

CONFECTION AFFECTION
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
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I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Desserts, sweets, and confections have a special place in the hearts of many. Some, including myself, even claim to have a special stomach, a dessert stomach. We receive treats as rewards and for special occasions like birthdays and holidays. We take comfort in treats during crises. “The sense of security that sweets can bring is reflected in the way sweet sales rise in times of war or economic or social unrest” (Richardson 10).

Metro Boston called desserts “a relief from reality, a throwback to the childhood and a less complex world” (Dickson 9). Certain sweets, after all, offer us a taste of lost youth - simpler times without responsibility, to-do lists, consuming media, with a perspective of our world as big as our own backyard. In my particular case, childhood summers were filled with ice cream. Everyday, sometimes even for lunch, my mother and I would have a bowl of ice cream together. Even now on a hot summer afternoon I ask my husband to take me out for ice cream for no reason other than the euphoric escape to all things simple. I relate to Tim Richardson, as he writes in his introduction to *Sweets*, “With sweets, the distinction between adulthood and childhood is blurred” (9). Emotionally, it is good, but it is a choice to treat myself knowing that too many treats may not be wise physically.

Personally, memories come to mind that have amplified my awareness of confections. My mom was in the hospital and recently passed away from cancer. While I was

going through these difficult circumstances, the initial interest of dessert as a subject was an easy choice. It was comforting. Like the pastry painter icon, Wayne Thiebaud said, “Why not paint cakes?” However, as they are eaten or deserted, their emptiness is revealed. As I’ve discovered, it does not last. This is when these innocent treats serve as metaphors for our culture’s need for instant gratification, consumption, fulfillment, and reward. The immediate pleasure of a beautiful dessert swiftly fades after it is gone. Confection affection is a love-hate relationship. I try to balance comfort and consequence.

Using a combination of mixed media drawings and design principles, this exhibit reflects a range of concepts and concerns about thoughts with contemporary American culture. Using artificial candy colors, the drawings become almost too sweet. By depicting the desserts in their “before” and “after” states, moments of reflection are provided for the viewer on the condition of our culture and consequences we face if we repeatedly consume and disregard when to stop. We are controlled by an overwhelming act of consumption in our fast-paced society. Fast food, cell phones, microwaves, and ATMs are all tools to facilitate our need for instant gratification. In this age of technology, our desire for the next best thing has become an increasingly wasteful, on-to-the-next-one lifestyle.

During the process, I further explored artists whose work influenced my creative project. I also was able to advance my knowledge of wet and dry mediums and their use in combination by experimenting with various solvents, watercolor, and litho crayons. Based on these experiments, the final works I created were diptychs to portray the dichotomy of each dessert. Each focusing on how our continual search for fulfillment, substance, and reward is devoted to the ephemeral and passing things of life. I finished with four sets of

drawings for my creative project and additional sketches and studies to support my exploration and process of the media and content.

II. REVIEW OF INFLUENCES

Wayne Thiebaud (1920)



Slice of Cream Pie with Cherry, 1964,
Woodcut, Artist's Proof



Cakes, 1963, Oil on Canvas

Wayne Thiebaud, an American painter, saw desserts as icons and portrayed them commercially in his paintings. He used exaggerated colors that drew your gaze across his paintings. The distinct shadows in most of his work ground the objects and give them a realistic setting. The colors and shadows both contribute to the commercial quality in Thiebaud's art. His work reflects advertisements for a bakery or pastry item. In the same fashion as he painted desserts, he also painted hot dogs, streets, lipstick, and deltas. Thiebaud (pronounced 'tee-bo') grew up on the west coast, which influenced his Hollywood/commercial style of flawless presentation. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Sacramento State College in 1951 and 1952, respectively.

In the 1960s, he created a series of images of pies. I am drawn to the elegant balance of black and white of this series. The tightly composed prints focus on one slice at a time, an individual piece. The reduced detail and context in the composition requires the viewer to appreciate the prints on a conceptual rather than a formal level. However, most of his dessert art draws from the similarity of oil paint to that of buttercream icing. Loaded and thick, the colorful pastels and blue shadows of paint draw attention to the sumptuous imagery. Each dessert is carefully handcrafted, but with the uniformity of a consistent crew. They are arranged and displayed in bakeries and diners across America.

