

**STAINED**  
**SHELLEY MILLER**

*March–July 2011*

*Stained* is a catalogue documenting a public sugar mural that was on the wall of Waddington Alley during artist Shelley Miller's one-month production residency hosted and organized by Open Space Arts Society March to July, 2011. Open Space is a non-profit artist-run centre located in Victoria, British Columbia.

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## *Toxic Pleasures*

Montreal artist Shelley Miller uses sugar as a medium in her art practice. It's a pragmatic decision for an artist—you can buy sugar anywhere, it's cheap and durable. Traditionally identified with the homey pleasures of holiday baking, candy, and other treats, sugar has seeped into almost all industrial food products. As public health researcher Robert Lustig observes, “Sugar is cheap, sugar tastes good and sugar sells, so companies have little incentive to change.”<sup>1</sup> Lustig discusses sugar as a lucrative commodity under investigation as a health hazard. Miller, on the other hand, presents a visual narrative—a history—a Dickensian political parable.

The beaux arts sugar filigrees that made up Miller's public mural *Stained* referred to many sources: the histories of slavery, displacement, and colonization, interior design, and, inevitably, cake decoration. Miller redeployed the distinctive blue and white palette of Portuguese *azulejo* ceramic murals, a form of public history painting, to riff off the ornate detailing of Victoria's downtown architectural heritage. *Stained* was an apt temporary public sculpture for Victoria. The historic downtown business core is more decorative than most Western Canadian city centres simply because it is the oldest, the Western Canadian outpost whose architecture is festooned with the symbolic towers of colonization. BC's economy rests on expropriated, unceded territory. Logging, mining, and the imminent transport of crude oil and natural gas resources make up an economic future that resolutely embraces amnesia as a planning strategy. Miller's *Stained* recounted the barbed histories of a familiar trade product, but she also succinctly represented a compelling study of forgetting.



How did Victoria audiences read Miller's text? Most were captivated by the novelty of its confectionary media and Miller's considerable technical skill. Some viewers even licked *Stained*, attesting to its dormant pleasures! Other observers speculated about whether white sugar is actually a food, exchanging anecdotes and opinions about the public health controversies associated with sugar. In contrast, a local official was concerned about rats hanging around the mural. I can't speculate how many viewers interpreted Miller's critical and historical references, but someone visiting the mural clearly caught the spirit of the political and historical subtexts in *Stained*, particularly the heroics of the rip-off. Four days after she installed it, Miller's mural was vandalized and the centre panels stolen, leaving an empty frame

that endured for months. In fact, Miller's mural didn't dissolve—it hardened in Victoria's summer drought, and in the end we had to chip it off. Sugar is mortared into our culture of excess. Most of us cannot resist its white, brittle, addictive, and potentially lethal lure. Ensnared in a carb-induced stupor, we are unable to grasp sugar's economic and political stronghold.

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Open Space thanks Shelley Miller for joining us for a month-long production residency in Victoria. It was wonderful working with her. We are grateful for the enthusiastic support of Hostelling International Victoria, who agreed to host *Stained* on their building. The Market Stores of Victoria supplied the sugar. Sarah Stein contributed the insightful essay in this publication. The board, staff, and volunteers of Open Space assisted with all aspects of Miller's unforgettable contemporary art project.

## **Helen Marzolf**

1. Robert H. Lustig, Laura A. Schmidt, and Clare D. Brindis. "Public Health: The toxic truth about sugar." *Nature* 482 (February 2, 2012): 27–29.



