailed description in conjunction with the figures, wherein elements are not to scale so as to more clearly show the details, wherein like reference numbers indicate like elements throughout the several views, and wherein:

[0010] Fig. 1 is a somewhat schematic illustration of a method of fabricating nano-catalysts.

[0011] Fig. 2 is a somewhat schematic illustration of a method of fabricating nano-catalysts.

[0012] Fig. 3 is a somewhat schematic illustration of a method of fabrication nano-catalysts.

[0013] Fig. 4 is a somewhat schematic illustration of a method of fabricating nano-catalysts.

[0014] Fig. 5 is a photomicrograph of nano-catalysts.

[0015] Figs. 6A and 6B are photomicrographs of nano-catalysts.

[0016] Figs. 7A and 7B are photomicrographs that each depicts a portion of single anchored nanostructure formation.

[0017] Figs. 7C and 7D are photomicrographs of anchored nanostructure material.

[0018] Fig. 8A a schematic diagram of a fabrication system for producing anchored nanostructure materials.

[0019] Fig. 8B is a schematic diagram of a simplified fabrication system for producing anchored nanostructure materials.

[0020] Fig. 9 is a photomicrograph of short nanomaterial.

[0021] Fig. 10 is photomicrograph of fluffy nanomaterial, at two different magnifications.

[0022] Fig. 11 is a photograph of fluffy nanomaterial.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0023] In the following detailed description of the preferred embodiments, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part hereof, and within which are shown by way of illustration the practice of specific embodiments of methods of fabricating nano-catalysts. It is to be understood that other embodiments may be utilized, and that structural changes may be made and processes may vary in other embodiments.

[0024] Disclosed herein are various processes for fabricating nano-catalysts that have utility for forming nanostructures and manufacturing nanomaterials. In some embodiments the nano-catalysts include nanoparticles that are disposed adjacent the surface of powder particles. The nanoparticles are typically metal. The powder particles are typically metal or ceramic particles. Nano-catalysts that have nanoparticles disposed adjacent the surface of powder particles are an example of powder-based nano-catalysts.

[0025] Powder-based nano-catalysts may be used in various processes to produce nanostructures and nanomaterials. For example, powder-based nano-catalysts may be used to grow carbon nanotubes that may be harvested and used as nanomaterials. The powder-based nano-catalysts may also be incorporated as a constituent of components and coatings that then have catalytic properties for enhancing the formation of nanostructures within the component or the coating. That is, instead of first fabricating and collecting nanostructures as nanomaterials and then mixing those nanomaterials with other constituents to form nanostructure-bearing composite materials, powder-based nano-catalysts may be mixed with other constituents and nanostructures may then be grown in-situ to form nanostructure-bearing composite materials. The term “in-situ” refers to a formation of nanostructures (e.g., carbon nanotubes) on individual powder particles that may subsequently be used to fabricate composite materials that incorporate the anchored nanostructure material, without transferring the nanostructures to another material or powder for such use. The nanostructure-bearing composite material may be formed as a layer that is disposed adjacent the surface of a component or the nanostructure-bearing composite material may be formed as a portion or all of the bulk material of the component.

[0026] Chemical processes may be used to form nanoparticles adjacent the surface of powder materials of interest. That is, the powder materials of interest may be chemically treated in a solution to deposit nano-size catalyst particles adjacent the surface of the powders by precipitation or reactive precipitation processes. Such techniques may be applied to virtually any ceramic or metal powders or powders formed from combinations of metals and ceramics. For example, all Sc containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Ni containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Fe containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Cr containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Co containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Ti containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all V containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; all Mn containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics, all Cu containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics; and all Zn containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics may be used. Y, Zr, Nb, Ru, Rh, Pd, Hf, Ta, W, Re, Ir, Pt, and Au containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics may also be used, as well as, Ce, Th, and U containing metals, alloys, and intermetallics.

[0027] The following provides detailed descriptions of various embodiments, including nanoparticle generation and the production of nano-catalysts by deposition of the nanoparticles on the surface of selected metal, metal alloy, or ceramic powders or powders that included mixtures of those materials. The powder-based nano-catalysts having nanoparticles adjacent the surfaces of the powder particles' surfaces are referred to as metal-powder-based nano-catalysts or as ceramic-powder-based nano-catalysts depending on whether the powder is a metal or a ceramic. Powder-based nano-catalysts may also be formed from silicon or other metalloid powders; such nano-catalysts are categorized as metal-based-powder nano-catalysts. The surfaces of a substrate material having the shape of a geometric solid may also be used to support nano-size catalyst particles. Such structures are referred to herein as "solid-based nano-catalysts." Solid-based nano-catalysts may utilize a silicon wafer or other ceramic material as a substrate. Powder-based nano-catalysts and solid-based nano-catalysts are collectively referred to herein as "nano-catalysts."

[0028] To facilitate the formation of nano-catalysts on the surfaces of powders or solid substrates, a "complexing agent" may be added to the surface of a powder or a substrate. As used herein the term "complexing agent" refers to a coupling agent, a chelating agent, or a similar chemical structure that facilitates the binding of metal ions to the powder or

substrate by such mechanisms as a chemical ionic bond or a chemical covalent bond or a chemical coordinate covalent bond or a chemical attraction resulting from electro-negative/positive effects. With a coupling agent, an atom (e.g., a metal ion) of the nano-catalyst is bound to a single atom (e.g., an oxygen ion) of the complexing agent, whereas with a chelating agent, an atom (e.g., a metal ion) of the nano-catalyst is bound to two or more atoms (e.g., two oxygen ions, or an oxygen ion and a nitrogen ion, or multiples of such ions) of the complexing agent. A carboxyl functional group ($-\text{COO}^-$) is an example of a coupling agent, while ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA) is an example of a chelating agent.

[0029] Figure 1 illustrates an embodiment of a process 10 for forming metal-powder-based nano-catalysts. In a typical formulation, 100 g of metal powder 12 is mixed in a first solution 14. Before mixing with the first solution 14 the metal powder 12 may be washed with deionized water (1 liter of water is typically sufficient) to clean off residual dust and debris, although typically this is not necessary. The metal powder 12 may also be washed with an acid, such as hydrochloric acid, to activate its surface. The metal powder 12 may, for example, be NiAl powder having particle sizes that range from about 10 nanometers to about 100 microns in diameter. NiAl powders and other powders ranging from about 0.5 microns to about 60 microns in diameter are typical. Such powders are referred to herein as powder particles. The first solution 14 typically includes (a) a mixture 16 of (1) ethanol (ranging from about 0 wt.% to about 50 wt.%) and (2) water (ranging from about 50 wt.% to about 100 wt.%) and (b) a chelating agent 18 (ranging from about 0.05 wt.% to about 0.5 wt.%). The chelating agent 18 may be ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA) or a similar chemical. Generally the metal powder 12 is mixed with the first solution 14 for approximately 30 minutes using an ultrasonic bath. The first solution 14 and the metal powder 12 are then allowed to stand, typically for at least approximately an hour up to about 6 hours (but overnight or up to 12 hours is not deleterious). This mixing and soaking produces a chelated metal powder 20.

[0030] The process 10 includes a step 22 that involves (a) separating the chelated metal powder 20 from the residual first solution 14, typically by pouring the mixture of the first solution 14 and the chelated metal powder 20 through a filter and (b) washing the chelated metal powder 20 with deionized water to remove excess chelating agent 18 that may have accumulated with the chelated metal powder 20. The chelated metal powder 20

is then added to a second solution 24 that includes metal ions 26. The second solution 24 may be 250 ml of a 0.001M to 1M (preferably 0.1M) solution of FeCl_3 , which of course contains Fe^{3+} ions. In other embodiments solutions containing other metal ions such as Co^{2+} , Co^{3+} , or Ni^{2+} may be used. The chelated metal powder 20 and the second solution 24 are stirred for about thirty minutes to about six hours or longer and then filtered to remove “loaded” metal powder 28 from the supernatant (residual) second solution 24. As used herein the term “loaded” refers to a configuration where ions are bound to (as in a chemical ionic bond or a chemical covalent bond or a chemical attraction resulting from electro-negative/positive effects) a surface of an element either directly or through an intermediate material. In this case the metal ions 26 are bound to the chelated metal powder 20 by the chelating agent 18. The loaded metal powder 28 may then be washed with deionized water to remove excess Fe^{3+} ions. The wash water containing Fe^{3+} ions may be analyzed by UV-visible spectroscopy to determine the concentration of Fe^{3+} in the wash water. The loaded metal powder 28 may then be dried under a vacuum (step 30), or it may be air dried.

[0031] In some instances it may be desirable to determine the quantity of Fe^{3+} ions that are loaded on the loaded metal powder 28. This may be determined by using UV - visible spectroscopy to determine the concentration of Fe^{3+} ions that were retained in the residual second solution 24 after the loaded metal powder 28 was filtered from the residual second solution 24 and the concentration of Fe^{3+} ions that were washed from the loaded metal powder 28, and then using the volume of each solution to calculate the moles of Fe^{3+} that were removed by those processes, and then subtracting that removed quantity from the total starting quantity of moles of Fe^{3+} in the first solution 14 to determine the number of moles of Fe^{3+} ions loaded on the loaded metal powder 28. Typically the concentration of Fe^{3+} ions (i.e., the metal ions 26) loaded on to the surface of loaded metal powder 28 (where the loaded metal powder 28 is NiAl) is about 3×10^{-7} grams of Fe^{3+} per gram of loaded metal powder 28 when the solution is approximately 0.001M FeCl_3 . The loaded amount may be increased by using higher concentrations of FeCl_3 solutions.

