

PREVIEW



GETTING GRANULAR ABOUT SUGAR



TANG MUSEUM
EXHIBIT EXAMINES
MYTHS ABOUT
A DIETARY
STAPLE./10

COVER STORY

'LIKE SUGAR' FEELS LIKE AN ANTIDOTE

Exhibit takes critical look at myths, iconography around sweetener

By William Jaeger

“Like Sugar” freely mixes historical artifacts and new artworks as if they are equally pertinent in an art gallery—and they are. There are field-worn sugar cane knives that look like machetes across the room from a photograph of a cake mounted on female doll legs by Laurie Simmons. This amalgamation of an exhibition is actually a recipe for protest—against both sugar and the worldwide sugar industry.

Leave it to the Tang to take a chance with such an array of works from different realms, forcing you to pay attention and put the myriad pieces together. The result is serious, fun and ultimately dazzling.

A visit is necessary just to see the Kara Walker sculpture, a life-size depiction of a boy carrying a basket, “African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar.” Like the artist’s now legendary giant sculpture made in the former Domino sugar plant in Brooklyn in 2014 (and which seems like the inspiration for this whole show), the smaller boy here is made in part from real sugar. The gallery smells like molasses cookies. And the work signifies a troubled history of labor by Africans, often as slaves, growing and processing sugar cane.

“Like Sugar” distinguishes itself with information such as historic photographs and illustrations in children’s books portraying the industry a century or more ago. This is layered with internet feeds on flat screens alleging the ongoing abuse of sugar workers around the world, with maps and figures. Suddenly,

If you go

“Like Sugar”

- **Where:** Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs
- **When:** Through June 23
- **Hours:** Tuesday - Sunday noon-5 p.m., Thursday noon-9 p.m.
- **Admission:** free
- **Info:** <https://tang.skidmore.edu/exhibitions/252-like-sugar> or 518-580-8080

even a sweet tooth gives new meaning to guilty pleasure. The large oil painting of a pink frosted doughnut by Emily Eveleth, “Big Pink,” is both a temptation and a warning (in this show) that you’re perpetuating global sin, the candy equivalent of blood diamonds.

There is more, and it keeps diversifying. The disarmingly cute row of advertisements from 20th-century magazines remind us of how fun sugary things are made to seem. No mention, of course, that refined sugars are linked to many diseases and to forced labor. The graphic art is snappy, but these aren’t so much art objects as part of the running commentary.

Jessica Halonen’s “Confectionary Units (a glycemic excursion)” looks at first like children’s blocks, cubes of different bright colors scattered about. But there is formal cleverness here, each block made of 2 pounds of sugar, colorfully dyed. And the total weight here is 144 pounds, a clinically “ideal” weight for someone of the artist’s height, reminding me of

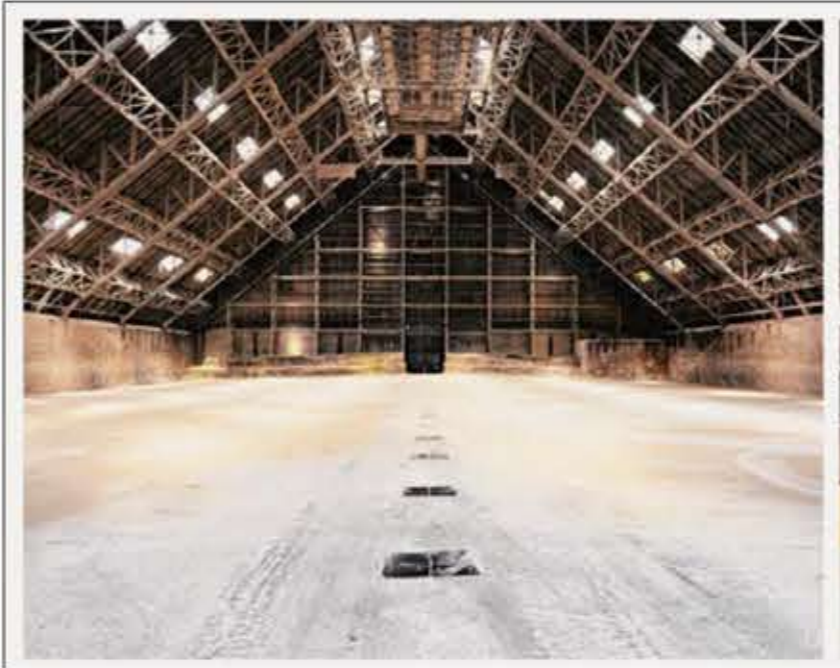


Photo courtesy the Tang

Zineb Sedira, “Sugar Silo I & II,” 2014, C-print photograph.