With such repetition, displaying his pies and cakes in rows, and his subjects of the seemingly mundane, many have labeled him a Pop artist with other known artists of that era like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein; however he did not consider himself a Pop artist. Thiebaud did not use desserts, as Warhol did with his soup cans, to critique consumer culture. He was genuinely interested in the nostalgia of the products themselves. His brushstrokes are expressive and lyrical compared to the flat, automated style of other Pop artists. He did not identify his art with any movement, but used many folk art techniques. “The obsession with detail, the faithfulness to an object’s essence, the use of fixed, rigid forms in a diagrammatic style, the employment of distortions in perspective to achieve a kind of caricature, the reliance on repetition and sorting, and a devotion to painterly excess and vivid color — these are devices that folk artists have traditionally relied upon” (Roth).

Thiebaud was the artist I knew to use as a jumping off point. His work is fun and filled with nostalgia. He sees and paints each repetitive item with such a distinct, individual look – lovingly crafted. I am also drawn to his dramatic use of light and shadow, which gives the paintings’ scenes authenticity – like he remembers right where he first saw it.

Will Cotton (1965)



Spumoni River, 2003, Oil on linen



Candy Curls, 2005, Oil on linen

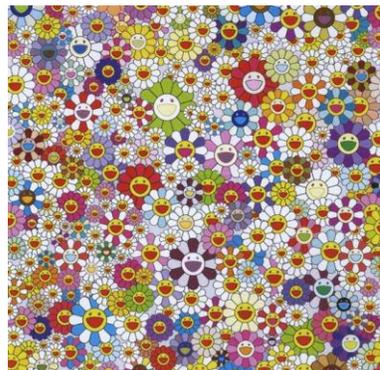
William Cotton, another more contemporary, American painter, provided me with examples of confectionery as well as temptation. His main subjects are landscapes composed of sugary sweets, often inhabited by women. Cotton sets up studio maquettes of his landscapes and photographs them. He then paints from the photograph. Even though his works are airy and light, they are heavy with meaning. It speaks of dissatisfaction, abandonment, and desire. The sweetness of his paintings becomes nauseating, even repellent. For Will Cotton, sugar is a vice. He coats his paintings excessively with it. It doubles as one of the seven deadly vices - gluttony, the excessive love of pleasure.

His color palette is vibrant and airy, letting light move your eye around the landscape. Cotton's use of color in his paintings was very significant in my work. He chooses colors that are easily identified with sweetness and attraction such as his sugary cotton candy pinks and creamy smooth whites. His paintings are extravagant and luscious beyond measure. They provoke a desire that is beyond necessary. His subjects are not a source of nourishment, just indulgence: past need, pure pleasure.

Takashi Murakami (1962)



Time Bokan-Pink, 2001, acrylic on canvas, mounted



Flowers, Flowers, Flowers, 2010, Offset lithograph on wood

Takashi Murakami influenced me with his use of bright colors and flat imagery that reflect youth. Murakami, a Japanese artist, attended the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and is known for his own style of art called Superflat. It is a style similar to manga and anime that comments on otaku lifestyle and subculture, as well as consumerism and sexual fetishism. His work thrives on eclectic Japanese culture.

One of his exhibit's titles, *Little Boy*, refers to the codename for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. It is such an innocent title for such a horrific event. The title doubles in meaning as it points to the infantilization of the Japanese culture after the war. The catastrophic things that occurred traumatized them to the point that they reverted to an adolescent state. Japan was filled with ancient tradition and culture. It has turned into a consumer culture seeming only to produce products for children and adolescents. This is evident in the fixation on *kawaii*, or cute, imagery in Japanese culture. *Kawaii* elements include characters with sweet, saturated colors and baby-like features, often with oversized heads with large eyes. Hello Kitty is a great example. Lesser-known examples may also be slightly distorted and ominous.

