

THE AZULEJO AS COLONIAL SYMBOL OF POWER: A DECONSTRUCTION THROUGH SUGAR AND ART

O AZULEJO COMO UM SÍMBOLO DO PODER COLONIAL: A DESCONSTRUÇÃO ATRAVÉS DO AÇUCAR E DA ARTE

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ABSTRACT

I create murals that look like azulejos, depicting caravels and many decorative features seen in traditional *azulejos*, but my murals are made entirely of sugar. I make the sugar tiles and hand paint them with edible inks. I am interested in the azulejo, specifically with imagery of ships, as a symbol of colonial power and of national pride (the Nation of Portugal), but only for the means to subvert this pride. I developed this work in Brazil, addressing the country's history of colonization and the slave trade that supported Portugal's sugar empire. I continue to use the blue tile reference, even outside the context of Brazil, because I want to reference the general construct of colonization and slavery, showing how oppression has found new forms. I install my ephemeral murals on city walls, where they wash away, fade, crumble and decay, animating a more realistic version of history.

KEYWORDS

Sugar | Street Art | Colonization | Social justice

RESUMO

Eu crio murais que se parecem com azulejos, representando caravelas e muitas características decorativas que podem ser observadas nos revestimentos azulejares tradicionais, mas os meus murais são feitos inteiramente de açúcar. Eu faço azulejos de açúcar e pinto-os com tintas comestíveis.

Interesso-me pelos azulejos, em especial os que apresentam imagens de navios, como símbolo do poder colonial e do orgulho nacional (a nação portuguesa), mas apenas como forma de subversão desse orgulho. Desenvolvi este trabalho no Brasil, abordando a história de colonização do país e o tráfico de escravos que apoiava o império açucareiro de Portugal.

Continuo a usar a referência azul, mesmo fora do contexto do Brasil, porque quero referir-me à colonização e escravidão, mostrando como a opressão encontrou novas formas. Instalo os meus murais efêmeros nas paredes da cidade, onde eles se esvaem, desbotam, desmoronam e decaem, animando uma versão mais realista da história.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Açúcar | Street Art | Colonização | Justiça social

I am a visual artist from Montreal, Canada, working primarily in public spaces, creating public art, street art and working in the milieu of community engagement. The primary material I am known for is my work with sugar. I create murals that look like traditional ceramic azulejo murals, in monochrome blue, but mine are made entirely of sugar. They are also ephemeral and they wash away in the outdoors.

Working with sugar as a medium for twenty years, I initially chose this material for its use as a superfluous decoration, associated to women's domestic labour and low-brow craft practices. I used it to reference other types of decoration and classical art forms like architectural ornamentation typical of Baroque and Rococo architecture. I first used this treatment on domestic objects, then interior walls, and eventually in the urban landscape, on city walls. I have created sugar and cake sculptures to critique ideas of social taste, indulgence, consumer culture, waste, excess and greed. I am interested in decadence and the relationship between high art vs low art, want vs need, luxury vs necessity. Sugar is a material rich in history and cultural significance, continually providing me with a wealth of inspiration.

After working with sugar for almost ten years, I went to Brazil in 2004 for two months to attend the Sacatar Foundation artist's residency program, on the island of Itaparica, near Salvador, Bahia. Initially, I thought I would forego working with sugar during this residency, and instead research new ideas. Looking back now, it seems almost comical that an artist interested in sugar would be in the land where the commercial global sugar trade essentially began, and not explore that history. After a few weeks of being on this island, in the heart of the Recôncavo region, I changed my mind, and delved into the local history.

My interest in using the azulejo as a symbol and visual referent in my work began during this first trip to Brazil. My first attempt to create a sugar azulejo was using piped sugar to create colorful decorative tiles, in blue and yellow, mimicking the style of domestic azulejos on houses. I applied these to an abandoned building, essentially sugar-coating the crumbling structure (Fig. 01). I titled the piece "Sugar Coated". The dictionary describes the phrase "sugar coating" as "*a thing used to make something else considered unpleasant or disagreeable seem attractive or palatable*". I considered how this title and the general expression "to sugar coat" could be interpreted in the context of Brazil.