[0032] The final step 32 for producing a metal-powder-based nano-catalyst 34 is contacting the dried loaded metal powder 28 with a reducing environment. In a preferred method of reducing the metal ions, the loaded metal powder 28 may be placed under a hydrogen atmosphere preferably containing about 4 wt.% hydrogen and about 96 wt.%

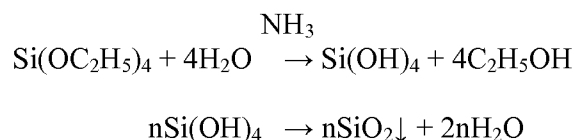
argon at a temperature above about 400°C (generally 500 - 850°C) for at least approximately 5 minutes. The preferred reducing agent is hydrogen (H₂) gas. The H₂ concentration may be in a range from just above 0% up to 100% H₂. A composition comprising about 4% H₂ is typically used because it is more effective than lower concentrations of H₂, and higher concentrations may introduce safety concerns regarding explosion or fire. The carrier gas for H₂ may be any inert gas, but Argon (Ar) is a preferred carrier for H₂ because Ar has very low chemical reactivity. Step 32 is used to reduce the metal ions 26 and form the metal-powder-based nano-catalyst 34 as metal nanoparticles 36 on the metal powder 12. Extending the time of exposure to the reducing environment to about 30 minutes increases the percentage of the metal ions 26 that are reduced, and an exposure time of approximately one hour may increase the percentage. Exposure times beyond about two hours have diminishing returns with approximately twenty four hours of exposure being the limit for any statistically significant increase.

[0033] In some embodiments a ceramic-powder-based nano-catalyst may be formed using silica (silicon dioxide) powder by producing mono-dispersed silica nanoparticles that are synthesized using wet colloidal chemical methods. A chelating process or a coupling agent process may be used to attach functional groups to the silica particle surfaces followed by loading metal ions onto the functionalized silica particles. Nano-catalysts may also be produced from ceramic powders by washing them with salt solutions as described herein for producing nanocatalysts from metal powders. The ceramic-powder-based nano-catalysts may then be produced by chemical reduction of the metal ions in solution or by hydrogen reduction in the solid phase at high temperature.

[0034] Figure 2 illustrates an embodiment of a method for fabricating a ceramic-powder-based nano-catalyst. The process 50 begins with forming a microemulsion medium 52 that typically comprises water droplets 54, oil 56, and a surfactant 58. The oil 56 is typically hexanol or cyclohexane or a mixture ranging from about 0 wt.% to about 20 wt.% hexanol and from about 80 wt.% to about 100 wt.% cyclohexane. The water droplets 54 typically comprise from about 5 wt.% to about 15 wt.% of the total microemulsion medium 52, the oil 56 typically comprises from about 50 wt.% to about 90 wt.% of the total microemulsion medium 52, and the surfactant 58 typically comprises from about 5 wt.% to about 15 wt.% of the total microemulsion medium 52. A polyethylene glycol p-tert-octylphenyl ether, such as commercially available TRITON-

101® may be used as the surfactant. Another suitable surfactant is tert-octylphenoxy poly(ethyleneoxy)ethanol sold commercially under the trade name IGEPAL (® Canada only). In the process depicted in Figure 2, water-in-oil microemulsions such as this serve as nanoreactors to produce components of the ceramic-powder-based nano-catalysts.

[0035] The process 50 continues with mixing an organic silane with the microemulsion in the presence of ammonia to form silicon dioxide nanoparticles. Typically from about 20 gr. to about 100 gr. of tetraethoxysilane (TEOS) - $\text{Si}(\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5)_4$ and from about 2 gr. to about 5 gr. of ammonia (NH_3) are mixed to form approximately 200 to about 1000 gr. of microemulsion medium 52 to initiate a TEOS hydrolysis process 60. That is, silicon dioxide nanospheres are grown in the water droplets 54 by hydrolysis of tetraethoxysilane (TEOS) in the presence of NH_3 catalysts. The reaction produces amorphous silicon dioxide nanoparticles 62 that are approximately spherical and that typically range from about 50 to about 500 nm in diameter, however diameters ranging from about 10 nm to about 10 μm are possible. The reactions are as follows:



[0036] The silicon dioxide nanoparticles 62 in a reaction solution 64 are then surface modified by hydrolysis of the organosilane (a silicon alkoxide) to form functional groups $-\text{COO}^-$. A coupling agent such as a sodium salt of N-(trimethoxysilylpropyl)ethylenediamine triacetate may be added to the reaction solution 64 in an amount ranging from about 0.2 wt.% to about 1 wt % based on the total weight of the solution 64 to initiate a process 66 that modifies the surface of the silicon dioxide nanoparticles 62 to form functionalized silicon dioxide nanoparticles 68. Typically the process involves modifying the silicon dioxide nanoparticles 62 to add functional groups, such as carboxyl functional groups ($-\text{COO}^-$) (a coupling agent) that have enhanced affinity for metal ions. After their formation the functionalized silicon dioxide nanoparticles 68 may then be removed from the reaction solution 64 by, for example, a process of destabilization (e.g., centrifugation) and the collected particles may be washed in an alcohol and water mixture. For simplicity of illustration the various forms of silicon dioxide nanoparticles (68, 70, 72, and 74) shown in the lower portion of Figure 2 are

portrayed as hemispheres, although in reality they are substantially spherical in form as shown in the upper portion of Figure 2.

[0037] Metal ions, such as Fe^{3+} , Co^{2+} , and Ni^{2+} , may be loaded onto the surface of the functionalized silicon dioxide nanoparticles wherein the metal ions are substantially homogeneously attracted to, attached to, or adsorbed to the surface functional groups. For example, in a step 76 the functionalized silicon dioxide nanoparticles 68 may be mixed in a solution 78 comprising metal ions 80 to produce loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 70 wherein the metal ions are bound to (as in a chemical ionic bond or a chemical covalent bond or a chemical attraction resulting from electro-negative/positive effects) the functionalized silicon dioxide nanoparticles.

[0038] In this embodiment the method of fabricating a ceramic-powder-based nano-catalyst then proceeds with a step 82 for separating the loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 70 from substantially all of the residual solution 78 to produce dry loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 72. For example, the loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 70 may be separated from substantially all of the residual solution 78 by centrifuging the mixture and drying the loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 70 in a vacuum, or air drying under a hood.

[0039] The final step 84 for producing the ceramic-powder-based nano-catalyst is to expose the dried loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 72 to a reducing environment such as by placing the dried loaded silicon dioxide nanoparticles 72 under a hydrogen atmosphere (such as an atmosphere containing about 4 wt.% hydrogen and about 96wt.% argon) at a temperature ranging from about 400°C to about 1200°C (typically from about 500°C to about 850°C) for approximately 5 minutes, to reduce the metal ions to metal and form the ceramic-powder-based nano-catalyst 74 as metal nanoparticles 86 on the silicon dioxide nanoparticles 62. Extending the exposure time to a range from about 30 minutes to about 2 hours may be beneficial.

[0040] Figure 3 presents a further alternate embodiment for forming metal-powder-based nano-catalysts. The process starts with a metal powder 100. In some embodiments the metal powder 100 may be pre-treated with an acid (such as hydrochloric acid) to activate its surface. Then as depicted in Figure 3 the metal powder 100 may be washed with a

metal-ion-containing solution 102 (e.g., a metal chloride salt solution) that typically comprises ions of iron (e.g., Fe^{3+}), cobalt (e.g., Co^{2+}) or nickel (e.g., Ni^{2+}), or combinations of two or more such ions. Metal nitrate salts (e.g., ferric nitrate) may also be used. Some beneficial synergism has been observed in solutions containing two or more such ions, particularly where the metal powder 100 is NiAl. Typically, the metal-ion containing solution 102 is formed from a metal salt and an acid that includes the anion of the metal salt. That is, when the metal salt is a chloride salt, the acid is hydrochloric acid; when the metal salt is a nitrate, the acid is nitric acid; when the metal salt is a sulfate, the acid is sulfuric acid, and so forth. In some embodiments AlCl_3 may be added to provide an excess of Cl^- ions, which are useful for breaking up any Al_2O_3 that may be present. Al^{3+} ions are preferably included in the wash solutions to create catalysts, and AlCl_3 may be used to breakup oxide coatings on aluminum, and/or to act as an acid as a Lewis acid, or/and to generate HCl acid. AlCl_3 hydrolyzes in water to form HCl acid which is an etchant for many metals helping to form catalytic features. It is a favorable species in aqueous metal salt solutions. AlCl_3 in water (aqueous solutions) also provides $[\text{C}]^-$ ions or/and $[\text{AlCl}_4]^-$ ions which are reactive in the depositions of the metal catalytic spots or dots on the larger, micron-sized powder and substrate surfaces.

[0041] Also, whereas a fresh aqueous solution of FeCl_3 is naturally acidic, over time, the pH may increase as colloidal iron hydroxide (ferrous hydroxide) is formed. These colloids may precipitate and cause problems. To reduce the formation of such colloids it is advantageous to adjust the pH of a FeCl_3 solution to a pH less than approximately three. The addition of dilute hydrochloric acid is the preferred method of reducing the pH. Using 0.1 M HCl or another weak acid solution (instead of water) as the washing medium stabilizes the Fe^{3+} ions and prevents their conversion to Fe^{2+} . When nitrate salts are used, dilute nitric acid is preferable as the washing medium.

[0042] The foregoing washing process produces a loaded metal powder 104. That is, the loaded metal powder 104 is a metal powder having metal ions 106 attached thereto. The loaded metal powder 104 is then separated from the supernatant metal chloride ion solution and dried either by air drying or a vacuum. The metal ions 106 on the loaded metal powder 104 may be reduced while at a temperature ranging from about 400°C up to about 1200°C , typically about 600°C , typically using a hydrogen gas atmosphere 108 that is typically 4% H_2 and 96% Ar, typically heated to about 600°C . The reduction process

typically takes about 5 minutes but longer process times ranging from about 30 minutes to about 2 hours may be beneficial. The result is metal-powder-based catalyst 110 that comprises a metal powder 112 with surface metal nanoparticle catalysts 114.

[0043] As an example of the embodiment of Figure 3 a metal powder, such as 10 gr. of NiAl powder, may be mixed with a metal salt solution, such as 10 mL of 0.001M – 1M (typically 0.1M) FeCl₃, and optionally a chelating agent such as EDTA. Typically the mixing includes several (typically two) hours of ultrasonic agitation or ball milling for 1 to 10 minutes. This process attaches metal ions (in this case, iron ions) to the metal (in this case NiAl) powder to create a metal-powder-based nano-catalyst. The solution may then be allowed to stand for several minutes up to several days (typically a few hours) to allow the metal-powder-based nano-catalysts to settle. The metal-powder-based nano-catalysts may then be separated from the solution (such as by filtering and drying in a vacuum) to form loaded metal powder. The loaded metal powder may be dried in a drying oven, typically at approximately 70°C – 80°C, or dried in air or in a vacuum. The metal ions that are attached to the metal powder may be contacted with an argon gas containing about 4 wt.% hydrogen to reduce the metal ions to metal nanoparticles, wherein the metal-powder-based nano-catalysts are formed.

