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Dark and light combine in Brooklyn sculptor's work at Lux

By Patricia Morris Buckley for The North County Times

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The conversation in artist Susan Graham's childhood home could be quite ordinary, until the subject of the end of the world came up. And it came up often.

"I had many relatives who were Christian fundamentalists, so they talked about the end of the world a lot," said Graham, who grew up on an Ohio farm. She's now based in Brooklyn. "There was always the fear of a natural disaster."

Her childhood has always informed her sculptures, including a sense of foreboding, a tie to nature and a love of crafts. Today she is known for her sculptures of hard things such as pieces of machinery, created through the sugar or porcelain.

For instance, in one exhibition, she created a lawnmower, guns and trucks in porcelain. Taking such a common object and making it look pure or endearing is jarring to the senses, which is exactly what she intends.

"The materials I use give the feeling of domesticity or sweetness," she said in her artist's statement. "The subjects are ones that make me uncomfortable."

Graham, who opens a residency at the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas today, is the only artist in her family. But her grandmother lived close by and had a craft club.

"What she did is nothing like what I do," she said. "She would make things like salt-dough flowers. But that's how I knew the possibilities of sugar."

Graham moved to New York City for grad school, but found she couldn't afford the tuition. Instead, she put all her money into a studio, and she began to work. She had no money or tools, so she remembered her grandmother and started to craft objects from sugar.

"There's a history of sugar sculptures," she said. "Henry Tudor had ornate sugar centerpieces he used at celebrations. I was using sugar alone for a while before I started soaking it in resin to make it last longer. A friend suggested I use porcelain so I could do something permanent. Porcelain looks like sugar, so it struck a chord in me. But I still do temporary pieces as well."

Graham's sculptures and photographs (she often captures images of natural disasters) have been displayed at the Bronx Museum of Arts, the Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris and the Neuberger Museum of Art.

While at the Lux Art Institute, Graham will return to creating a temporary piece of art. She is re-creating a toile wallpaper with sugar that's reminiscent of the wallpaper she had in her home growing up. Once again, she'll be drawing from her childhood for inspiration.

"This is the way I process images and objects," she said. "I like to conquer and tame things that bother me. One way to do that is to transform it into something that's mine."

Graham will be in residency at Lux through Oct. 6. As part of Lux's mission, visitors will be able to watch her at work in the studio. After she leaves, her work will remain on exhibit through Oct. 27.