Felix Gonzales-Torres’s archetypal installations of candy using similar internal logic.

Turn again and there is a row of portraits by Vik Muniz called “Sugar Children.” These faces of descendants of sugar workers in the Caribbean were made by arranging sugar on black paper and then making a photograph, Muniz building the material into the results. Likewise with Marilyn Minter’s close-up, large color photograph of someone eating pink sugary granules, as sordid and sensual as Muniz’s are somber and clever.

There is some filler here, no doubt—a sack of sugar in the corner—but it adds to the, uh, flavor of the show. I would have skipped the inevitably sexist Mel Ramos cliché of a seductive female coming out of a candy bar (recent apologists for the artist have lost their feminist bearings, I’m sure).

Everything is redeemed many times by what really connects here, like the series of small oil or enamel paintings by Julia Jacquette, who manages to make treacly pink and saccharine ads for confections as insidiously evil as they apparently were. She appropriates the vintage imagery and adds new, fully serrated text, cutting to an interpersonal core.

That’s what good art does, and this show does it all with sweet, fresh fortitude.

► *William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*

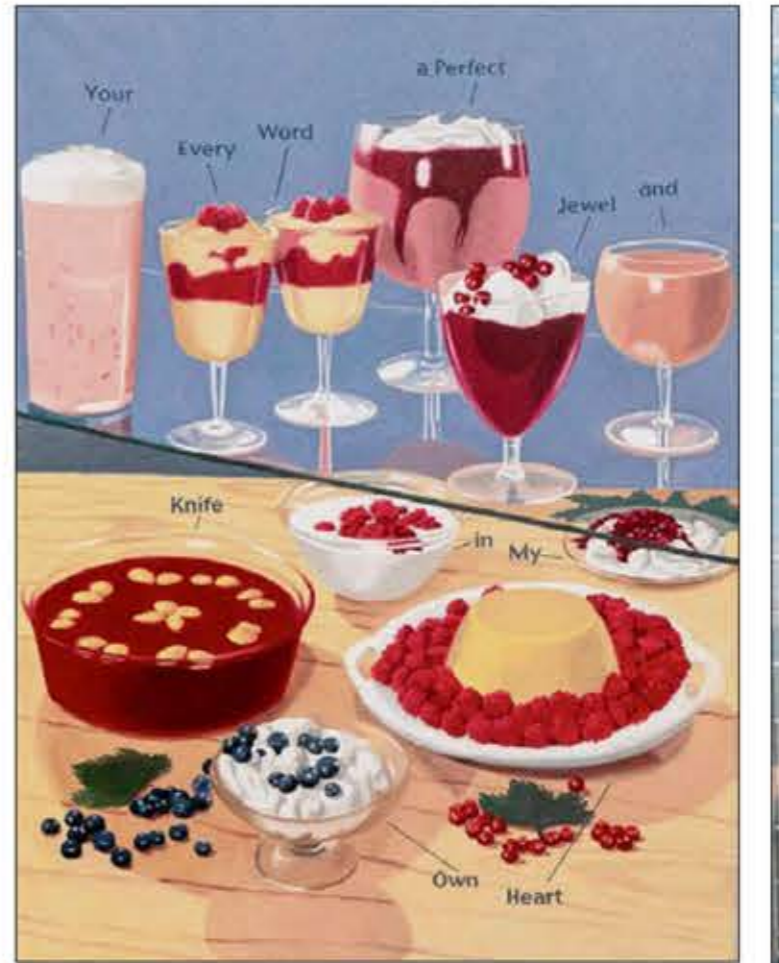


Photo by William Jaeger

Julia Jacquette, “Your Every Word,” 2014, oil on canvas.



Photo by William Jaeger

Garnett Puett, study from “Buckminster Fuller theories,” undated, beeswax, steel and wood in vitrine.



Photo by William Jaeger

Above, Kara Walker, “African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar,” 2017, cast pigmented polyester resin with polyurethane coating with molasses and brown sugar.



Photo courtesy the Tang

At right, Bushra Junaid, “Two Pretty Girls,” 2016, archival photograph and archival text printed on backlit fabric panel.