[0044] Processes similar to those described for forming powder-based nano-catalysts may be used for fabrication of a solid-based nano-catalyst. Solid-based nano-catalysts have metal nano-particles disposed adjacent the surface of a substrate material having the shape of a geometric solid. The substrate may, for example, be a fully-dense or a porous wafer, plate, rod, honeycomb, a foam such as a carbon or metal foam or other geometric three-dimensional body, or a similar structure. Small granular materials may be used as substrates for solid-based nano-catalysts. The distinction between (a) “powder-based” nano-catalysts and (b) “solid-based” nano-catalysts that use granular substrates is based on the diameter of the substrate. Generally, if the diameter of a substrate particle is less than approximately 100 micrometers the resultant nano-catalyst is characterized as “powder-based,” whereas if the diameter of a substrate particle is greater than approximately 100 micrometers the resultant nano-catalyst is characterized as “solid-based.” A powder or a solid substrate upon which nanoparticles are formed to produce nano-catalyst materials is referred to as a support material. The support material may comprise metal, such as NiAl, ceramic, a cermet, or silicon or other metalloid.

[0045] In a typical process for forming a solid-based nano-catalyst a silicon wafer is washed, activated, and then modified by using a chelating agent to bind metal ions to the surface of the wafer. In alternate embodiments the silicon wafer may be replaced by a silicon structure having a different solid geometry, or may be replaced by a solid structure comprising a different material such as a different metalloid, a ceramic, or a metal. When the substrate is a metal or a metalloid the nano-catalyst is referred to as a metal-solid-based nano-catalyst, and when the substrate is a ceramic the nano-catalyst is referred to as a ceramic-solid-based nano-catalyst. The metal ions that are bound to (as in a chemical ionic bond or a chemical covalent bond or a chemical coordinate covalent bond or a chemical attraction resulting from electro-negative/positive effects) the surface of the solid substrate are then reduced by hydrogen reduction in the solid phase at high temperature to produce metal nanoparticles on the silicon wafer.

[0046] Figure 4 presents a more detailed illustration of a process for forming a solid-based nano-catalyst. In the embodiment of Figure 4 a silicon substrate 120 is prepared by washing the substrate in baths of one or more of the following chemicals: ethanol, acetone, chloroform, and water (each in turn), typically using ultrasonic agitation of the bath to enhance cleaning effectiveness. Then in step 122 the surface of the silicon substrate 120 may be exposed to dilute (from about 0.1 to about 2 molar) nitric acid, typically for a time ranging from about 30 minutes up to about 6 hours. Following exposure of the silicon substrate 120 to the nitric acid, as a further portion of step 122, any residual nitric acid on the silicon substrate may be removed by washing the silicon substrate, typically with water and ethanol. The step 122 develops an active surface 124 for further surface modification. An active surface is characterized as a surface that may be reacted with a coupling agent to form carboxyl groups on the surface.

[0047] In step 126 the active surface 124 of the silicon substrate 120 is exposed to a coupling agent that typically comprises a mixture of a silane compound and chloroform, which provide carboxyl functional groups. An exposure ranging from about one hour up to about 12 hours is typically sufficient to attach surface functional groups 128 and form a functionalized substrate 130. Any excess coupling agent may be removed by washing with deionized water or ethanol. As illustrated by step 132, the functionalized substrate 130 may then be exposed to a dilute metal salt solution, e.g., a solution ranging from about 0.001 to about 1 molar FeCl_3 , to load the surface of the functionalized substrate 130

with metal ions 134 (e.g., Fe^{3+} ions, or Ni^{+2} ions, or Co^{+2} ions, or Co^{+3} ions or combinations of two or more of the four) and form a loaded substrate 136. In a step 138 the metal ions 134 that are bound to (as in a chemical ionic bond or a chemical covalent bond or a chemical coordinate covalent bond or a chemical attraction resulting from electro-negative/positive effects) the functionalized substrate material are reduced, typically by placing the metal ions 134 on the loaded substrate 136 under flowing H_2 at a temperature greater than about 400°C (e.g., ranging from about 400°C up to about 1200°C , typically about 600°C) to form the nano-catalyst 140 as metal nanoparticles 142 on the silicon substrate 120.

[0048] It should be noted that the processes for production of powder-based nano-catalysts may be adapted for production of solid-based nano-catalysts by substituting solid substrate material for the powder substrate material. Similarly the processes for production of solid-based nano-catalysts may be adapted for production of powder-based nano-catalysts by substituting a powder substrate material for the solid substrate material.

[0049] In some embodiments where a substrate (either a powder-based or a solid-based substrate) comprising NiAl is used, an aqueous solution of an aluminum salt and a dilute acid (such as a chloride combination: $\text{AlCl}_3 + 0.1\text{M HCl}$, or a nitrate combination: $\text{Al}(\text{NO}_3)_3 + 0.1\text{M HNO}_3$) may be used as an etchant to etch the surface of the substrate. In some embodiments the dilute acid may be used without a salt (AlCl_3 or $\text{Al}(\text{NO}_3)_3$). This etching process produces Ni^{2+} ions in the etchant. Then drying the substrate in the presence of the etchant produces nano-size deposits comprising Ni^{2+} ions which are reduced when heated under hydrogen to produce a nano-catalyst. In addition, this salt solution washing process works not just for NiAl substrates, but also for any nickel-containing substrate. Salt solution washes may also be used with carbon materials, such as foams. Furthermore, the salt solution washing process works for substrates comprising scandium, or titanium, or vanadium, or chromium, or manganese, or iron, or cobalt, or copper, or zinc as well as nickel. Substrates containing such metals may be etched with an acid, an aqueous aluminum salt solution, or a mixture of an acid and an aqueous solution of an aluminum salt. In some processes, such as those using iron containing substrates (such as steel), dilute hydrochloric acid or dilute sulfuric acid may perform better than other acids. It is generally beneficial to use dilute acids. For example, concentrated nitric acid may undesirably passivate some substrates comprising scandium,

or titanium, or vanadium, or chromium, or manganese, or iron, or cobalt, or nickel, or copper, or zinc.

[0050] Further, note that any etchant that is typically used in microscopy to evolve the grain structure of a metal will work for that metal. In some embodiments, the etchant solution may include ethanol instead of water and/or a glycerol addition for better wetting. The following are examples of etching processes that may be used for iron- and iron-alloy-containing materials:

- a. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 100 ml of ethanol + 1-10 ml nitric acid (not to exceed 10% nitric acid) for a few seconds up to a few minutes.
- b. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 50 ml cold-saturated (in distilled water) sodium thiosulfate solution and 1 gr. potassium metabisulfite; immersion at room temperature for approximately 40 seconds to 120 seconds.
- c. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 80 ml ethanol + 10 ml nitric + 10 ml hydrochloric acid + 1 gr. Picric acid for a few seconds up to a few minutes.
- d. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 30 gr. $K_3Fe(CN)_6$ + 30 gr. KOH + 150 ml H_2O (1 sec to several minutes). Note, the potassium hydroxide should be mixed into the water before adding $K_3Fe(CN)_6$.
- e. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 20-30 ml HCl + 1-3 ml selenic acid + 100 ethanol at room temperature for 1-4 minutes.
- f. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 45 ml Glycerol + 15 ml HNO_3 + 30 ml HCl for a few seconds up to a few minutes.

- g. Etch an iron- or iron-alloy-containing powder or solid substrate in 10 gr. $\text{K}_3\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6$ + 10 gr. KOH + 100 ml water for a few seconds up to a few minutes.

[0051] When a powder-based or a solid-based substrate is washed (etched) with an acid, an aqueous aluminum salt solution, or a mixture of an acid and an aqueous solution of an aluminum salt, the metal ion (salt) precipitates out as nano-size spots or dots. Then the metal ions are reduced to the “free” or uncharged state to form metal nano-catalysts when heated under a hydrogen gas flow. In some embodiments where such nano-catalysts are used to produce carbon nanotubes the hydrogen gas flow is applied both (a) during the reduction of the precipitated metal ions (nano-size spots or nano-size dots) to metal nano-catalysts and also (b) during a subsequent ethanol (or other organic) gas flow over the nano-catalysts to form carbon nanotubes. Having hydrogen present during the formation of carbon nanotubes prevents the catalysts from becoming “dead” and allows the metal nanoparticles to remain active as catalysts for extended periods of time thereby allowing the high volume of carbon nanotubes to be grown. This process makes the catalysts very efficient. The same technique of flowing hydrogen gas during the formation, growth and production of carbon nanotubes may be applied to processes using other nano-catalysts that were generated by mechanical, thermal, or chemical means to prolong the “active life” of the catalysts and thus prolong the growth/production of carbon nanotubes.

EXAMPLES

[0052] Figure 5 depicts an example of ceramic-powder-based nano-catalysts 150. Silicon dioxide spheres 152 have iron nanoparticles 154 disposed adjacent the surface of the silicon dioxide spheres 152. The silicon dioxide spheres 152 range in diameter from about 10 nm to about 10 microns (typically 50 nm – 500 nm) and the iron nanoparticles 154 range in diameter from approximately 1 nm up to about 10 – 30 nm, but some iron nanoparticles 154 may be as large as 50 nm. The nano-catalysts 150 were fabricated by preparing a microemulsion media using polyethylene glycol p-tert-octylphenyl ether, hexanol, cyclohexane, and water. This water-in-oil microemulsion served as a nanoreactor to confine the resulting nanoparticle sizes. Ceramic nanospheres were grown in the microemulsion by hydrolysis of organic tetraethoxysilane (TEOS) in the presence of an ammonia (NH_3) catalyst. The reaction produced amorphous, spherical

nanoparticles of SiO₂. The SiO₂ surfaces were then modified by hydrolysis of the organic silane with functional groups to enhance the affinity of the SiO₂ surfaces for metal ions. The functionalized silica particles were then exposed to a dilute solution of FeCl₃ wherein Fe³⁺ ions were substantially homogeneously adsorbed on the surface of the SiO₂ particles by attachment to the –COO[–] functional groups. The metal ions were then reduced in the presence of hydrogen at high temperature forming the iron nanoparticles 154 adjacent the surface of the silicon dioxide spheres 152.

