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Sweet and Scary at Lux Art Institute

By James Chute

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“The reaction I get quite often — because I know I come from a family of non-artists and I know lots and lots of people who don’t talk about these things in any kind of analytical way — is they just look at them and go, ‘That’s really cool.’

“And I have to admit, that’s sort of what I’m thinking people probably will think. ‘That’s made of what?’ That’s always the question. ‘How did you do that?’

“Sometimes, people just end up staring at the stuff,” said Graham, whose art is on display through Oct. 27 at the Lux Art Institute, where the Ohio-born, New York-based artist is in residence through Oct. 6.

But there’s an entire world embodied in Graham’s delicate but deceptively powerful art. There’s her father.

He and his daughter were often in conflict over his gun collection. It’s replicated in Graham’s art (which also includes other common items). She grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and he was a strong figure with distinct opinions, including that everyone should be allowed to have guns (except women, as he wouldn’t allow her to go to a shooting range) and that his daughter shouldn’t be an artist (he initially withdrew financial support when she switched her major to visual art in college).

“The gun thing is very powerful,” Graham said. “Even if you are a pacifist, you run into them. You know they are there. They are everywhere. They are ubiquitous.”

And there’s her grandmother, too.

She lived next door with her husband (another gun enthusiast) and had members of her craft club over to her home, which was a significant influence on Graham and her decision to use sugar as her primary medium (along with porcelain).

“They made all kinds of stuff,” Graham said. “They didn’t make things from sugar, per se, but they made things from stuff in the kitchen. They used to make little flowers out of salt dough, all kinds of little things. And I kind of knew that sugar would be a good material for me to use.”

And there's Graham.

She uses her art to express things she's unwilling or unable to talk about: her conflicted feelings about the guns, for example, and the fascination and repulsion those guns have brought her over her entire life.

"In a sense, the art is about things that have gotten to me, almost like problems I can't solve," Graham said. "You know, things that are going to bug me on an ongoing basis. Things like the gun stuff. Things that are conflicted ..."

"I actually have kids, and I'm sort of not obsessed (but concerned) with what's going to happen eventually. I don't talk about it too much. It only comes up in the art really. But it's the idea that somehow we can't keep going the way we are and have things be OK on the planet."

There's more if you consider her art long enough. But perhaps it's enough to just wonder and delight at her delicate, magical objects, which are being increasingly shown in galleries from Milan to New York.

And don't be afraid to stare.