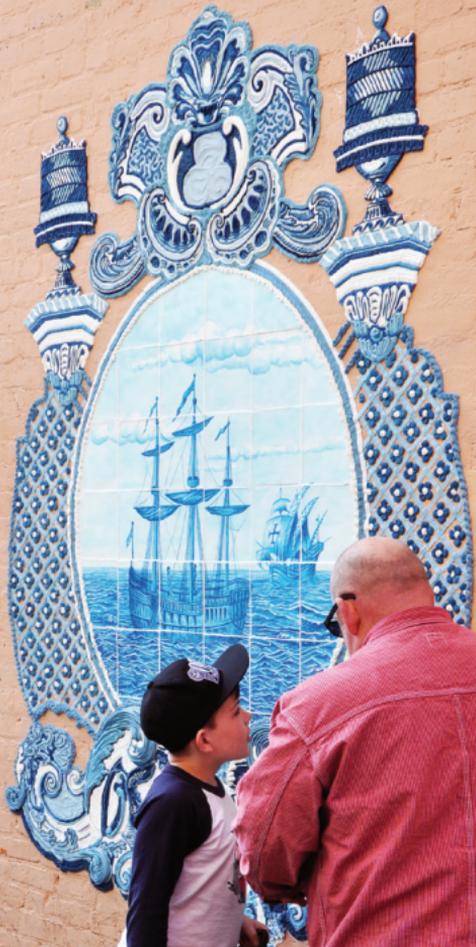
## *Shelley Miller; Stained*

The first sensual experience of Shelley Miller's work is as likely to be aromatic as visual—it smells as good as it looks. Situated in one of Victoria's pedestrian thoroughfares, *Stained* referenced the history of the sugar trade with the depiction of a colonial scene. Rendered in a sugary mural of traditional Portuguese *azulejo*, Miller's fragile sugar tiles were painted with edible blue ink and piped Royal Icing (made from icing sugar and gelatin) in white and shades of blue. Shifting between the sensory experience of the work and the intrigue of its illusion, the conceptual purpose emerged—to put the frilly icing on the sordid history of its own materialism.

The work, made entirely of edible materials, measured six feet high by five feet across. The mural was created during the artist's month-long residency at Open Space and installed on the wall of Waddington Alley, where it remained until it broke down completely in the elements. The mural depicted two ships: one in the foreground sitting idle with its sails down while two figures work its ropes and one in the background appearing to be aggressively headed for the first, its sails decorated with the Order of Christ cross—a symbol associated with Portugal. This vessel was modeled after the Portuguese and Spanish carracks first used to circumnavigate and colonize the world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the lower centre of the elaborate decorative border, two dark figures were depicted working, harvesting sugarcane.

Miller has worked with sugar-based installations for about

Waddington



fourteen years. Evolving from a desire to include other decorative practices in her own work, she began by elaborating on Montreal graffiti with piped icing sugar. These first interactions were influenced by a longing for historical context, recreating architectural elements from classic Roman and Greek architecture while encircling the urban marks of graffiti artists. A 2001 work entitled *Pipe Dreams* existed as a living vanitas painting, with confectionary roses rotting away on the side of a building. After finishing her MFA at Concordia, subsequent trips to India and Brazil provided Miller with historical and architectural inspiration. She began to reconsider her material and tie the use of sugar to notions of excess, consumption, and a bitterly intimate historical relationship to colonialism. In Brazil, Miller was introduced to ceramic tile murals depicting colonial scenes of ships as symbols of conquest and national pride. During its time of colonization, the country was one of the world's largest sugar producers, its industry and economic production relying mainly on imported African slaves. Miller appropriated the use of naval imagery for her sugar-based tile installations to represent the industry's foundation of slavery and exploitation.

With a clever integration of conceptual and material concerns, Miller creates work that challenges notions of what public art should be—her installations are edible and ephemeral, and rely on their ultimate decay to convey meaning. The temporality that characterizes much of Miller's practice is one of the most important aspects of this work. Depending on the environmental conditions, the works may last up to two months but may collapse in as little as a few days. The tiles inevitably fade, run, crack, smear, disintegrate, or are eaten and attract insects. In the artist talk preceding the public unveiling of her mural, Miller spoke of the

final installation process as the end of her personal work, but the beginning of the work's separate public life. Initial public reaction to the mural included surprise and marvel. At a glance, the mural fluently integrated into Victoria's heritage architecture and effectively achieved a trompe l'oeil effect. The accessibility of the imagery and material contributed to its success as public art—it was beautiful, representational, and familiar. It didn't challenge its viewers but quietly subverted itself, pointing toward a greater social complacency. The press release from Open Space states that the ephemeral nature of the installation was “like history itself, eroding and dissolving over time, subject to the distortions of told and retold stories.” Miller reminded us of something we shouldn't forget, while at the same time invoked the process of forgetting. The work receded into the surrounding architecture, eventually disappearing altogether. While this is not permission to forget, it suggests that everything fades with time—including the guilt of excess, or consumptive processes that create wealth for some through the exploitation of others.

In the end, *Stained* was not as sweet as it smelled. It was a reminder that sugarcoating can make a bitter pill more palatable for a varied art-viewing public, but we need to make sure it doesn't go down too easily. Although the work's decadent facade crumbled, mirroring the collapse of the colonial apparatus, what should not dissolve is the memory of the stain left behind.

**Sarah Stein**

# Biography

Shelley Miller completed her undergraduate degree at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary before relocating to Montreal. Here she received her MFA from Concordia University in 2001. Miller has received numerous grants and fellowships, including the Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Award (2001) for research and exhibition purposes in India and the Sacatar Fellowship (2004) to attend the Sacatar Residency in Brazil. Her work has been exhibited in numerous galleries across Canada and abroad. Miller currently lives and works in Montreal.

