

Interview with Will Cotton

By Otino Corsano

Monday, July 30, 2007



WILL COTTON "NUT HOUSE" 2007, OIL ON LINEN, 36" X 40"

OC: I find hyperrealist painting involves a critical dilemma: imagery is either read literally as formal content or viewed allegorically as a symbolic free-for-all. Where do you locate your work in this spectrum between empirical stock and interpretive association?

WC: There's a lot of painting that would fit into that category (hyperrealist) for which the similarity to photography seems to be the whole point. In other words the way in which the painting is executed is more important than whatever imagery might be depicted. I see painting as story telling so for me the content is of primary importance and is served by the manner of execution. Over the last ten years I've moved more and more toward a very exact rendering of surface because the subject matter is better explained through that type of description. If for example I'm painting a landscape of glazed doughnuts that doesn't look absolutely shiny, sticky, sweet, translucent, and vast, I haven't told the story as completely as I could have. Of course once a painting leaves the studio it's fair game for anyone to interpret as they will.

OC: One example of the more literal criticism the work generates revolves around the basic categorization of the paintings as “food art”. Your inclusion in “The Food Show: The Hungry Art” at the Chelsea Art Museum (Nov. 16, 2006 – Feb. 24, 2007) is a sample of the works accommodation to this genre. Is the ongoing citation of Wayne Thiebaud as an influence justified?



WAYNE THIEBAUD, "CAKES", 1963, OIL ON CANVAS

WC: I'm always a little surprised by that association. Thiebaud's cake paintings are in the tradition of still life painting, mine are about landscape. I feel more of a kinship to the Hudson River School painters like Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt who's work dealt with a kind of sublime natural splendor.



ALBERT BIERSTADT, "AMONG THE SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA" 1868, 72" x 120"

OC: Still, your work is often critically described using the language of food and confectionary. This mode of synesthetic interpretation can lead one to draw several reads: commercial gluttony as visual luxury, hyper-superficial sugar rush for the food-fetished wealthy, are just two that are top of mind. Are you concerned about the work languishing from either unappetizing analogies or similar candied, rococo reads?

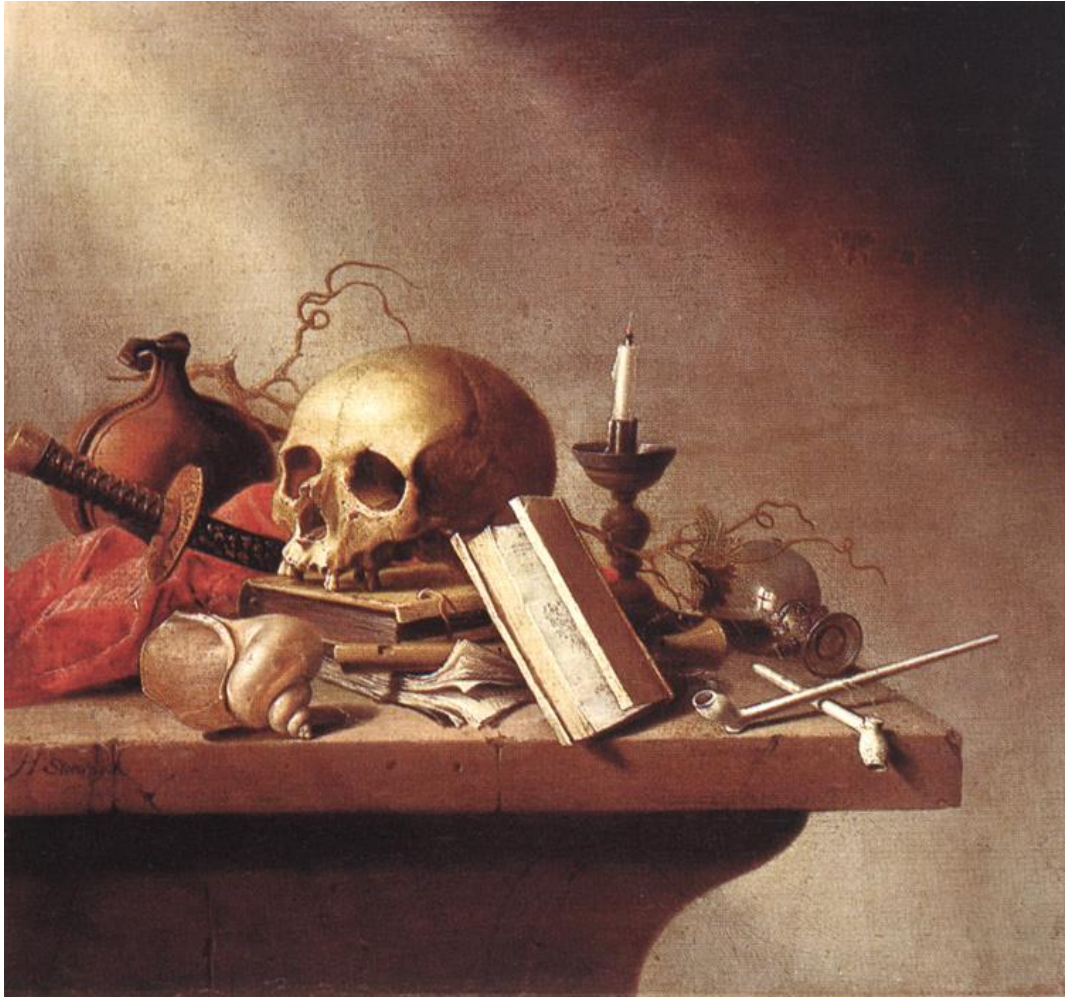
WC: This type of critique doesn't actually refer to my work but to the perceived market for the work. It's frustrating to see how distracted some critics are by issues of commerce. The only audience I have in mind when I make a painting is comprised of myself and my peers, beyond that it's impossible for me to guess how anyone might read or consume my work.



