

Art review: Will Cotton at Michael Kohn Gallery

By Leah Ollman

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Images: Will Cotton, "Ice Cream Venus" (top) and "Cupcake Katy," Michael Kohn Gallery

Let them be cake. That's the principle at work in Will Cotton's new paintings of women adorned by and embodying confectionary delights. A glut of empty calories, Cotton's show at Michael Kohn offends on multiple levels, but most egregiously by simply being bland.

Cotton has focused on sweets for more than a decade, painting landscapes densely forested by lollipops and flooded in pudding. When he began to introduce women to the scenes, he cast them as additional ornaments, indulgences, male fantasies of perfection and availability. He populated his juvenile candyland paradise with a succession of delicious, idealized Eves. Cotton's new paintings (all 2010) extend his familiar formats. Two large canvases (7 feet by 6 feet, and 6 feet by 8 feet) feature a lovely blond as Venus, scantily wrapped in red cellophane and crowned by a meringue folly. In one painting, she stands, glam-shot style, within a melting glacier of vanilla ice cream, and in the other, she sits in a puffy cloud of pink cotton candy.

Both images look like glossy ads and, in fact, "Cotton Candy Venus" is a variant of the cover art the New York-based Cotton painted for pop singer Katy Perry's latest release, "Teenage Dream." The hyper-materiality of the soft mounds of ice cream calls to mind

those liquor ads in which images of sex were purportedly embedded in the gleaming ice cubes and amber tones of Scotch. Would that there was some subliminal seduction going on here. Cotton's work, down to its personality-free brushwork, is so artificial and superficial that it begs for an ironic gloss. The treacle lacks savory counterpoint. The contemporary art scene might be suffocating from self-consciousness, but this work is hardly a refreshing antidote. Commercially slick and sociologically naive, it doesn't critique indulgence or excess, it merely capitalizes on them.

The remaining paintings in the show adhere to posing conventions from advertising and studio portraiture, with each model gussied up like a bonbon against a solid background. "Cupcake Rose" stands in warm, contour-bleaching light in a garment of scalloped pastel cupcake papers. "Katy" (yes, that Katy) mugs coyly in a dress fashioned like a paper-lined foil cupcake wrapper open at both ends, a necklace of butterscotch drops and a crown of meringue and hard candies. Another model poses seated, in standard three-quarter view, in the same foil dress but with a croquembouche (cone of profiteroles) poised upon her head.

Cotton's name is often uttered in the same breath as Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, painters who also emerged in the '90s with work that flaunted its political incorrectness in regard to the female nude. Yuskavage and Currin undermine erotic conventions in their own idiosyncratic ways, while Cotton merely plays into them in a manner that's more pedestrian than provocative. In a catalogue essay for Cotton's previous show here, in 2005, art historian Robert Rosenblum posits that the opposing poles of avant-garde and kitsch (famously articulated by Clement Greenberg) merge in these saccharine visions, but to me, the paintings look only backward, not forward. Cheesecake has been replaced by cupcakes, as per the gastronomic trend, and the subjects' girly, cutesy sex appeal now disingenuously credits itself as post-feminist. None of Cotton's choices speaks of subversion or criticality, and his rococo froth is only minimally clever. Exhausting familiar sexist correspondences between women and fantasy, desire, indulgence and consumption, the work exploits a single gimmick to the point of sugar shock.

Michael Kohn Gallery, 8071 Beverly Blvd., L.A., (323) 658-8088, through Feb. 26.
Closed Sundays and Mondays.