[0053] Figures 6A and 6B depict scanning electron microscope images of NiAl particles 160 having Fe nano-catalyst particles 162 disposed on the surfaces thereof. Figure 6A is a backscattered electron image.

[0054] Mechanical and thermal processes may be used to form nanostructure features adjacent the surface of powder materials of interest. Putting mechanical work into the material surface generates nanostructure features on the surface of the material. Mechanical ball milling is an example of such a mechanical process. Grinding and forging-like processes may also be used to mechanically form nanostructure features adjacent the surface of powder materials. Heat cycling and thermal spraying are examples of thermal processes.

[0055] Ball milling is typically accomplished by placing solid spheres (balls) made of a suitably hard ceramic material in a cylindrical tumbler along with the material to be milled. The axis of the cylindrical tumbler is horizontal and the tumbler and its contents are rotated about the axis over an extended period of time (typically several hours) to pulverize the material to be milled.

[0056] In one embodiment Ni and Al powders are ball milled together until nano-scale features form adjacent the surface of the powder particles. In some embodiments various combinations of the following metals may be ball milled together, either as individually, jointly or in combination with Ni and Al: (1) Co and Al, (2) Fe and Al, and 3) cobalt containing and iron containing powders (such as steel). The resultant structures are an example of a powder-based nanocatalyst.

[0057] Solid-based and powder-based nano-catalysts may be used to grow nanostructures, and in particular to grow carbon nanotubes. Nanostructures that are

grown are attached to the nanoparticles that have been formed on the nano-catalysts, typically using a process described previously herein. These nanostructures may be grown at temperatures starting as low as 450°C, although around 600°C is better and preferably the nanostructures are grown at higher temperatures, typically ranging from about 600°C to about 1200°C. In a typical embodiment, single-wall or multi-wall carbon nanotubes may be grown on a powder-based nano-catalyst. The powder-based nano-catalyst is placed in a process vessel and loaded into a furnace. A quartz tube is typically used as the process vessel because quartz is chemically inert and tolerant of high temperatures, and various sizes of quartz tubes are readily available. High temperature corrosion-resistant metals (such as Inconel) or ceramics may also be used to fabricate suitable process vessels. A vacuum is drawn and the nano-catalyst is heated to a target temperature ranging from about 400°C to about 1500°C, with about 600°C being typical. The specific target temperature is designed to approach but not exceed the lower of the melting temperature of the powder or the nanoparticles formed on the powder. Various sources of heating may be used. Infrared heating using a quartz tube is beneficial because quartz is substantially transparent to infrared radiation, so that almost all of the heating energy passes through the process vessel and is absorbed by the reacting materials. Microwave heating may also be used, preferably with a microwave-transparent process vessel.

[0058] In alternate embodiments an inert gas may be used instead of the drawing a vacuum in the furnace. The term “protective atmosphere” is used herein to refer to either a vacuum or an inert gas. The target temperature is maintained typically for about two hours, but may range from about five minutes to about twenty-four hours, while an organic vapor, such as ethanol vapor, is flowed through the furnace at a rate ranging from about 100 cc/ minute to about 10 L/minute (depending on the volume of the chamber). Typically this establishes an organic vapor process pressure ranging from about 1 torr to about 400 torr within the tube furnace for about a ten minute duration. During this process nanostructures, specifically carbon nanotubes, attach to and grow on the nanoparticles adjacent the surface of the powder particles. The resultant nano-catalyst / nanostructure constructs are referred to herein as anchored nanostructure materials. The rate of growth and physical attributes of these anchored nanostructure materials may be varied by adjusting the organic vapor pressure, the flow rate, the temperature, the time of

exposure, and the concentration of nanoparticles adjacent the surface of the powder particles. After a desired amount of growth is complete, the organic vapor exposure is discontinued, the anchored nanostructure material is removed from the furnace hot zone to a near-room temperature zone (within the quartz tube) while maintaining a protective atmosphere. The quartz tube and its contents are allowed to cool under a protective atmosphere to a temperature at which the anchored nanostructure material does not significantly oxidize in an ambient atmosphere. Then the anchored nanostructure materials may be removed from the quartz tube.

[0059] These nanostructure materials are sometimes referred to as being formed “in-situ” because the formation of the nanostructures (e.g., carbon nanotubes) on individual powder particles occurs on powder particles that may subsequently be used to fabricate composite materials that incorporate the anchored nanostructure material, without transferring the nanostructures to another material or powder for such use.

[0060] Figure 7A is a photomicrograph that depicts a portion of an anchored nanostructure formation 170. The anchored nanostructure formation 170 has a NiAl powder particle 172 with a plurality of Fe (iron) nanoparticles 174 disposed adjacent the surface of the NiAl powder particle 172. A nanostructure, in this case multi-wall carbon nanotube 176, is attached to one of the nanoparticles 174. In many embodiments a plurality of nanostructures may each be attached to one of a plurality of nanoparticles that are disposed adjacent the surface of a powder particle, such that the nanostructures are anchored to the surface of the powder particles.

[0061] Figure 7B is a photomicrograph that depicts a portion of an anchored nanostructure formation 180. The anchored nanostructure formation 180 has a metal powder particle 182 with a plurality of Fe (iron) nanoparticles 184 disposed adjacent the surface of the metal powder particle 182. A nanostructure, in this case a single-wall carbon nanotube 186, is attached to one of the nanoparticles 184.

[0062] Figures 7C and 7D are photomicrographs of anchored nanostructure material grown on ball milled Ni and Al powders. The nanostructures are carbon nanotubes that range in diameter from about 60 to about 80 nm in diameter.

[0063] Figure 8A presents a schematic diagram of a fabrication system 200 for producing anchored nanostructure materials. Fabrication system 200 includes a furnace 202 that has a hot zone 204 and a transfer zone 206. The furnace 202 includes a cylindrical quartz tube 208 that is configured to house a cylindrical process vessel 210 that also may be fabricated from quartz. The cylindrical process vessel 210 may include a peg-lock end cap 212, or a similar structure, to facilitate the loading of nano-catalysts into the cylindrical process vessel 210, and the removal of anchored nanostructure materials from the cylindrical process vessel 210 after processing. A cylindrical hollow quartz shaft 214 is provided to move the cylindrical process vessel 210 between the transfer zone 206 and the hot zone 204 of the furnace 202. The cylindrical hollow quartz shaft 214 passes through a pair of bearings 216 that permit axial and rotational movement of the cylindrical hollow quartz shaft 214 and the cylindrical process vessel 210. An evacuation port 218 is provided in the furnace 202, and the evacuation port 218 may be used to provide a vacuum in the cylindrical process vessel 210. The evacuation port 218 may also be used to extract process gases from the cylindrical process vessel 210, so that a flow of process gases is maintained through the cylindrical process vessel 210.

[0064] Fabrication system 200 also includes a process gas system 230. The process gas system typically includes a source of ethanol 232. A source of water vapor 234 may also be provided. Typically for processes used to fabricate anchored carbon nanotubes, the water vapor 234 is supplied at a rate of about 50 to 500 parts per million by decomposition of ethanol that is used to grow the carbon nanotubes. The water vapor oxidizes away any carbon that is not a nanostructure. In some embodiments a mixture 236 of methane and air (in approximately a 50:50 ratio) may be provided as well as a source of auxiliary gas 238. Methane may be used as an alternative or supplement to ethanol as a source of carbon for growing carbon nanotubes. A gas stream monitoring system 240 may be provided to monitor levels of oxygen, water vapor, hydrogen, carbon monoxide, methane, etc. The gas from process gas system 230 is provided to the cylindrical hollow quartz shaft 214 at a coupling 250.

[0065] Figure 8B illustrates a further embodiment of an apparatus 300 for manufacturing anchored nanostructure materials. The apparatus includes a furnace 302 that is operated by a controller 304. A thermocouple 306 provides temperature information to the controller 304 and the controller 304 drives a power line 308 to control the temperature of

the furnace 302. The furnace 310 is configured for heating a reactor vessel 310. Various gas delivery systems are provided. One gas delivery system is an ethanol tank 320 and a water tank 322. The ethanol tank 320 and the water tank 322 are typically wrapped with heat tape to raise the temperature of their contents to a temperature ranging from room temperature to the boiling point. Porous frits may be disposed in the tanks to enhance thermal stability and to disperse the gas, increasing contact area with the content, thus, allowing the gas to act as a carrier or “pickup” of the liquid. Further gas delivery systems include argon/hydrogen tanks 324 and an argon purge gas tank 326 for controlling the atmosphere in the furnace 302. Flow controllers 330 are provide in conjunction with a system of valves 332 (two typical valves are labeled in Figure 8B) and rotameters 334 to control gas flow. A pressure controller 340 with a set point adjustment 342, a pressure gauge 334, and a mass flow controller 346 are used to control the pressure in the reactor through a vacuum pump 348.

[0066] Anchored nanostructure materials may be formed in several morphologies. Two particular morphologies are fluffy nanomaterials and short nanomaterials. Fluffy nanomaterials and short nanomaterials may be produced using the fabrication system 200 of Figure 8A or apparatus 300 of Figure 8B under the following process conditions:

Powder-based nanocatalysts are heated to about 600°C and contacted with a flow of ethanol vapor at a rate of between about 125 cc/minute and about 150 cc/minute at a process pressure ranging from about 200 torr to about 400 torr. Short nano-materials with individual nanostructure fibers being about 2 microns in length are produced when these process parameters are engaged for approximately five minutes. Fluffy nanomaterials with individual nanostructure fibers about 4 microns in length are produced if these process parameters are engaged for about 30 minutes, and fluffy nanomaterials with individual fibers about 100 microns up to several millimeters (typically up to about one centimeter) in length are produced if these process parameters are engaged for about 24 hours.