Fig. 01 · *Sugar Coated* (detail), 2006, Shelley Miller, Itaparica, Brazil. 144 cm x 98 cm. Piped icing sugar on abandoned building wall. January, 2006. Sugar lasted 3 weeks before washing away (photo by Shelley Miller)

At this time I was also learning more about the role that sugar played in Brazilian history and in the formation of Brazilian society. To provide a very brief review, the Portuguese colonized Brazil in the early 1500's when the Portuguese navigator Pedro Álvares Cabral, and his thirteen vessels, officially discovered Brazil in 1500, and claimed the land for the Kingdom of Portugal (Cavendish, 2000). By 1526, Brazil was shipping sugar to Lisbon in large quantities and by 1625, Portugal was supplying nearly all of Europe with sugar from Brazil (Mintz, 1986: 38). Large numbers of African slaves began to be imported by the 1570's to work in the cane fields, but it should be noted that the Brazilian sugar-plantation colony began with the extensive use of Indian slave labor for nearly fifty years (Schwartz, 1985: 51). This fact often gets overlooked, given that African slaves were used for nearly three hundred years following this initial period. Although not all slaves remained in Brazil, and they did not all work in the sugar industry, between 1826



Fig. 02. *The Wealth of Some and Ruin of Others* (triptych 1/3), 2007, Shelley Miller, Salvador, Brazil; 164 x 175 cm. Sugar tiles, hand painted, applied to exterior wall with additional icing. Photo taken on December 7, 2007 (Day one). Mural lasted 9 weeks (photo by Shelley Miller)

and 1830, Bahia's slave trade reached its height, with close to ten thousand slaves arriving a year (Schwartz, 1985: 345).

Keeping these historical facts in mind, during my first visits to Brazil, I was seeing a large number of azulejo murals, an obvious symbol of the Portuguese history in Brazil. Some are purely decorative, covering houses, both inside and out. I was also noticing the presence of ship imagery on many of the larger public murals. I took this to be a symbol of pride in colonial conquest; a reference to those first pioneering ships of Cabral that established Portuguese rule in this new land. But is there truly reason to be proud of this history, I questioned.

In my home city of Montreal, Quebec, there is a large diaspora community of Portuguese people. The area I live is referred to as "little Portugal", with flags of Portugal seen in nearly a third of the shops in the area. There is also, I realized when I became more interested in *azulejos*, the prevalence of blue and white *azulejo* murals in this area, in banks or restaurants, many with

ship imagery. It seemed this symbol from the past was an important identity marker for diaspora communities, emphasizing their National identity within the general Canadian context. I found this very interesting, especially since they are more like kitsch replicas, not tin-glazed, but facsimile's, acting as stand-in for the real. All the same, I have observed their importance to the Portuguese community.

I wanted to explore how I could link sugar to the imagery of ships in *azulejos*. I began to perfect my technique for making sugar tiles, allowing me to create a mural that was a true *trompe l'oeil*. I achieved this by making a rolled sugar fondant tile, and hand painting the images on the tiles after they dried and hardened. By connecting the materiality of sugar with the *azulejo* form and the imagery of the ship, I created my first *azulejo* style sugar mural in Salvador, Brazil in 2008 (Fig. 02). It certainly succeeded in fooling the eye, as the curious passers-by questioned what I was doing, and insisted I eat pieces of it, in front of their eyes, to offer proof that it was in fact sugar.



Fig. 03. *The Wealth of Some and Ruin of Others (triptych 3/3)*, 2008, Shelley Miller, Salvador, Brazil; 164 x 175 cm. Sugar tiles, hand painted, applied to exterior wall with additional icing. Photo taken on January 24, 2008 (week 7). Mural lasted 9 weeks (photo by Shelley Miller)

The central image of this inaugural mural was inspired by an actual historical azulejo mural and represents a Caravel as the central image, with the Order of Christ's Cross on the sail, which was originally used by the Portuguese Order of Christ. The title of my sugar mural, "The Wealth of Some and the Ruin of Others", was chosen because it references the contrast that the mural undergoes as it washes away and literally falls into a state of ruin (Fig. 03). It also offers a more immediate contrasting perspective that traditional ceramic azulejos with heroic ship imagery do not embody, since the lifespan of my murals are merely a few weeks, at best. In this sense, I wanted to show the destructive side of colonization by creating a time-based *vanitas* installation. Like the tradition of Dutch *vanitas* still-life paintings, my murals are a reminder of mortality and of the worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures.

This sugar mural was up for about nine weeks, while I regularly returned to document its slow destruction in photographs. I chose three final images to represent

this time-based ephemeral work, and it is these three images that I exhibit and show as document of the work. As with all of my sugar murals, I consider photography to be an important aspect of the work, since this is how most people will experience the work. After I install these sugar murals, my physical work is done, but the life of the concept just begins. I want viewers to consider the entire process of the piece, because it is the erosion and contrast from start to finish that fully encapsulates the concept of this work. I often face the question, "but couldn't you coat the sugar with something to preserve it?". My answer remains the same: it is precisely the loss, decay, erasure, and association to destruction that I want the work to embody. I want them to have a baroque aesthetic. Photography then, through time-lapse, becomes a way for me to present the story that presents itself in each mural.