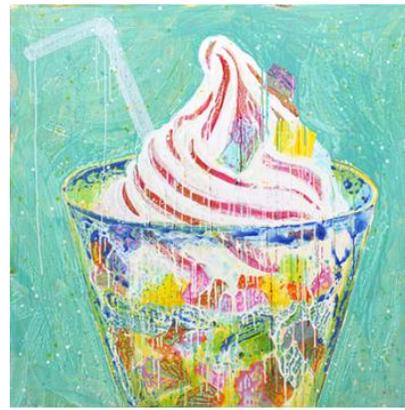
Time Bokan (pictured on previous page), represents a mushroom cloud. Surrounded in hot pink, Murakami drew from the historical national disaster and painted the cloud like a cartoon. It becomes so flat, non-dimensional and abstracted, that it looks “cute.” Murakami would argue that the cute cartoons are at a level that the Japanese can relate to. Fantasy provides an escape from history for the Japanese.

What I wanted to take from Murakami’s work was his use of imagery to communicate deeper ideas. The “cuteness” of his work draws viewers in at a level that they can quickly relate to (much like the commercial persuasion of Thiebaud). With my work, colorful desserts are the draw. Again as Tim Richardson described, sweets blur adulthood and childhood (9). For me, sweets are a ways to cope with the traumatic things of life. I immediately identify with them. Using this hook, I proceed to challenge American contemporary culture.

Wang Liang-Yin (1979)



Chocolate Crumb Donut, 2009, Acrylic on Canvas



Colorful Sundae, 2009, Acrylic on Canvas

Wang Liang-Yin, a Taiwanese painter and sculptor, is an artist who I discovered much later in my research. Wang conveys very similar concepts with her art. She focuses on the transient nature of desserts and the emptiness that follows. As she presents each piece, the viewer sees her vibrant imagery but is led to contemplate whether this cheer continues beyond our sight. The dripping paint in her colorful works hints at the unstoppable disappearance. I admire her use of a wet medium because she allows the drips to become an important part of her work. She is in tune with the qualities of the medium.

Still life usually implies the stationary element of interior life. In Wayne Thiebaud's work, for example, the objects are found on a stable surface, casting a shadow on a display table or countertop. From there, everything is carefully and symbolically arranged: the cakes are on the table, the table is in a controlled environment, and the controlled environment is built on solid ground. Each is at its right resting place, contained and at ease. With Wang Liang-Yin's work, each sweet stands out in the center of the painting as it is suspended on the canvas. They lack the support of both context and background. Each dessert fills up the

frame, pointing out the individual. Her bright colors and centered imagery isolate the viewer and the object.

The contemporary artists whose work I researched each dealt with the element of sweet. Wayne Thiebaud's work was sweet in his use of desserts as nostalgia. Will Cotton used sweet to an excessive degree for temptation by confectionery. Takashi Murakami's work used sweet colors to relate to the infantile Japanese culture. Wang Liang-Yin painted sweets in energetic colors to consider the fleeting nature of desserts.

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORKS

This exhibit combined mixed media drawings and design principles to create a body of work exploring four sets of related ideas about contemporary American culture. My thesis used desserts to draw people in and describe the state of our culture, including the cost it may have. Desserts engage me because it reminds me of my childhood with my mom, but like the time it transports you to, it does not last. During my studies I became really interested in pieces that incorporated duality, like Murakami's *Time Bokan*. His work immediately translated innocently through his flat rendering like cartoons but then also politically because of the history of the subject matter. With my work the subjects translate as a delicious dessert experience, but also each dessert, the banana split, the strawberry ice cream, the chocolate cupcake, and the apple pie, proposes the struggle between the initial comfort and immediate consequence of the indulgence of the sweet. To achieve this, I presented the before (classic mouthwatering depiction) and after (the empty result).

Each piece was prepared on paper with a flat watercolor wash. However, before I started on the final pieces, I experimented with different washes and materials (as seen in Appendix A). I included the baking process and some base ingredients into my art process. Since many desserts use salt, sugar, and eggs, I mixed salt, powdered sugar, sugar crystals, and eggs separately with water. The salt gave a nice crackled look, but it did not look

delicious. The powdered sugar gave a really stunning shimmer to the piece, but it kept the paint from mixing well. The sugar crystals gave the paper the sugary effect I was looking for, but it was not consistent and took many days to dry out. The eggs made the paper very glossy and difficult to draw on top of. In the end I opted out of using any of these additives because they were distracting and painted only with watercolor.

