

Sugar Land

Like sherbet mining holes in one's teeth, the effervescent sands of Saccharinopia whirl around artist-cum-explorer Neil Shurgold as he struggles deeper into the pink desert. As each heavy step shatters the dunes and embankments that give shape to the landscape, he realises: the ground is a coming together of particles, granular monads that vibrate and recalibrate, growing back into new forms, a pink stalactite fringing his beard.

Shurgold's exhibition *Voyage to Saccharinopia* presents a series of crystalline artifacts discovered on this imaginary excursion to a foreign planet. Made using a glut of sugary treats, the objects are sweet yet scratchy—to brush past them might inflict a minutia of cuts or grazes. This paradox is instinctive to the crystal form. As in the technical term “crystal interface”, where one crystal meets another crystal or material, its appearance in art and architecture has bridged many gaps. Crystals are a non-vital, solid matter that grows when new atoms or ions are added to their lattice-like structure. In turn, their contrary nature has been used to draw symbolic connections between the organic and the inorganic, science and fiction, dreams and reality: “Even as “corpses” they function as physical reminders of life.”¹ Rosemarie Haag Bletter described this presence as a “mythologem”, or recurrent mythological pattern, that has appeared in Solomonic legends, Moslem architecture, Gothic cathedrals, Romantic illusions and Expressionist fantasies.²

In contemporary art, the crystal metaphor continues to be reinvigorated. As Mark A. Cheetham explains, the current fascination has more to do with our “natural anxieties” than a Utopian vision: “More than a symptom of our nostalgia for a benevolent nature or our fears about the destruction of the environment, it [the contemporary crystal aesthetic] is a sign³ of confusion about where nature is.”³ This is

¹ Mark A. Cheetham, “The Crystal Interface in Contemporary Art: Metaphors of the Organic and the Inorganic,” *Leonardo* 43, 3, (2010): 251.

² Rosemarie Haag Bletter, “The Interpretation of the Glass Dream—Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, 1, March (1981): 43.

³ Cheetham, 251.

seen in David Altmejd's metamorphic sculptures, Gerard Caris's pentagon drawings and (late) Robert Smithson's iconic exploration of the American landscape. However for Shurgold, it is a material engagement with sugar that has inspired his new body of work: seeking out boutique cake decorators and lolly stores the artist sourced a wide range of sugary foodstuffs to make Saccharinopia's remains. And just as the crystalline vision has recurred throughout time, these works also resist a unified historical moment. The tiled palace wall built with sour-strips and marshmallows is distinctly arabesque. A series of busts (the Saccharinopian Emperors) don punk haircuts, while marzipan roses barnacle their cheeks. Pots and vessels date back to the lost art of DIY-shabby-chic, and a portal-shaped icing painting merges nauseous overindulgence with the sublime.

Shurgold has created an aesthetic of lost time, where everyday utopias come together from different and often-opposing eras and sub-cultures in punk-meets-grandma chichi. As the artist describes, "I am interested in how sugar can be used as an art material. It is pretty but is also addictive and sickly, and so it can speak about many different ideas at once." Just as the sci-fi genre luxuriates in casual allusion to what came before, Shurgold too refers to other times and trends, both imagined and from his own life: the artist himself played in UK punk band, The Smashers, had a Mohawk-clad babysitter called Stephen King as a child, appreciates the whimsy of fantastical literature and is a self-confessed sweet tooth. However, it is the overarching saccharine aesthetic that ties these objects to a particular place, encouraging the viewer to ponder the fallen cultures of Saccharinopia.

Back on Earth, the artist takes a quiet moment in the gallery to reflect on his journey. Had he reached his intended destination of P.O.C.A.⁴, art would have been presented as art. Instead he discovered a really-imagined microcosm from which objects have arrived as if by chance. As in Matthew Ritchie's ongoing project, where a created world perpetually unfolds to reveal new data and visions, this is an

⁴ Planet of Contemporary Art

unpredictable process. In *Voyage to Saccharinopia* we witness the beginning of Shurgold's exploration, the first document in a meta-narrative of the pink planet.

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