WILL COTTON "ROOT BEER SWAMP" 2002, OIL ON LINEN, 48" x 60"

OC: The floating bubbles in the painting "Root Beer Swamp" 2002, appear as floating skulls while the bubbles themselves are traditionally interpreted to represent the brevity of human life. Are your paintings constructed as contemporary vanitas?

WC: The tradition of vanitas painting as well as memento mori has always interested me, but more in the classical sense than the medieval. If vanitas implies carpe diem then I'm all for it. For me the reminder of life's transience is absolutely life affirming



HARMEN STEENWIJCK, "VANITAS" c.1640, OIL ON PANEL, 37.7 x 38.2 cm

OC: Your process of constructing elaborate sets are the initial reference stage for the paintings has been well reported. As Matthew Barney is purported to create films to justify his sculpture production, are you creating paintings to support your previously unexhibited art of food installations?



WILL COTTON "MACROON GARDEN", 2005

WC: I like that the paintings become a record of something which existed temporarily, but has since melted or decayed into oblivion. If the maquettes I paint from were to survive themselves, I'm afraid it might ultimately diminish the impact of the paintings. This working method really speaks to how much of the art-making process happens in private. In many cases I've built an elaborate installation in my studio which will never be seen by anyone but myself. When I was an art student I spent some time making landscape paintings outdoors and found that I almost couldn't see what I'd done as long as it was in the context of the subject itself. It was only in returning home in the evening that the painting was able to take on a life of its own.

OC: Many of the dark shadows sprawling over the dessert landscapes of earlier paintings give evidence of a looming human presence. Childhood tales like "Hansel and Gretel" are easily called to mind. Is it fair to say there are dark undercurrents to these works?



WILL COTTON "CREAMY DREAM" 2000, OIL ON LINEN, 60" x 72"

WC: A few of the words that bother me in the context of my work are fantasy and escapist, I think that's where the dark undercurrents come in. As much as I'm interested in depicting a kind of utopia/paradise it's only in considering the potentially dystopian aspects of the scene that it begins to make sense to me.

OC: Are the dystopian aspects of these scenes representational of addiction?

WC: I've been fascinated by the disparity between the imagined utopia and the attempt to bring that vision into existence. It's easy for me to see human history as a series of failed attempts to create a paradise on earth. Addiction plays into this in that something in life has become tragically out of balance, that there is a compulsion to pursue a kind of behavior that's ultimately destructive to the individual.



WILL COTTON "COTTON CANDY CLOUDS" 2006, OIL ON LINEN, 72" X 96"

OC: Do you feel any need to justify your representation of women in your paintings?

WC: In the end I'm not so much depicting women as I am depicting a specific depiction of women. In thinking about who might populate a landscape of pure saccharine sweetness it was American mid twentieth century pin-up painting that came to mind. Not so much real womanhood as an exaggerated signifier of femininity.

OC: What statement do you hope is inferred by intersecting the stylized tropes of calendar girls and Dutch treats?

WC: It's important that me that in image making I'm putting forth more questions than answers. That's to say that there is no statement. I get very bored with art when I feel I'm being told something or taught a lesson. I'd prefer that my paintings to have enough potency to provoke a discussion, but a discussion with no specific intended outcome.



WILL COTTON "CANDY STICK FOREST" 2005, OIL ON LINEN, 60" X 72"

OC: The more recent paintings involving models appears akin to aesthetics from fashion and advertising. What are your intentions for choreographing this look of consumerist desire in painterly realism? Are these paintings linked to the commercial context of the Chelsea gallery circuit?

WC: The statistics vary but it seems the average American is exposed to around 3000 advertising messages per day which means this has effectively become our environment. Advertising imagery is the new landscape, and these images exist to create desire within us. So it feels natural for me to reference the aesthetics of advertising when I'm painting about desire. Oddly the Chelsea gallery circuit strikes me as a completely different kind of consumerist paradigm and not one I understand well enough to comment on.



WILL COTTON "PRETTY" 2004, OIL ON LINEN, 60" x 80"

OC: The resurgence of hyper-realism as a popular genre in the contemporary art arena appears to have drawn polar responses. To some a comprehensive mastery of oil painting inherently carries the stigma of bravado, academicism or worse, meticulous frivolity. The surfacing of issues of connoisseurship can also be viewed as equally problematic. To others, the potency of the laborious process as a romantic human cost naturally fuses the artistic intentionality with a signature intensity. What drives your motivation to paint women in dessert landscapes with such visual accuracy? Is it the same desire represented in the work?

WC: This is actually a very unnatural way for me to paint, as you pointed out it's laborious and in fact very difficult. The migration in my work toward this type of representation happened as a direct result of my desire to tell the story completely.

- Otino Corsano & Will Cotton, April 2007
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