Starting at the top of the paper, I painted a stroke of color and worked my way down. After it dried, I went over it again. When the paint was still wet, I subtly added analogous colors to give the washes variation. Color was visually one of the most important concepts to drive this thesis. I chose very bright, ethereal pastels, similar to Thiebaud and Cotton, to connect with the nostalgia of desserts and attract attention. Using very candy-like colors, the subjects became more artificial, suggesting a deeper truth. I wanted to tie the four sets of work together with similar color treatments and vibrancy. The rainbow gradient in the work added to its rich sweetness.

When the washes were dry, I added the desserts on top with black and white litho crayons. The black litho crayon allowed me to draw textured bold lines that reflected the pie prints Thiebaud did in the 1960s. The white litho crayon added depth to the desserts, but also gave me transparency to let in the color of the wash show through. I like juxtaposition of the bright soft backgrounds and the rigid outlines of the images. The desserts float on their backgrounds, contributing to their ethereal airiness.

For the exhibit the four sets of drawings were hung from a line, similar to hanging them out to dry. Again, the desserts float from the gallery wall. They are suspended in time to give them a nostalgic Americana presence. It represents “simpler times” before mass

technological advances and machinery like washers and dryers. Clotheslines are reminiscent of a time of less complexity. I left the edges of the drawing to show process and again instill a 1950's home crafted feel. Initially I used the margins as workspace, trying out different techniques and materials that resulted in the margins documenting my process of line work and miniature desserts.

BANANA SPLIT, diptych 1 & 2



Desserts are iconic. One that is unforgettable is the banana split. There is a certain way a banana split should look with its symmetrical mountainous scoops reaching the heavens, piled high with toppings and whipped cream, lined with banana halves. But how long does it last like that? Soon after receiving the picturesque treat, it is consumed. If not eaten, it soon becomes a puddle of mixed flavors in the bottom of a bowl, leaving only a pool of what it once was. It beckons to be consumed right away; it is a vertically built accomplishment waiting to be conquered.

Desserts have a sense of urgency about them. When they present themselves to us, we're overwhelmed with the impatience of youth. No matter how old

we are, we suddenly decide that we need to eat them right here, right now.

We know that if we wait until we're hungry again, an hour later, we will risk missing something: the taste will fade, the dynamic contrasts will vanish, and we'll never experience that dessert in quite the same way. (Chen 85)

The banana split draws attention to the American culture of consumption and instant gratification. These actions are lifted up on a pedestal. The banana actually provides a bit of sustenance, but split between the halves of something good, are piled high so many toppings, layers, syrups and fluff until it can go no higher...just as there are so many devices that sustain our need for instant gratification. We have personal cars, fast food, cell phones, microwaves, and ATMs to give us what we want, when we want it.

What happens if we consume too much? There are consequences - like in the world of desserts, as delicious as they are, they do not serve as a part of a healthy diet. We already know many Americans are unhealthy. An unhealthy diet yields being overweight or obese. According to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, the United States has the largest fast food industry in the world. The way that fast food is prepared is the reason it is usually precooked and filled with preservatives to survive long transportation hours and to be prepared for the quick and demanding customer. The director of the obesity program for the Children's Hospital Boston, David Ludwig, claims, "fast food consumption has been shown to increase calorie intake, promote weight gain, and elevate risk for diabetes" (Warner). Our refined distorted craving for a palate of all things saturated and sugary is a cycle we are only now seeing elevated health complications and major repercussions in our youth.

In our culture, the consequences of overconsumption in food, technology, and entertainment stimulation are very similar. Another way we see this in our culture is our spending habits. “Consume! Consume!” We are repeatedly told this through advertisements, commercials, and other gluttonous consumers. As we spend more and more, we spend even more than we have. The rising amount of credit card debt is astounding. The average American household with a credit card is about \$15,000 in debt. Our “I want it now” culture is leading us to a superficial sense of means. It has stripped us from the freedom to own and produce with great profit and gain. Rather, it has bound and enslaved us to a self-inflicted ceiling of our own building or to drown in a puddle of melted leftovers.