[0067] Short nanomaterial 400 is depicted in Figure 9, and fluffy nanomaterial 410 is depicted in Figure 10. Both the short nanomaterial 400 and the fluffy nanomaterial 410 are carbon nanotubes. At approximately 2000 magnification, the fluffy nanomaterial has the appearance of raw, uncarded, wool. Nanocatalyst particles 402 are dispersed in both the short nanomaterial 400 and the fluffy nanomaterial 410, as a legacy of the production process that uses powder-based nanocatalysts. Figure 11 illustrates a copious quantity of fluffy nanomaterial produced by this process.

[0068] In summary, embodiments disclosed herein provide methods for producing short nano-materials and fluffy nano-materials. The methods typically involve flowing about 125 cc/min of organic vapor at a pressure of about 400 torr over powder-based nanocatalysts for a period of time that may range from approximately 5 minutes to 24 hours.

[0069] The foregoing descriptions of embodiments have been presented for purposes of illustration and exposition. They are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the embodiments to the precise forms disclosed. Obvious modifications or variations are possible in light of the above teachings. The embodiments are chosen and described in an effort to provide the best illustrations of principles and practical applications, and to thereby enable one of ordinary skill in the art to utilize the various embodiments as described and with various modifications as are suited to the particular use contemplated. All such modifications and variations are within the scope of the appended claims when interpreted in accordance with the breadth to which they are fairly, legally, and equitably entitled.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A fluffy nanomaterial comprising a plurality of individual nanostructure fibers, the fluffy nanomaterial being characterized at approximately 2000X magnification as having the appearance of raw uncarded wool, with individual nanostructure fibers having lengths ranging from approximately four microns to approximately ten millimeters and wherein the fluffy nanomaterial has powder-based nanocatalysts dispersed therein.

2. A method of manufacturing a fluffy nanomaterial, comprising:

heating powder-based nanocatalysts to about 500°C; and

exposing the powder-based nanocatalysts to a flow of organic vapor at between about 125 cc/min and about 150 cc/min and at a process pressure of between about 200 torr and about 400 torr for a time period ranging from about 30 minutes to about 24 hours to form the fluffy nanomaterial.

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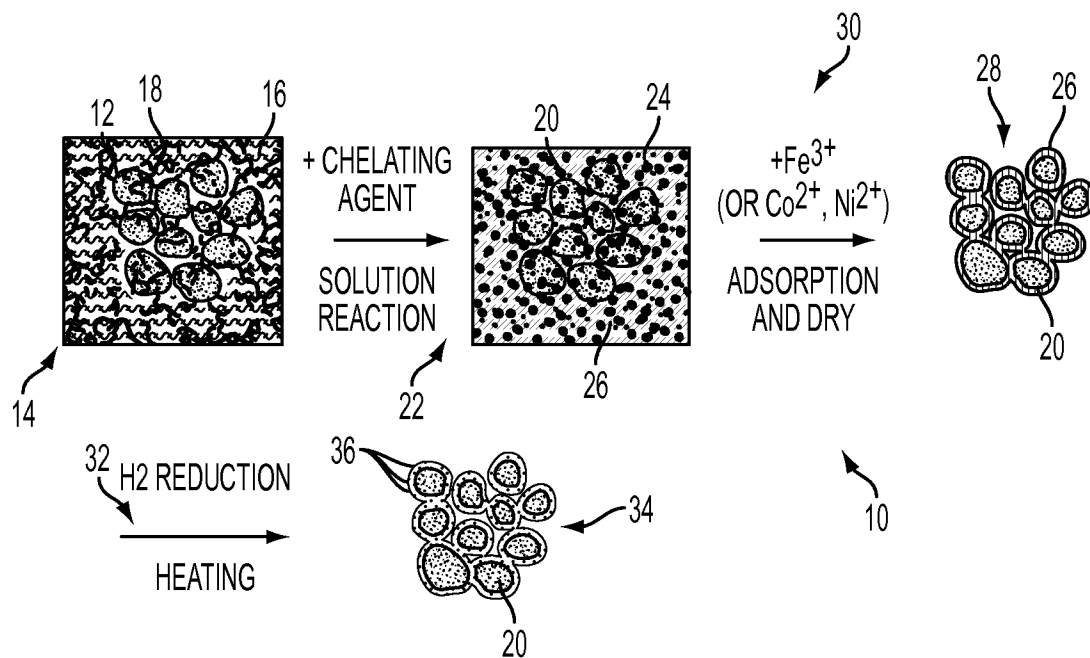


FIG. 1

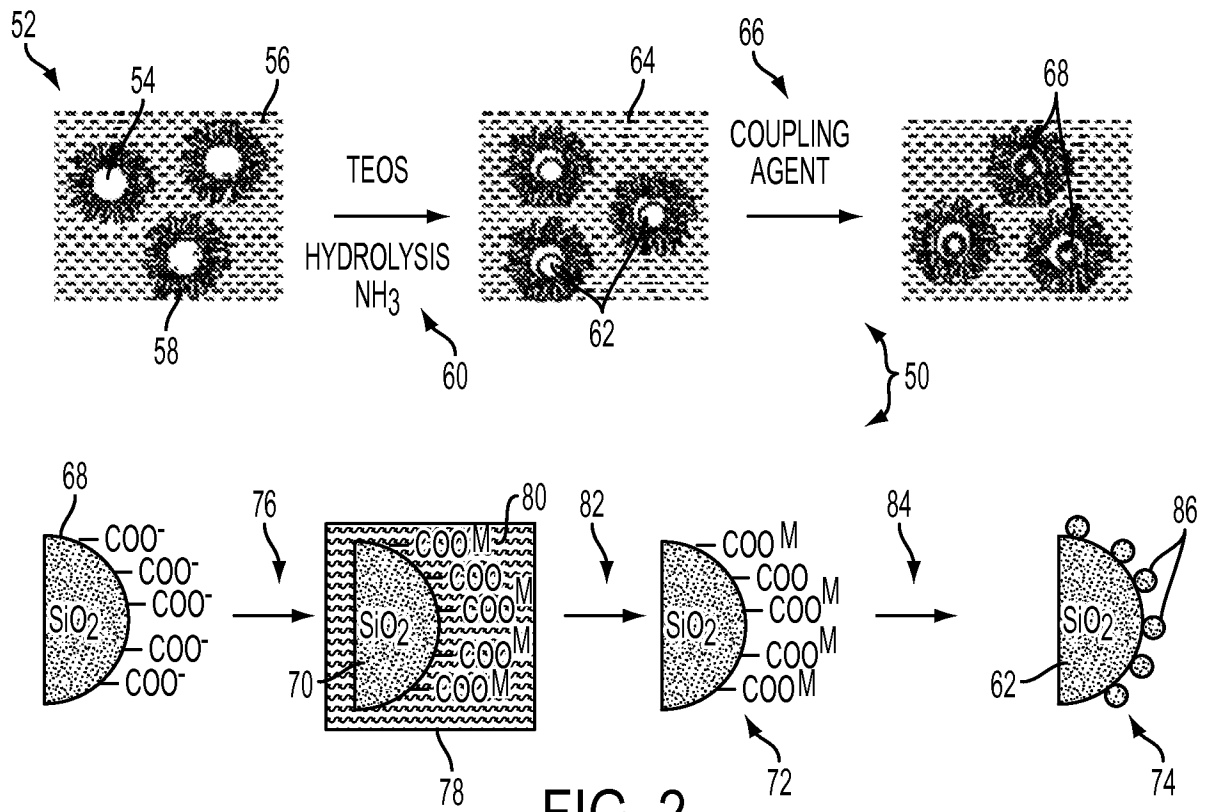


FIG. 2

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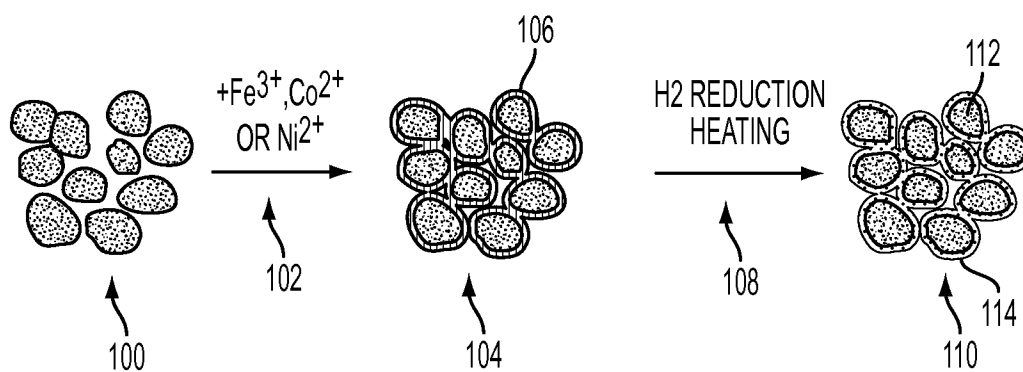


