



Will Cotton Candy

Audrey Walen

This latest show of Will Cotton's big paintings at Mary Boone Gallery on 57th Street features four of his candyland-scapes, just in time for an Easter sugar-rush. Continuing in the vein he's been working in for the last half-decade or so, these luscious slices of a fantasy landscape grabbed me by the gut and transported me back to a childhood world of indulgences, treats, visceral desires and endless hours of engrossing play.

The memories come thick and fast, from playing the board game Candyland with school friends, to building little worlds on the dinner plate out of mashed potatoes and lima beans dotted with globs of ketchup. Remember that moment when you emptied your Halloween haul on the living room carpet and got down on all fours to count and sort the goodies? Cotton does.

Entering the perfectly pristine cube of the gallery, goodies called out to me from all sides. Did I want to gaze longingly at the melted pink fantasy dead ahead? Or would I let my eye be drawn to a tumbling world of icing sugar with hot pink sugar almonds exploding around the perimeter on the left? And what about that strange captured moment of the witches' gingerbread house-cum-trailer home disappearing into a morass of the sickeningly sweet? Despite the fantasy of the objects Cotton chooses as his subjects, the sheer overwhelming scale and abundance makes apparent the abject reality underlying it all.

Cotton works by creating actual three-dimensional set-ups of the scenes he intends to paint. He builds a maquette in his studio, designing it to present the finished view – his maquettes are not sculptures, they are mere studio props. He even takes a perspective of an adult looking slightly down onto the diorama. Real candies, Oreo cookies, Mint Milanos, jelly rings, cinnamon danishes, all the sweet junk of our disposable culture, become embedded in drifts of icing and rivers of melted chocolate. There is a literalness to the finished landscapes. Cotton keeps one foot in reality, and one in fantasy, creating an uneasy sensation of instability in the viewer.

If you eat too many sweets you will get a tummy ache. If you spend your life in a world of fantasy and make believe, you won't get your homework done.

There are of course inescapable references to the great history of studio painting. By working directly from studio props, by spending countless hours planning, shopping for, and constructing what in the end are no more than references for his painter's brush, it would be impossible to consider Cotton's work without going back as far as the Renaissance. An old master such as Botticelli used landscape to present an unreal idyllic world of animals frolicking in perfect rolling hills and grottoes. Then there are the glistening sugar highlights reminiscent of Rembrandt's lace collars and cuffs, the combination of the landscape and still-life genres that it would be impossible to disassociate from Cezanne's apples tumbling across a table top, and the gooey frosting seemingly uncannily like Wayne Thiebaud's endless pies.

But most intriguingly, Cotton also develops evocative, narrative stories in a single canvas. A child growing up in the latter-half of the twentieth century, he can't have missed the products of Hollywood at its schlockiest worst – such as the Western and the B-grade horror film (I'm thinking Nightmare on Elm Street here) – and is intensely aware of the ability of an obviously artificial creation to still be convincing. His candy-scapes draw you in and tell you a story, but you can see the manipulations of the brush and never lose sight of the fact that the artist has 'created' the entire set-up. Cotton does not do photo-realism. Cotton is, first and foremost, a 'painter.' And that's part of the point for him. To paint.

I believe that Cotton is going to take these sweet narratives somewhere new in the very near future, and it will be very interesting to see where that cookie finally crumbles. Somehow I don't think it will be quite a light and sweet as we might expect. I'm thinking saccharine. □

At Mary Boone Gallery through 5 May 2001