STRAWBERRY ICE CREAM, diptych 1 & 2



The ice cream cone is another classic dessert. Two scoops of frosty cold flavor in a crisp waffle cone is what I have always imagined as the perfect remedy for a hot, humid day. Ice cream is an important summer treat of American culture, since 1921, when the commissioner of Ellis Island decided to “treat all immigrants to a taste of something truly American – ice cream” (Dickson 35).

Surely we can relate to or picture the unfortunate day when the delicious cone filled with ice cream slipped from someone’s fingers and toppled ‘almost in slow motion’ to its demise onto the scalding hot pavement. Left to melt, the cone and liquid ice cream are abandoned. In our society we try to hold too many ice cream cones. They all start to melt and you need to neglect some cones to give attention to others – ultimately sacrificing a flavor for another and increasing the risk of losing an ice cream treat completely. In reality we try to hold on to all of our new computers, televisions, and cameras. Phones, music players, tablets, cameras, and computers: we want every combination, no matter the overlap. Then new and better upgrades come out before we get a chance to ‘finish’ the previous version. Version 10.2 makes version 10.1 obsolete. They slip through our fingers. Once the cone has turned over, it becomes a reverse funnel – more and more flows through faster as we try to reach the top of the technology pyramid. Consequences arise as our desire for the next best thing continues; the lifestyle we have becomes progressively more wasteful. The ice cream is a metaphor for the wastefulness of the American dream, which includes our obsession with technology.

CHOCOLATE CUPCAKE, diptych 1 & 2



The chocolate cupcake is the ultimate temptation and symbol of delicacy in hopes of fulfillment and has a power of its own. I'm sure most 'chocoholics' would agree that temptation and chocolate just go together. The chocolate cupcake first offers a fulfillment that you can just inhale and then gives one's mouth a sense of ecstasy after indulging in it. The mind is instantly overcome with satisfaction; however, the rush quickly passes and feelings of emptiness and hunger soon return. You are left with its lifeless circular wrapper, only to remind you of the goodness that was and a desire to begin the cycle again.

Craving the temptation is the effect that too much sugar has. When you eat chocolate cupcake after chocolate cupcake, or even just one, the treat spikes your blood sugar level, and your body responds with an increase of insulin production. Insulin's job is to

drive and move glucose (reduced sugar) out of the blood stream to more important areas that use it as immediate energy and store it for potential energy as fat cells.

If the insulin levels are raised at a constant rate, the body is continually in fat storing mode and only uses energy coming from the surplus of sugar from the bloodstream rather than using stored fat. Then when your blood sugar level is low, the brain responds with “I need more sugar/energy.” Perhaps this explains why every year, the average American consumes almost 100 pounds of sugar and other caloric sweeteners (Chen 7). In hopes of a fulfilling temptation, the cupcake does not sustain.

APPLE PIE, diptych 1 & 2



The mere mention of apple pie warms the heart of every American. It is the quintessential dessert seen nestled next to a flag of red, white, and blue on a hot summer afternoon with the anticipation of fireworks to come. Pie creates nostalgia for the past and a desire for simpler times with the dessert cooling on an open kitchen window seal. Outside of a modest suburban home, the average number of kids are playing in the neighborhood, waiting for dad to arrive home from work where he earns the family paycheck. These are the

dreams of reward. The “American Dream” is the goal and reward that we work towards.

This country is saturated with freedom, built on individualism, and we all want a slice of the pie.

During my undergraduate studies in architecture, we studied the shift of American individualization that was a result of the end of World War II. This transition occurred when veterans came home to women who stepped up to replace the drafted men’s roles. From there, a shift happened that culturally began to accept women holding positions and provide financially for their families just as much as their male counterparts. As this generation sought to express their reenergized freedom and individuality the suburban lifestyle became more desirable and affordable. People moved out of the cities into what is now called sprawl, or the depletion of density and increased reliance on the car. Everyone needed his or her own house, yard, garage, and automobile. This became the new “Americana.” Now lives are filled with work devoted to these ephemeral things – getting the house, the car, the comfortable lifestyle – and will spend anything to get it. As we work toward these things, the pie continues to be consumed, but not replenished. Our resources are depleting at rates that cannot be sustained. We buy more than we can afford economically, environmentally, and physically.