FIG. 3

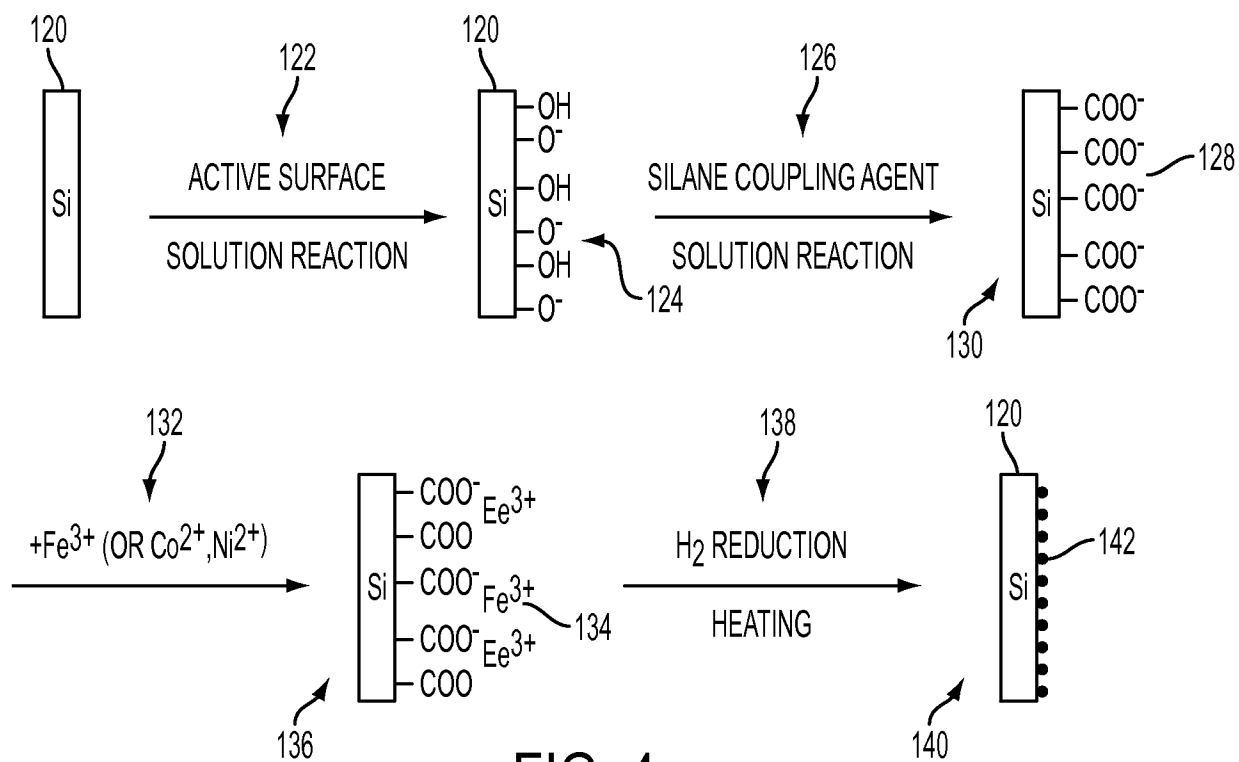


FIG. 4

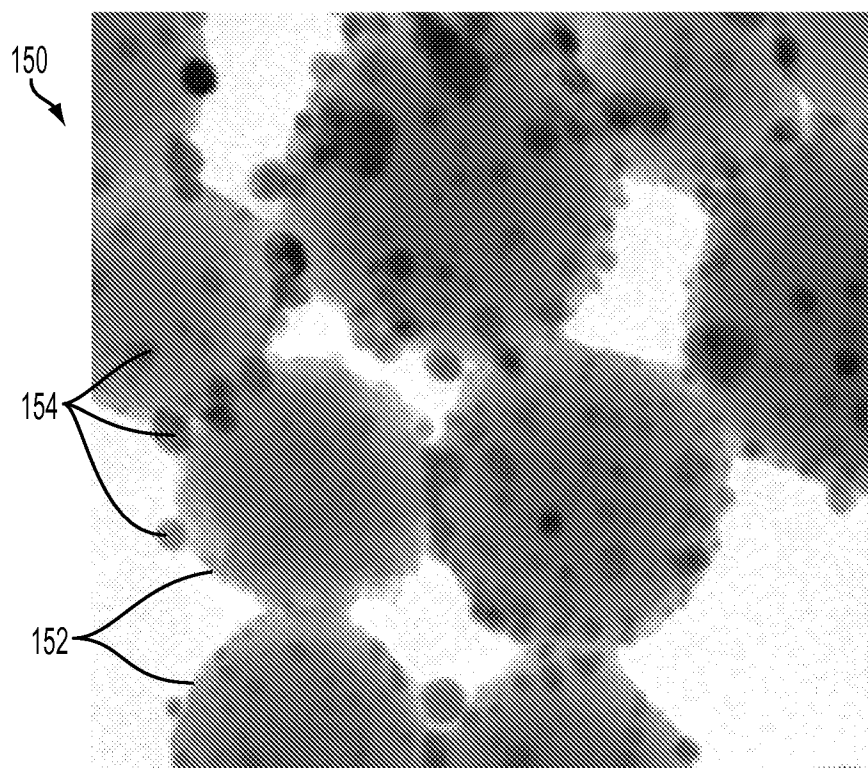


FIG. 5

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FIG. 6A

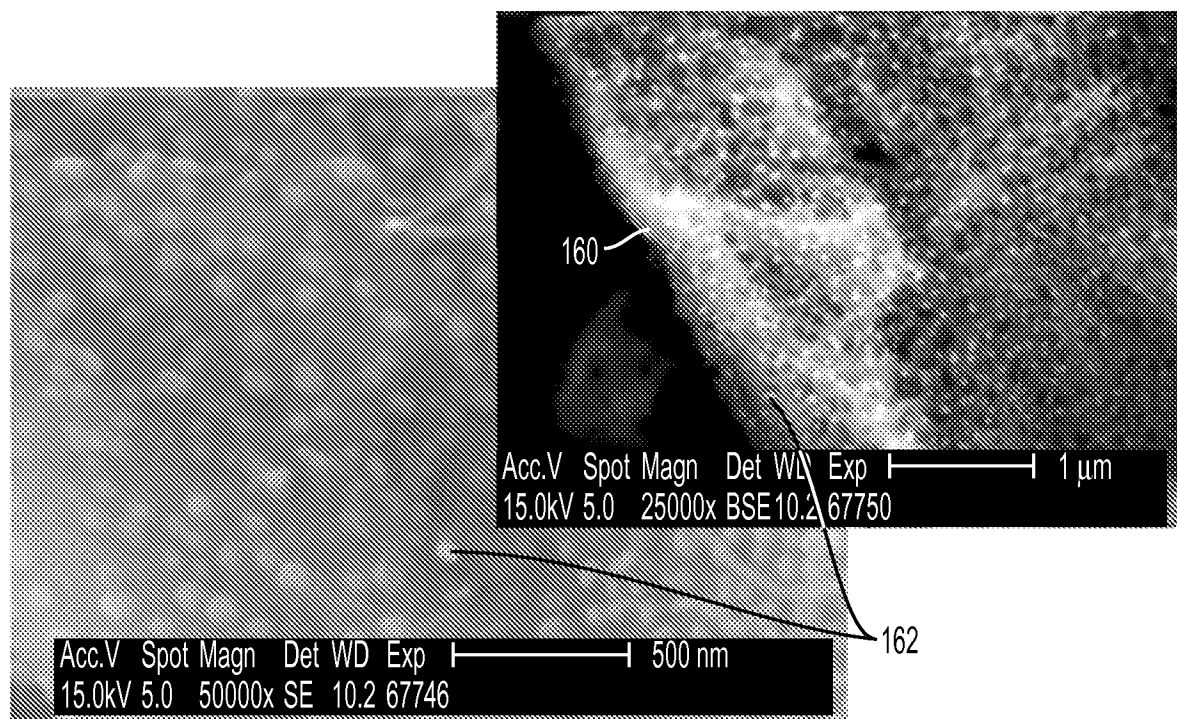


FIG. 6B

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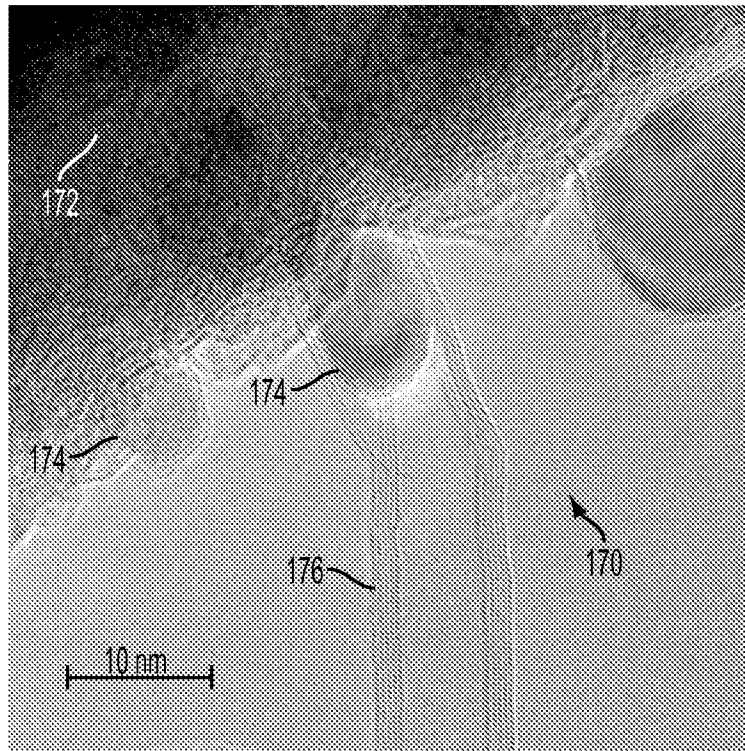