I have since made several more of these sugar murals in Brazil, Canada, India, United States and Australia. I have used a blue and white colour palette even in

works outside the context of Brazil because I want to continue referencing not only Portugal's role in colonization and the global sugar trade, but the entire system of the sugar slave trade that accompanied European colonization in the 16th-19th centuries. This includes implicating France, England, the Netherlands, and Spain.

As sugar began to be more widespread throughout Europe, the demand and taste for it increased. The successes for growing in different colonial regions varied over the centuries with some countries having greater success than others. Although Portugal had initial successes in the 16th century, by the following decade, the French, and more so the British (with help from the Dutch) became the western world's dominant sugar makers and exporters (Mintz, 1985: 35).

There was much competition throughout history for gains to be made in sugar production and trade. It was Spain who pioneered sugar making, the use of African slave labour and the plantation form in the Americas (Mintz, 1985: 32). However, in the end, it was England who conquered the most colonies, imported the most slaves and made the fastest gains in creating a plantation system (Mintz, 1986: 38).

As trade and travel increased, it also affected the sharing of visual styles and techniques between cultures. Due to this cross-pollination effect of styles and materials, other European countries involved in colonizing lands for sugar production also have traditions of ceramics with paintings of ship imagery, as well as the use of monochrome blue, notably by the Dutch. I use hybrid compositional features and decorative styles in my murals, intentionally evoking multiple European origins, be it azulejos, or English porcelain dishware with painted scenes. My aim is to reflect aristocratic, colonial society.

Each time I create a new mural, I customize it to reflect either local history or a current event. In a mural installed in Australia in 2013, I looked at the unique conditions of slave labour within the sugar industry history there, in the 1800's when it was still a self-governing British colony. In the late 19th century to early 20th century, recruiters brought Indigenous peoples from nearby Pacific islands, primarily Vanuatu, New Guinea and Solomon Islands, to work in the sugar cane fields. This practice, referred to as "blackbirding", involved kidnapping or coercion to work in the cane fields.

My mural for Sydney shows small archival images of cane workers and actual blackbirds amongst the main image, a ship called Velocity, which was the actual name of one such blackbirding ship.

I then wanted to show how my own country of Canada had involvement in the sugar trade. In my home city of Montreal, which is a port city on the St. Lawrence River, I created a sugar azulejo titled "Cargo" which shows contrasting sides of the sugar trade: export and import (Fig. 04). The right side represents the sugar producing islands with images of workers cutting cane, and loading barrels of raw sugar onto small boats to be exported. On the left is an historical image of the Old Port of Montreal, receiving the raw sugar in barrels. In the far distance is a land mass that could be interpreted as Africa, easily missed within the busy composition, but whose significance is still integral to the ocean trade depicted.

The island imagery I have painted on the right is a composite that I constructed from several paintings done by William Clark (1770-1838) from his series called "Ten Views on the Island of Antigua" dated 1823. Clark was a British naval painter who was posted in Antigua for three years to document not only the landscape and the scenery but also the various processes involved in the production of sugar, including the human labour (Nelson, 2017: 218).

I used his works because I wanted to create a scene that was neither extreme nor overly violent, but one that still showed the imbalance of power in the labour dynamics of the subjects working in the cane fields. Clark's imagery shows the exertion of the black labourers, pushing, carrying, lifting; compared to the more passive stance of the white owners, showing the labour distinction between blacks and whites (Nelson, 2017: 221). His series also shows people of all ages working, revealing that even children and the elderly were not spared the burden of labour in plantation life (Nelson, 2017: 289).

