

Sugar Boy Exhibition

Until May 11, 2003

Stark Galleries, Memorial Student Center

Texas A&M University

Tuesday through Friday, 9 am to 8 pm

Saturday and Sunday, noon to 6 pm

Closed Tuesdays

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Sugar Art: Sugar Boy

“Their colors are as bright as Pixar’s,” says Mary Ciani Saslow a teacher of color and creativity in the respected Visualization Program in the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University of the packaging of children’s foods. “Their characters are as friendly, 3-dimensional and animated as any Disney cartoons – which some of them are. I was drawn to them as works of art.” Then her adult daughters discovered that they felt more consistently energetic if they cut out foods high in sugar from their diets, and Saslow read of the epidemic of obesity and Type 2 diabetes among American children. “So I put two and two together and started researching the sugar content of these seductively packaged foods.”

The results of her research are on display at the main art gallery at the university. “I hope a lot of children and college students see Sugar Boy and figure out that this is not what they want to be,” says the artist of her cautionary sculpture. “All he can do is sit smiling and eating in a sandbox filled with sugar and sugar foods and the trash of discarded wrappers and plastic bottles.”

His head? A bag of sugar with marshmallow nose and chocolate tongue. His esophagus is Oreos; his stomach is a round, plastic, drink mix container; dark cereal pellets fill his intestines. Red plastic spoons replace his heart; arms are stuffed with sugar cereal; legs are bags of cereal; toes are marshmallows. “Since he is hyper all the time from all the sugar he eats,” explains Saslow, “his silver, pipe cleaner hair sticks straight up.”

His foods

On display on the walls around Sugar Boy are some of his foods. Hung like works of art, they are defaced with Sugar Content labels and plastic spoons that represent the teaspoons of sugar they contain.

“It’s hard to separate the seductive beauty of these packages from the manufactured products they contain,” explains Saslow. “Once children and parents figure out the difference between outside and inside they will be armed to know what is real and what isn’t, what is nutritious and what causes obesity and diabetes.”

Old words; new products

How have we got ourselves in such a fix? “The definitions of foods have been hollowed out while we weren’t looking,” explains Saslow. “‘Cereal,’ ‘drink,’ ‘lunch,’ ‘snack,’ and ‘fruit’ don’t mean anymore what we think they mean. It happened slowly over a long time so we didn’t notice. Recently it’s gone into high gear with companies designing and marketing new products that fill the middle of the supermarkets. People who have not shopped for children for a while might be surprised.”

- **“Cereal”** marketed to children have more sugar, ounce per ounce, than Hostess Twinkies. Despite claims of vitamins, minerals, reduced fat and whole grains, they are around 50% sugar. A parent pays for a full box of cereal, but half is cheap sugar, so manufacturers can afford to hire the best graphic designers to make packaging tempting to kids. All the major manufacturers – General Mills, Kellogg, Post, and Quaker – also make unflavored cereals -- Cheerios, Cornflakes, Shredded Wheat, and oatmeal -- which contain, at most, 7% sugar. They are not among the rows of sugar cereals that parade down supermarket aisles at kids’ eye-level.
- **“Drink”** sold to kids contain more sugar than the water, milk, and real juices they replace, and none of their nourishment. A pouch of CapriSun, for example, has 7 1/2 teaspoons of sugar; a 20 ounce bottle of Fruit Works has 15 1/2 teaspoons of sugar; a shiny 16 ounce plastic bottle of Nesquick Banana Milk has 14 1/2 teaspoons of sugar; and the star of the show, a 14 ounce plastic bottle of Hershey’s Cookies ‘n’ Cream MilkShake, contains a startling 22 teaspoons of sugar!
- **“Lunch”** might be a packaged product called Lunchables. A Lunchable Deep Dish Pizza box is on display with 15 teaspoons stuck into it represent the 15 teaspoons of sugar it contains.
- **“Snack”** today is not as often an apple as Oreos, Kisses, Skittles, M&Ms, Peppermint patties, Harry Potter Bertie Bott’s every Flavor Beans, Fruit Gushers, and Pudding Snacks. The prize here? Nestle’s Butterfinger BBs. The package encourages children to:

"Enjoy one of AMERICA'S coolest snacks ANYTIME, ANYWHERE, ANYPLACE: Watching TV, Playing a VIDEO GAME, Surfing the NET, Popping in the CAR, During HOME-WORK."

It is as if sedentary children are expected to constantly top up their sugar level. A 12.5 ounce bag of BBs contains 24 teaspoons of sugar.

- **“Fruit”** means sweet and nutritious real food loved by children, but is used liberally to name manufactured products with brilliant false colors and intense false flavors. As do many products, Winnie the Pooh snacks have enticing images of fruit on the box with the words “made with real fruit juice.” The Pooh snacks contain two kinds of wax and are 56% sugar. Dannon’s Danimals Rockin’ Raspberry Drinkable Lowfat Yogurt has almost 4 teaspoons of sugar in a very small (and very beautiful) 3.1 fluid ounce bottle. How much fruit is in Froot Loops one wonders, or Fruity Pebbles, Cap’n Crunch’s Crunch Berries, Apple Jacks, or Strawberry Blasted Honeycomb cereals. How much is in Fruit Gushers or Fruitopia or Strawberry Melon Fruit Works?

How much sugar

It is easy to figure out the amount of sugar in these products. Find the number of grams per serving listed at the top of the Nutrition Facts panel on the side of the container. Then look down to the number of grams of sugar per serving. If you see that a serving is 30 grams, and there are 15 grams of sugar per serving, it is not too hard to figure out that the product is 50% sugar! A calculator can make short work of this and can lead to interesting family discussions.

It's easy, too, to figure out how many teaspoons of sugar are in that serving. Since there are 4 grams of sugar in a teaspoon, just divide by 4 the number of grams of sugar listed. So the 15 grams of sugar in our serving of cereal would be equal to 15 divided by 4 or 3 3/4 teaspoons of sugar - a lot of hidden sugar.

Sugar and Bread

The problem, Saslow found, is not desserts and candy, which we all know are full of sugar and should be limited to celebrations and holidays. The problem is that "food" itself is not what it used to be. The high sugar content of these first foods leads to life-long addictions to fast fuel and an epidemic of obesity and diabetes.

Also on display is Bread, an installation by the artists' collective AFEW that includes Karen Hillier, Bill Jenks, Carol LaFayette, and Saslow - all associated with the Visualization Program. Images of foods, their TV ads, and movie product placements are projected on a giant piece of bread to the sound of temple bells and medieval chants. A crystal glass and a golden wafer glow in the darkened space.

Sugar Boy and his foods and AFEW's Bread are vivid warnings. Take your kids to see them. On your way out pick up some of the information handouts Saslow prepared.

SUGAR CONTENT

_____ Grams per Serving
X _____ Servings per Container
= _____ Grams of Sugar per Container
or _____ Teaspoons of Sugar per Container!

4 grams of sugar = 1 teaspoon sugar

Sugar Content labels are glued to products on display in Sugar Boy.