FIG. 7A

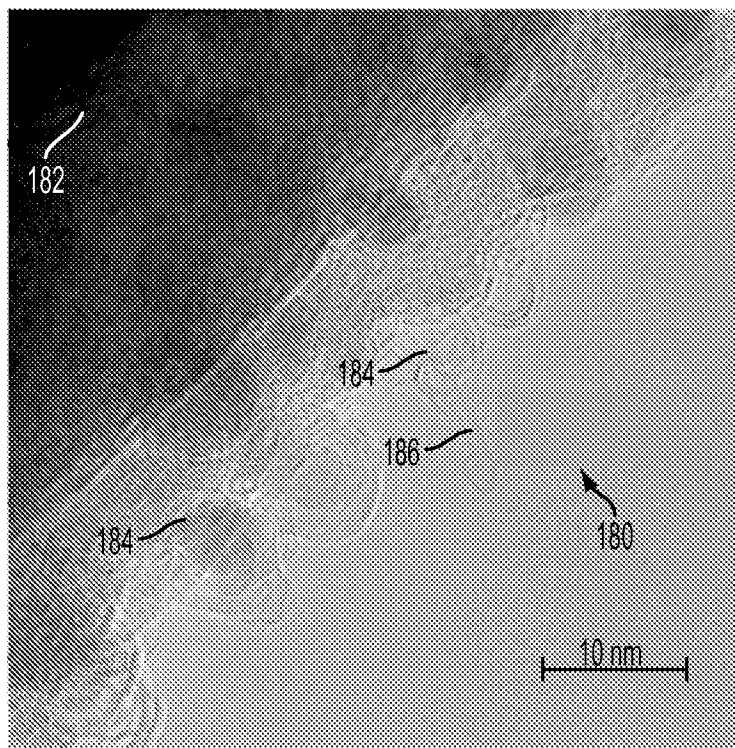


FIG. 7B

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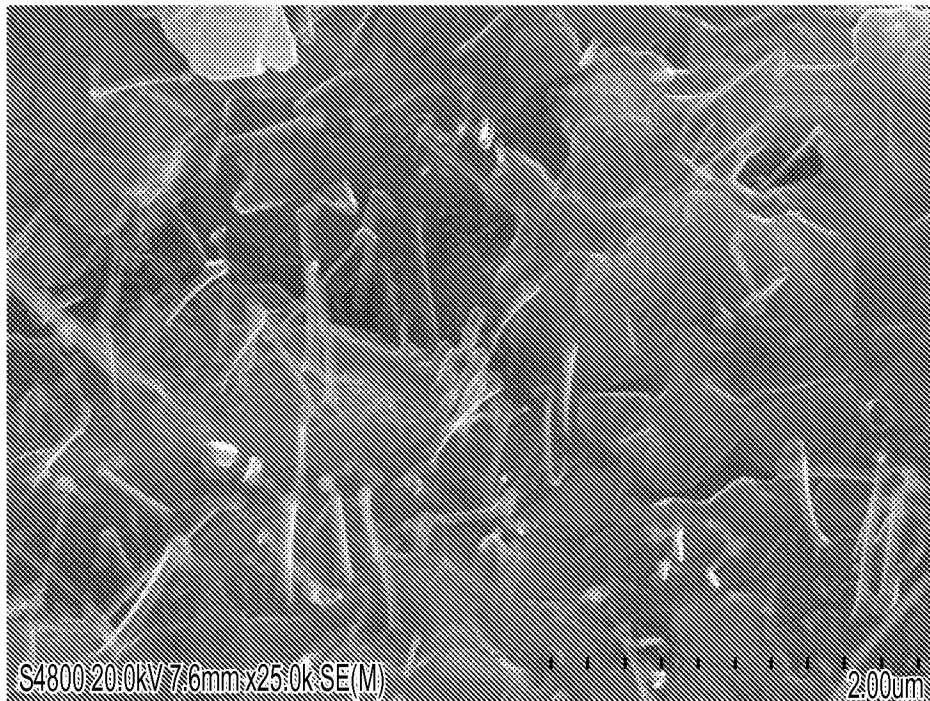


FIG. 7C

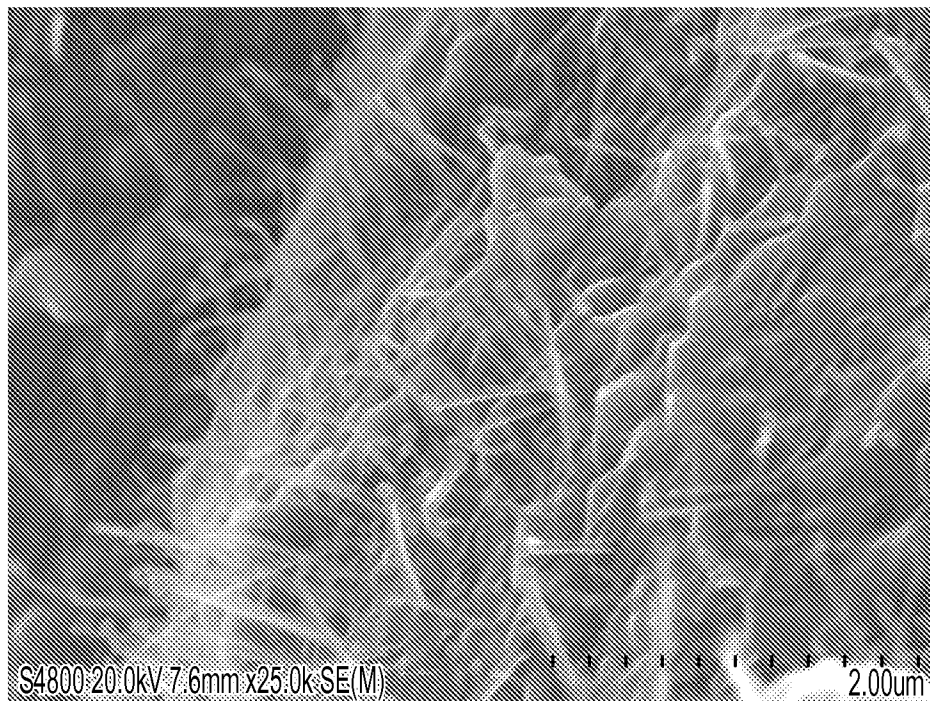


FIG. 7D

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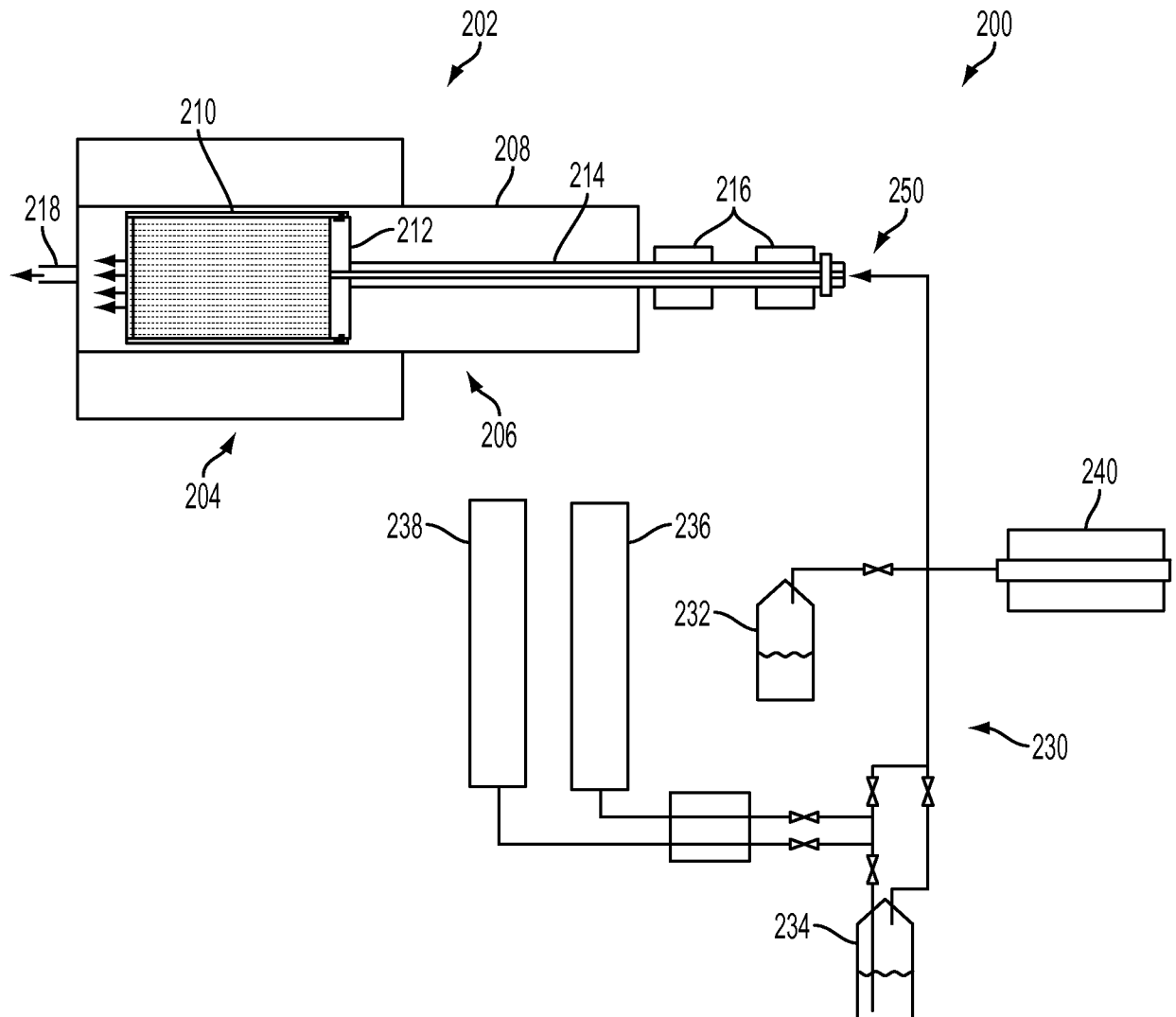
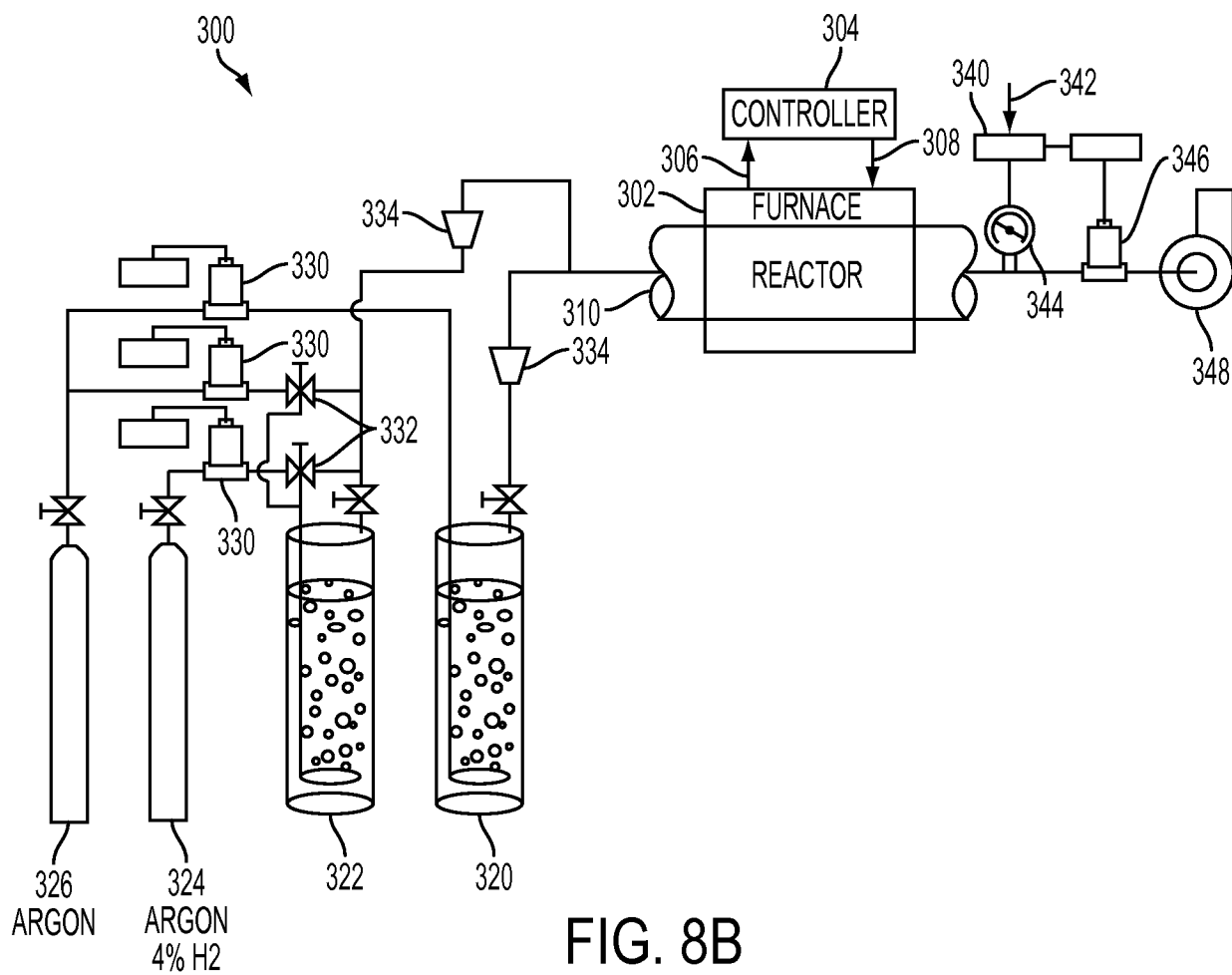


