

Modern Painters

Will Cotton

By Shana Nys Dambrot

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New York painter Will Cotton hasn't lost his sweet tooth. In his most recent paintings and drawings, Cotton's predilection for situating female nudes in settings fashioned from candy and frosted cake leads to dream-like reveries. That Double as both childhood fantasies and formal meditations on beauty. His large scale oils on linen are feather-light and his smaller chalk-on-paper sketches are solid and heavy objects; but overall he seems inspired by Freud's pleasure principle in producing these objects of the id's desire. Cotton's work is in line with theories of subconscious expression, especially if by pleasure one means beauty. Though he can go to far for his relish for the sickly sweet, and the sumptuous visual richness he concocts can be nearly unbearable in works like Spumoni Stream (2005), for the most part Cotton's art is intelligent and complex to a degree that transcends the trap of empty calories.

The Elegant craftsmanship and strategic armature of his compositions reveal a deeply academic bent that has less in common with the girl-and-candy Pop art of Mel Ramos and James Rosenquist, and more with the articulation of the surrogate caress found in Ingres, and the unabashedly joyous colour of Sargent. These are milk-bathed iconic nudes with the decadence of French court painting and the innocence of Shirley Temple; with the wryness of kitschy self-awareness and the guilelessness of Watteau. Cotton flirts with surreality but his technique is crisp and ephemeral, building shape without line and mass without shadow. The perfection of his model's faces is like the unassailable Venus in her oyster shell.

The impossible wispieness of clouds like kitten fur, the luminosity of a pale, relaxed body, and the swirls and eddies of a sleepy storm of hair that comprise Cotton Candy Cloud (Sandra) (2005) are as delicate as perfume. The painting's variably highlighted surface, its dry brushes of pink cloud embracing folds of a deeper pink, like the inside of a conch, and the Jordan Almond-smooth enamel of baby blue sky behind are also rendered with Cotton's light touch, his witty taste for narrative distortion, and a dissolute realism that emits romance like the latter-day invention of the soft-focus halo effect in film.

Drawings like Candy Apple Forest (2004) are more planar than, and not as bulbous as, the paintings, employing a confident architectural line. The charcoal is here dragged flat across the paper like a stone rubbing, there turned on its edge to delineate form on a need-to-know basis. The strongest example is Cotton Candy Cloud Study (Mona) 3 (2004), in which his use of red chalk on blue paper is an old trick but a reliable one. Its evocation of the Old Masters is complete in style and stylization, the austere contrast of the rusty pigment and the absorbent pastel of the blue field doing much of the heavy lifting in the series. But the draughtsmanship in these drawing is expert and economical, with the gift and/or the training to render the figures and scenes with formal reverence, aesthetic joy and an emotional reserve not often seen in combination in modern figurative painting.