On Being Seduced: The Taste of a Sugar Buzz

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“Sugar Buzz” exemplified Mason Cooley’s (2006) maxim that “art seduces, but does not exploit.” The exhibition’s drawings, paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos and installations dealt with sweets and confection as either “imagery” or “medium” (Hoeltzel 2007), and bombarded the viewer with a cacophony of shapes and colors that evoked a lifetime of experiences relating to the consumption of sugar. Entering the main gallery, the viewer was confronted by an eight-foot slice of rose-decorated, sticky, white cake nestled on a dolly, an iridescent floor relief of crushed sugar, and an oversized collection of opulent cupcakes made of found materials. The gallery was alive with art that either used or resembled succulent icing, fanciful candy, oozing donuts. Who, after all, doesn’t like candy and cake? Who has not been seduced by sugar? “Sugar Buzz” posed the question: Is art seduction and seduction art?
The artworks compelled response through the senses: the vision of confectionary splendor, the sound of crinkly wrappers, the taste and smell of sugar, and the stickiness of candy itself— an onslaught of sensory anticipation and satisfaction. This was a show that was accessible to everyone—children and adults, savvy connoisseurs and novice art learners. But surface appearances can seduce, especially the glitz and glitter of taffy and cake, the lush, dense paint in pastel colors, the curvilinear forms of izing and glaze. It would be a mistake, however, to confuse accessibility with simplicity or seduction with superficiality. The senses are fundamental to selfhood, and each person harbors a unique relationship with sugar, one that involves self-image, the acquisition of material goods, the need for gratification, societal acceptability and cultural norms. Here the artworks destabilized the usual distinctions between the genres of food, comfort, art and seduction. The works in this exhibit used candy to strike at the heart of how the world and identity could be seen, felt, thought and remembered, and demanded appreciation about the complex roles that confection plays in social and emotional behavior from childhood through adulthood.

Art, like seduction, involves the senses; both involve a complex layering of thoughts and emotions collapsed into an overwhelming (though selective) influx of information that demands response and reciprocity. Jean Baudrillard called seduction “a power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination, a power that causes the collapse of not just sex, but the real in general” (1990: 81–2). Perhaps the collapse to which Baudrillard alludes is actually a heightened reality from which the extraneous has been stripped away, leaving the senses rather than the intellect in control of constructing significance. At times, however, the experience of vicarious enjoyment mixes with what Janet Hall terms “voyeuristic anxiety” (2005: 464). Seduction, after all, involves attraction, temptation, persuasion and, occasionally, guilt, deception and deceit. While “Sugar Buzz” was humorous and celebratory, issues of excess, temptation and culpability inevitably emerged. Whether or not seduction was the key element in every artwork, it was certainly woven throughout. In this case, the seducer (the work of art), and the seduced (the viewer) met in complex acts of persuasion and acquiescence that revealed something about both the dynamics of seduction and the nature of artistic experience.

Co-curators Susan Hoeltzel and Nina Sundell organized forty-six artworks by twenty-eight artists into several categories: those that referenced or made homage to earlier artists’ works (such as Wayne Thiebaud); transformed sugar into a textile; developed environmental installations; expressed social commentary; relied on language; or dealt with abstraction. The four artists discussed below all adopted uncommon approaches to approximate confection, with one using actual sugar.

Emily Eveleth’s large-scale painting, Repose (2006), featured donuts as a lush, seductive personae represented in the style of
formal, classical portraiture. The donut, the ubiquitous American breakfast treat beloved by rich and poor alike, here functioned as object and figure, icon and portrait. Four closely-cropped jelly donuts lay across one another like beached whales. Their plump bodies (painted in pale, earth tones) were punctuated by small, irregular holes, or orifices, that oozed dark, blood-red jelly. The majestic snacks inhabited a shallow, rich, black space and were dramatically highlighted in the same manner as an Ingres portrait. Larger than life, Eveleth’s fleshy donuts loomed as much as they seduced. Feasting one’s eyes upon the donut while savoring the taste memory of its sweet, gelatinous jelly, one could not also help feeling a bit threatened by the dominating, monumental presences. Heavily female, the donuts embodied both earth mother and corpulent courtesan. They played both roles of the seduction game, as did the viewer: seducer and seduced, consumer and consumed.

Vadiis Turner’s wall relief, Cupcakes (2006), offered a different sort of attraction — seduction as a game. Composed of colored yarn and beads twirled together to approximate icing on cupcakes, the artwork playfully, yet purposefully, deceived the viewer. It was
satisfying to watch a prosaic material turned into confection and back again, completing a trompe l'oeil circle of transformation and reformation. Playing with such basic art elements as line, shape, color and texture, the artwork spilled out in a dizzying array of sensory-laden combinations. More than a mere cornucopia feast for the eyes, the variety inherent in the construction of each cupcake module compelled the viewer to contemplate oral consumption. A seduction through the senses ensued in which the viewer knowingly allowed herself to be tempted into consuming the very thing that directed the action. This was an orchestrated game of seduction in which each player (artist, viewer, artwork) knew her role and willingly performed it.

In another twist on the art of seduction, Rebecca Holland took a universally acknowledged comfort food, sugar, and transformed it into an edgy warning. Situated on the floor, the broken pieces of sugar approximated shards of glass. Holland cast sugar into sheets and then crushed them into pieces - hence the title Long Crush (2007). The viewer could almost feel the crunching sensation kinesthetically, and had to refrain from the desire to crush the sugar even further. The relationship between viewer and the artwork made the viewer a complicit, willing partner, yet one who was also acted upon and told to watch her place. Holland's piece was site-specific and therefore transient; it disappeared with the end of the show much as sugar disappears in one's mouth. One could feel empathy for an object whose end was a condition of its existence, while at the same time, circumventing its sharp, glass-like silvers. A tension developed between the fragile, ephemeral quality of the material and its strong, minimalist appearance. Holland delivered a wry, feminist
commentary on Minimalism (an essentially male production), simply by substituting the impermanent substance of sugar. The ambiguous position in which the viewer found herself was matched by the ambiguity of the piece itself; it was strong yet weak, powerful yet manipulated. It was both seducer and seduced; the faceted pieces generated a luminosity that seduced while the temporal material creates affinity with the seduced.

Luisa Caldwell’s twenty-one-foot hanging column of cellophane pieces tied to string was also ephemeral. Color Falls (2006), composed of 8,000 candy wrappers, moved suggestively. Shapes and colors fluttered in the air like exotic butterflies, creating a
glittering, shimmering effect. The empty wrappers contained the imprinted impression cast by the absent confection and represented the trace or consumption of candy. The piece took up space but not mass, had form that was variable, and was composed of a material that served a consumerist purpose yet was evocative of nature. It was unabashedly fragile and impermanent, intimately connected to the fleeting aspects of time and memory. The viewer was reminded that sensory fulfillment is a form of seduction, and is similarly short-lived. The candy wrappers recalled previous experiences with sugar, memories laced with nostalgia for bygone sensual pleasures.

Eveleth's enticing donuts, Turner's trompe l'oeil temptations and Holland and Caldwell's objects of sensory fulfillment were all examples of art as seduction. In different ways, these works enticed, satisfied and confounded the viewer in a web of entanglements that is the stuff of sugar and of seduction. Sweets, like art, are viewed, desired and then consumed, creating a complex relationship between the object, the viewer/actor and the framing structures of society. The artworks in "Sugar Buzz" examined myriad layers of seduction and demonstrated that seduction in art and sugar is neither pure nor exploitative, and that, in this show at least, seduction is art and art seduction.

References