

BOMB

Archetypal Portraits: Will Cotton Interviewed by William J. Simmons

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By William J. Simmons



Will Cotton, *The Taming of the Cowboy (Scott)*, 2020, oil on linen, 37 × 28 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

I am a queer-feminist writer who has always loved Will Cotton's work, despite and because of the critiques that have been levied against it in the name of its alleged obliviousness to or rejection of those identity-based discourses. However, I do not believe in the term "guilty pleasure," or, for that matter, the term "unreliable narrator," since neither pleasure nor narration are guided by binary, juridical notions of right and

wrong, progressive and regressive. Contrary to gay art historians of a certain generation, I moreover would never consider pleasure to be a form of liberation either. Pleasure is chimerical—those faces-upon-faces in your dreams—and it simply, concretely *is*.

Recognizing someone, anyone, entails recognizing a stereotype—a genre of person, which, of course, sounds fascistic. Think back to people about whom you’ve had sex dreams. You know in your mind who they are, yet while your eyes are closed, their image has no face, or it is a wanton combination of faces that you are ashamed to admit you have folded into the one face that purports to matter. So, who is that longed-for body that stands before you in the subway station, perhaps in a dream and perhaps in the life-called-real? They are the handsome cowboy who kisses you and trots off into the sunset after saving your farm from a land-grabbing rancher. They are also a normative vision that causes others to accuse you of having despicable desires. They are also the queerest thing you could ever imagine, both limitlessly joyful and representative of a disappointment so intense that you grind your teeth and cry at night, before dreaming.

—William J. Simmons

William J. Simmons

Your work is often historicized with artists or schools of the past (Alexandre Cabanal, Rococo, the Hudson River School, Dutch still life) or with contemporary artists with obvious stylistic affinities (Jeff Koons, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage). Who are your contemporaries?

Will Cotton

I like artists who share my interest in rendering the fantastic in a way that makes you believe the fiction. That list would include Inka Essenhigh and Hilary Harkness, and, yes, John and Lisa, too. I also feel a relationship to Cecily Brown. Cecily and I shared a studio from 1997 to 2001 when we were both starting out. Back when we shared a studio, I was living a really decadent life and working a lot with themes of desire and insatiability. Cecily was making pictures she referred to as the “boy paintings.” They depicted naked men, usually in a state of arousal, painted in a loose, semi-abstract fashion. That work and her attitude toward the subject struck me as a departure from the feminist art I was aware of. The paintings didn’t seem critical, nor did they depict dangerously aggressive male energy. She was painting desire—not his, but hers. She was the active presence, the voyeur. I found that fascinating and liberating.



Will Cotton, *Bareback*, 2019, oil on linen, 80 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

WJS

In your interview with Tom Ford, he says, "I'm an equal opportunity objectifier. I like paintings of beautiful men just as much." And now you're painting beautiful men! We've gestured in our studio visits over the years to the queerness (or even feminism, in the case of Catherine Breillat's fairytale films) of excess, myth, and aspiration. Why this shift to the male figure?

WC

I'm one hundred percent with Tom on that one. My work isn't about telling the truth. It's about using a symbolic language and actors to tell a story. Back when I was painting predominantly women, my points of reference were Venuses and pin-up girls. I was looking for archetypes over individuality. It was while going to a ranch in Wyoming for an art residency in 2018 that I became enamored with the mythology surrounding the classic American cowboy. As I started making sketches it became clear to me that the character needed to look dashing and heroic in order to capture our attention. Of course, the myth of the cowboy is, at the same time, complex; my interest in pairing him with the unicorn was to address some of his more negative character traits. He's a flawed man, out of touch with the feminine, initially an interloper in unicorn land, who can then go through a transformation.

WJS

Any mention of archetypes implies a mention of genre, which is a dirty word in art history. And the overarching dirty word is stereotype. But genre is an essential mode of arranging one's self in relation or opposition to normative ways of telling stories; it's a way to build the self with and against the cultural phenomena most readily available to us. It follows that the critical/complicit binary often comes up in reviews of your work. Earnestness can be either/both patriarchal and/or queer.

WC

Archetype, stereotype, genre. These are all natural methods of organization employed by a human brain reacting to a very complex set of stimuli. As a mode of survival, our minds spend most of their time dumbing down and quickly applying labels to the world around us. Typically, our endeavor as artists is to go deeper toward unravelling the complexity of the subject in a more nuanced vision of reality. In my case, I'm pointing us back to that baser kind of understanding, to forgetting our intellectual bias against generalization and embracing the unreality of the purely symbolic. When I paint a cowboy, it's not a person who has his own life story and past and future; it's the totality of all the cowboys in reality, fiction, and the collective imagination.



Will Cotton, *Flying Cowboy*, 2019–20, oil on linen, 96 × 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

WJS

In an interview, you stated, “I guess, if I were a fiction writer, I would be one of those writers that has to go and live the life of the character to be able to write it realistically.”

Funnily enough, I found a pulp Western from 1958 called *Raiders of Red Gap*, which was written by another Will Cotton. It begins:

He called himself Jim Gordon, which was not the name he was born with. Three years before, at nineteen, he was Jim Garde. But there came a night of violence; a man died slowly in an agony of pain caused by a bullet, and that night Jim Garde buried his name as he buried a part of himself and the man he helped to kill on the lonely trail in the Big Bend country of Texas.

This other Will Cotton and his Jim Gordon/Garde also probably thought about archetypes. Jim's name is in flux because he is, just like any other cowboy character, the totality of all cowboys. You deal so often with narrativity: Do you see yourself as a writer?

WC

I'd love to be in a place without names—not for people, not for objects. It's a place I try to go to when I'm painting. As soon as a thing has a label, it's one thousand times less interesting to me. So, in that sense, I'm really not good enough with words to be a writer. But the experiential part is paramount. As much as I talk about archetype, I don't mean that in a cartoonish sense. It's important to me that the paintings are as convincing as possible, that they can evoke smells, textures, sounds, and specific times of day. Being immersed in the environment of the subject at hand really feeds the end result.



Will Cotton, *Marshmallow Cowboy*, 2019–20, oil on linen, 75 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

WJS

The same Will Cotton (I am guessing) wrote a sexploitation noir the following year in 1959 called *The Night Was Made for Murder*. Noir is not all that different from a Western, which makes me think about the frequent invocation of your “style”—your “signature” subject matter and “signature” technical virtuosity that modifies or, some would say, elevates that subject matter. But like the writer Will Cotton of the 1950s, I

wonder if your “signature” is more about choice, about choosing to paint/photograph/ model how and what you do, rather than any sort of statement about the subject matter you choose to represent.

WC

Choice is the DNA of painting. That’s probably most visible in purely abstract work when the picture has no specific referent, but it is even more complex and wonderful when there *is* a discernible subject. Every brushstroke, every bit of detail that’s accentuated or diminished, every decision made becomes the artist’s fingerprint. But it’s something I never have to think about consciously. I noticed this once when I tried using a painting assistant. Even though we were both working from the same reference, everything I didn’t paint looked absolutely wrong to me. In this sense, a painting that is almost like mine is in fact nothing like mine. I was in Penn Station once to meet up with my girlfriend when I saw her from across the room and walked toward her. It turned out it wasn’t her, but it wasn’t almost her, or thirty percent her. DNA is really all or nothing.

Will Cotton: The Taming of the Cowboy is on view at Galerie Templon in Brussels until July 31.

William J. Simmons is a writer based in Los Angeles and New York.