IV. CONCLUSION & EXHIBITION STATEMENT

This creative project drew from two distinctly different sources that made the products rich to work on and explore. The first source was my fondness and connoisseurship of sugary treats. The nostalgia of desserts was therapeutic as I began researching, bringing me back to times with my mother on those summer afternoons enjoying life without schoolwork or responsibility. I enjoyed studying the science of baking and ice cream and looking at cakes. The second source that I was able to draw from was the conceptual depth of the metaphors in the dessert. This was a challenging yet rewarding experience for me. Coming from a background in architecture, I quickly developed an opinion on our social, cultural, and built environments. With this project I chose to communicate something I was interested in sharing with others. After realizing my subject and that I wanted to draw more than a portrait of a dessert, I challenged the way American's live their lives. Do we deserve everything we want? If we continue to live so recklessly, we will be left unsatisfied.

As Chen in *The Taste of Sweet: Our Complicated Love Affair with Our Favorite Treats* concluded, "By looking at the world through the lens of sweet, I learned about the vulnerabilities and desires that color human nature and came to discover how the quest for the perfect sweet reflects our endless search for happiness without compromise" (11-12). Similarly to the caveat of indulging in confection, we are warned that we are devastatingly

ruining our health, state of mind, our resources, and our environment as we continue the search of ephemeral happiness.

Confection Affection

Desserts, sweets, and confections have a special place in the hearts of many. Some, including myself, even claim to have a special stomach, a dessert stomach. We receive treats for special occasions and rewards. We take comfort in treats during crises. Certain sweets, after all, offer us a taste of lost youth. In my particular case, childhood summers were filled with ice cream. Everyday, sometimes even for lunch, my mother and I would have a bowl of ice cream together. Even now, on a hot summer afternoon, I ask my husband to take me out for ice cream. I relate to Tim Richardson, as he writes in his introduction to *Sweets*, “With sweets, the distinction between adulthood and childhood is blurred.”

Like the pastry painter icon, Wayne Thiebaud said, “Why not paint cakes?” However, looking deeper, these innocent treats serve as metaphors for our culture’s need for instant gratification, consumption, fulfillment, and reward. Confection affection is a love-hate relationship. The immediate pleasure of a beautiful dessert swiftly fades after it is gone.

Using a combination of mixed media drawings and design principles, this body of work reflects a range of concepts and concerns about thoughts with contemporary American culture. Using artificial candy colors, the drawings become almost too sweet. The “before” and “after” images of the desserts provide moments of reflection for the viewer on the condition of our culture and consequences it may have. We are controlled by consumption in our fast-paced society. Fast food, cell phones, microwaves, and ATMs are all tools to facilitate our need for instant gratification. In this age of technology, our desire for the next best thing has become an increasingly wasteful lifestyle. Our continual search for fulfillment and reward is devoted to the ephemeral things of life.

I enjoyed further exploring artists whose work influenced my creative project. I also advanced my knowledge of wet and dry mediums by experimenting with watercolor, grease pencils, and litho crayons. Based on these experiments, I created diptychs to portray the dichotomy of desserts. I finished four sets of drawings for my creative project with additional sketches and studies to support my exploration of medium.

In pursuing a graduate degree I am grateful to many individuals for providing support, encouragement and inspiration. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my thesis advisor Scott Anderson for walking me through this process. I appreciate the time dedicated to teaching me about the art world. I thank my other committee members, Hannah Barnes and Sam Minor for their encouragement, advice and critique. I thank my friends and family for supporting my education and helping me when life got too busy. Finally, special thanks to Andrew, my husband and best friend, for his love, encouragement, and understanding. Thank you for your support in letting me pursue a dream.

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APPENDIX A

ADDITIONAL IMAGES AND SUPPORT

These images capture the preliminary experiments with sugar crystals, egg, conte crayon, and powdered sugar on different papers.

