

An Interview with Susan Graham

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On a Tuesday morning in September, I met with sculptor and photographer Susan Graham at Lux Art Institute in Encinitas, California. Graham was more than halfway through her five-week artist residency and opened her studio to me, allowing an up-close view of her sugar and porcelain sculptures in the process of assembly. Graham shared stories from her childhood in Ohio, articulated her thoughts about working, and touched on how September 11 has altered the view of some of her earlier art.

Robin Tung: Thank you for opening your studio. What are you working on while you're here?

Susan Graham: I made a sugar toile piece previously, and I proposed making one here and expanding it with porcelain. I've been doing temporary sugar pieces that are large-scale. I have five weeks here and estimated that by making some pieces out of porcelain, I could come back in and expand the piece by adding sugar [while here] because sugar doesn't really ship well.

RT: So the materials aren't mixed—it's either a piece of sugar or a piece of porcelain.

SG: Yes, it's not sugar and porcelain mixed together. It's sugar or porcelain. In the piece, it's mixed, which is new to me. I've never put them side by side. So it's different whites, a different way of doing an on-site piece.

RT: What do you mix the sugar with?

SG: It's sugar and egg whites, an icing mixture. It's something I started using a long time ago because I was in New York and didn't have any money. I had gotten a studio though, but didn't have tools and just wanted to start making things. I was looking for a material that would mean something to me.

There was nobody artistic in my family, really, but my grandmother had a craft club and she lived next door. They made bouquets of tiny flowers out of salt dough. And I thought they were amazing. For myself, I was thinking of something that seemed feminine, sweet and domestic, and also I wanted to work off material that was white.

RT: Themes of escapism or imagination with wide-open spaces, natural phenomena, and vessels like cars and planes, are often visible in your work. And it seems like there's this binary to the pieces, like the gun made out of sugar.

SG: That's something that I always do—with the binary you mentioned. It seems whatever I'm doing, I end up doing two opposing things at the same. With these photographs I try to take something that's obviously very fake but because I'm using either really fast film and making it super grainy and flat, or pinhole images which give a sense of atmosphere, it makes the photographs seem like there's a much bigger space even though it's obvious that it's tiny.

RT: You cited "Puzzle Bottle, 1995" by Charles Ray in an artist statement. How was that piece influential?

SG: I was curated into a show at the Whitney Phillip Morris. They had us respond to a piece in their collection. I didn't ever really read what Charles Ray said about that piece, I just looked at it and imposed on that figure in the bottle what he'd done, and turned it around, depicting these big open spaces. Did you read what I wrote about that?

RT: You wrote about wanting to create what that figure was looking at, or imagining.

SG: What he was experiencing given his tiny little space. There's this existential problem this little man has. There was a Shakespeare quote that was actually misquoted to me, and then I came up with something parallel for my title.

RT: *A Universe with Edges Would Be All Right if Only I Didn't Dream.*

SG: That's what I came up with though the Shakespeare quote is something different. Basically something about the universe in a nutshell.

RT: I like that it's misquoted and then re-imagined to fit the work.

SG: It has a lot of layers, and the more time I get to think about it, the more complicated it gets... Everything that I make has a personal beginning. It starts with imagination and associations, and then in a lot of the pieces, politics and things in the real world will start coming in. There is a playful element to it. I think everything I make is a little humorous. I manage all this stuff by making it a little lighter, and pretty harmless in the presentation.

RT: Can you speak to influences or inspirations early on?

SG: When I was in undergraduate at Ohio State University, I was not allowed to study art and—

RT: Wait—why were you not allowed?

SG: Because it's not practical. I'm the oldest kid. My dad, who worked for General Motors, told me what college I should go to, that I should be an engineer, and work for General Motors. My first semester I took chemistry, calculus, and art history. The second semester I took chemistry, calculus, and photography. I was influenced by a book of someone who had photographed carnies. It was a strange world. And I really responded to the black and white.

And, my dad had a gun collection when I was a kid. And my brother came down into the basement with a gun, he found one of them. That was a big childhood experience that was freaky because he was really little and the gun was really big. It took me the longest time to recognize that guns were a giant part of my childhood.

Later after I became an artist, and my father cut me off financially, and I moved to New York City, the guns ballooned into politics between him and me, and I had to think about guns in American culture . . . I asked him for a list of his guns, and then I made a lot of the collection. He died about four years ago.

RT: I heard this quote that journalism's responsibility is to tell you what happened, but art and fiction should tell you how it felt. I loved your photograph of the planes circling and suspended around the towers. It made me anxious.

SG: Right, nothing's happening [in the photograph]. September 11 is so taboo I don't really mention it. This is something I have not talked about during this residency, or for a long time. But, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council used to award raw space in the World Trade Center to artists. I was there during the session before September 11. After, the Council suddenly got all of this money and attention for artists who made work in the World Trade Center and a show was put together to travel to museums. It turned out that not one venue would touch that show. A lot of us had imagery with the World Trade Centers even though it had nothing to do with September 11.

Our studios looked north toward the Empire State Building. And I had read about a plane crashing into the Empire State Building . . . in the 40s, I think. So I was doing things with planes and buildings back then. I made the buildings out of sugar, and had them lean towards each other. It was very sweet actually. I also had images with the planes because helicopters would go below you when you were up in the Towers.

But those images mean something different now even though I didn't intend that . . . And that's it, it's done. That's one of those things where politics and what's going on in the world changes really changes things. It made me aware of how I can't really control the message of what I'm

making. Because it's ruined, it's put away. I can't show those photos. Maybe someday. But they don't mean what I meant them to mean.

Graham showed me around the museum installations and led me down into her living space below the studio so I could view her permanent porcelain gun brushed over with resin. The Lux Art Institute artist living quarters were spacious and designed with contemporary décor: antler candelabra, animal print throws on a leather sofa, streamlined kitchen appliances and a hallway leading into a minimalist bedroom with a king size bed. We returned upstairs shortly after so I could ask her my last two questions for new artists.

RT: What struggles have you seen for artists trying to emerge?

SG: If you're trying to go some place with a lot of artists, an art market, and actually emerge, I think you have to really figure out what your voice is and what you can do on a long-term basis. It can't be external. It has to be very self-driven and it has to be specific.

I was a guest artist at a college and there would be graduate students still doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that. You will never get anywhere working like that. Some artists can do a little bit of everything but they have an overarching idea that they can explain. I thought, *You're not going to get anywhere if you don't figure that out.* Otherwise no one will know who you are because they'll never recognize your work. You don't have to be so eccentric to be recognized, but you have to commit to making something specific to you.

RT: Any other advice for young or new artists? How would you encourage artists to define success?

SG: The first success is to define for yourself what you want to do. And then figure out how to do it. Do you need a studio or not? Some artists that I know dispense with the studio because it's expensive. On the other hand, not having a studio can make it so that you can't do certain things. Figure out what you need to do what you want to do. And then start pursuing all those things available to new artists: art programs, studio programs, alternative spaces. For some artists, to not be attached to a commercial gallery with a brand works; you can float around showing in a lot of different places and situations. Show your art wherever you can. Get people to see your stuff however you can do it.

Make what you want to make, figure out how do that in a way that you can afford, and get people to see it.