The central area of Cargo again focuses on ship images. Instead of a singular ship, as I had done in other murals, I have a variety of ships, taken from disparate times in history, as a means to show the lengthy time gap that this triangle trade occurred. On the top, within the decorative border, there is a globe showing what is known as the triangle trade, which arose in the 17th century and links the areas of Europe



Fig. 04. *Cargo*, 2009, Shelley Miller, Montreal, Canada; 138 x 292 cm. Sugar tiles, hand painted, applied to wood panels with additional icing. Photo taken on July 2, 2009 (Day two). Mural lasted 10 days (photo by Shelley Miller)



Fig. 05. *Cargo*, 2009, Shelley Miller, Montreal, Canada; 138 x 292 cm. Sugar tiles, hand painted, applied to wood panels with additional icing. Photo taken on July 6, 2009 (Day 5). Mural lasted 10 days (photo by Shelley Miller)

to Africa and the New World. Canada is not included in the triangle trade route illustrated on this image, and is often left out of the global consciousness of the sugar trade subject. This is a prime inspiration for why I chose to do the mural showing a Canadian port city. In her book, "Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica", Charmaine Nelson points out that the traditional triangle referenced when speaking of the Transatlantic slave route is too simplistic to accurately reflect the complexities of trade routes, and often neglects some areas of the Caribbean and Canada (Nelson, 2017: 4).

The title "Cargo", seen at the bottom, bracketed by chains and anchors, affirms the reality that ships did not only travel the seas carrying adventurous explorers, and finished products for trade but also human lives. In an act of subversion, I have replaced cherub-like figures that are often seen on *azulejo* murals with images of bodies carrying heavy barrels; representing the people whose bodies and labour supported this architecture. Instead of the sugar tiles falling off the wall in an act of self-destruction, like other murals have, this mural simply faded, like an old photo, or like memories can fade, with facts getting lost or forgotten (Fig. 05).

In 2016, I decided to use the blue *azulejo* reference to create a sugar mural that speaks about a different form of power and oppression; but one that I believe is linked to colonization. In "Legacy" (Fig. 06) I draw parallels between slavery and the current epidemic of young black men disproportionately imprisoned or targeted by police with lethal consequences. I chose to focus this theme in the context of Brazil, but I feel it can be used to represent the global issue of injustice at the hands of police. I also focused this mural on Brazil, because I have a personal connection of losing a loved one in Brazil at the hands of the police.

The central image represents the atmosphere of a police state. I have positioned a large contingent of fictitious armed officers in an actual area of Salvador, Brazil called *pelourinho* (English translation is pillory, a device used to whip and humiliate). When Salvador was founded as the first capital city of Brazil, in the year 1549, the Portuguese placed the *pelourinho* in the central area of its acropolis, a symbol of the slavery system administration, and later was used to name this entire historic district (Nobre, 2002: 110).

Today, it is largely a tourist area, but the legacy of this painful location and the institutions that supported this slave practice remains in the consciousness of the social fabric of Brazil.

The three portraits of young men in the border of the mural were all killed by police in Brazil, and were not armed. The sad truth is that there were hundreds of faces I could have depicted. In Brazil, as in many other countries, notably the United States, racial profiling is a massive social justice issue that can be considered as the legacy of colonization. In her book, "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness", Michelle Alexander argues that the mass incarceration rate in the United States is the new metaphorical form of racial segregation. No other country in the world incarcerates so many of its ethnic or racial minorities as the US does, and has higher percentage of black populations in prison than South Africa did at the height of apartheid (Alexander, 2012: 6).

As described throughout this essay, I have used the *azulejo* in my sugar murals in different ways, beginning by mimicking the imagery I saw in real *azulejos*, notably ship imagery, and the classical ornamentation and decorative motifs, and over time, I embellished, and added new images, subverting the traditional with new meaning, each time with symbolic references to different forms of oppression and power systems. I continue to be inspired by the art form of the *azulejo* and by the myriad of ways that it can be subverted to question new forms of colonization and power dynamics, whether that be by a ruling nation or corporate interests.

Within my art practice, decorative art forms, represent the margins, the peripheral, that which blends into the background. The decorative arts have long been considered a lesser art form than modern architecture or painting. In his famous essay "Ornament and Crime" from 1908, the architect and theorist Adolf Loos (1870-1933) comments that ornamentation represents backwardness and signs of a degenerative society, even hampering the evolution of culture (Miller and Ward, 2002: 32). I play off of these theories, creating decorative works that literally degenerate and decay, becoming living *momento mori* sculptures.

Today, the decorative is still around, used to cover, to embellish, to distract, to beautify. Especially in the case of repeated patterns, decoration can be easily missed,



Fig. 06- *Legacy*, 2016, Shelley Miller, Montreal, Canada; 178 x 203 cm. Sugar tiles, hand painted, applied to concrete city wall with additional icing. Photo taken on August 16, 2016 (Day one). Mural lasted one week (photo by Shelley Miller)

easy to take for granted, our eyes missing the details, forgetting to take notice. I use the decorative form and its long history as a means to ask, both myself and

others, what else do we not see? What new forms of oppression or unjust social practices do we walk past each day, not taking notice of?

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