FIG. 8A

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9/10

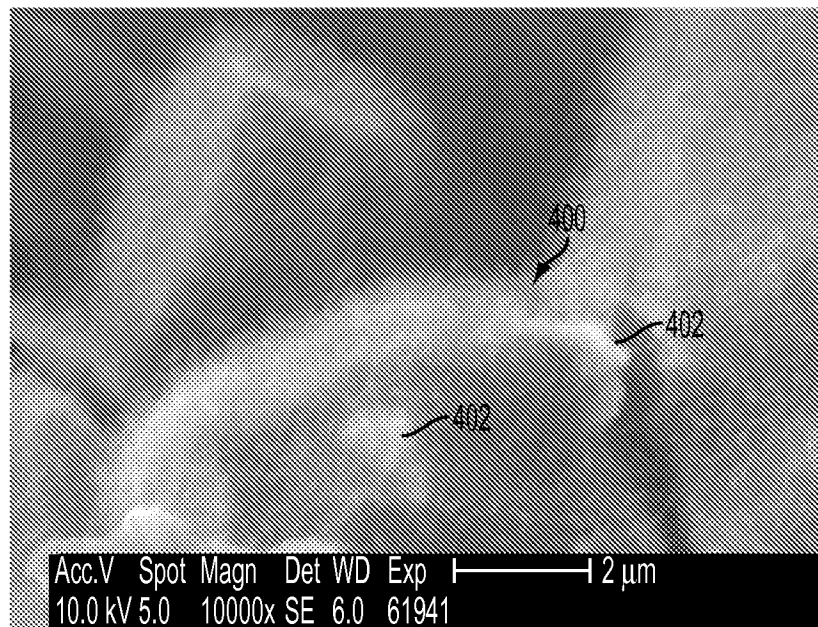


FIG. 9

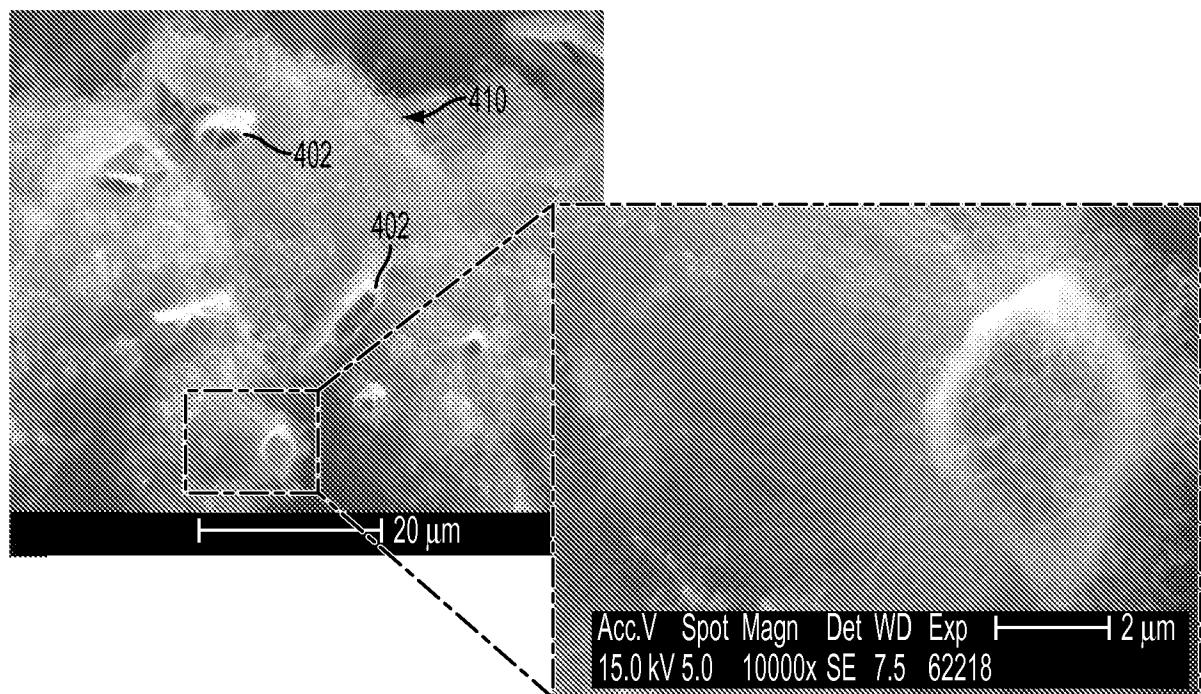


FIG. 10

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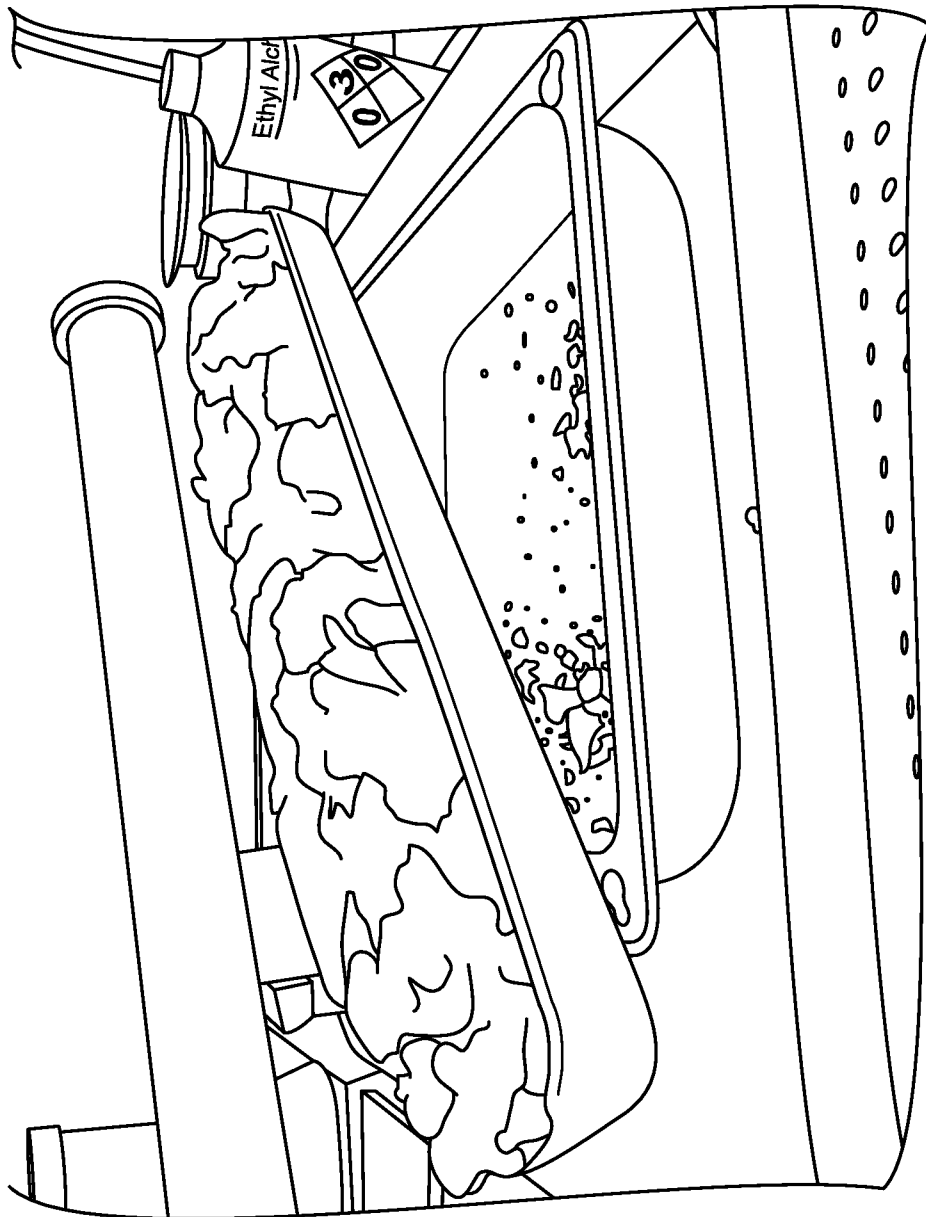


FIG. 11