

## Adam Stennett in Conversation with Will Cotton

June 2008



Adam Stennett, *Girl in Bathtub*, 2007, oil on wood, 48 x 48 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and 31GRAND, New York

**Adam Stennett:** What is the most recent painting you finished?

**Will Cotton:** This one's been in the works for a long time. About a year ago I made a little sketch of a girl with ribbon candy hair and set about trying to make the necessary props. Ribbon candy, it turns out is a really tricky substance to manipulate and even after taking a class I wasn't able to develop the calluses necessary to manipulate the 170 degree sugar. Then a friend introduced me to a terrific French pastry chef who understood what I was after and was able to make the candy wig. The painting is portrait format, only 34" x 24".

**AS:** It seems like candy for you is a bit like mice for me. Candy and sweets have been fertile ground for you. How did you arrive at the decision to use candy as a metaphor or tool to explore the ideas you bring to your work?

**WC:** In the early nineties I made a group of paintings using advertising icon characters. I felt like this was a cultural iconography I could understand, a set of universal symbols that we'd all grown up with. I made paintings of Mr. Bubble, the Hamburglar, Twinkie the Kid, and many others, and I found myself being drawn more and more toward anything specifically involving sweets. I was looking for a metaphor for pure indulgence, pure pleasure, something that only exists for enjoyment and nothing else. It was around

this time that I came across the Candy Land board game I'd played as a child and I started to explore how a sweet landscape might take on the role of main character in the narrative.



Will Cotton *Ghost*, 2007, Oil on linen, 72 x 48 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

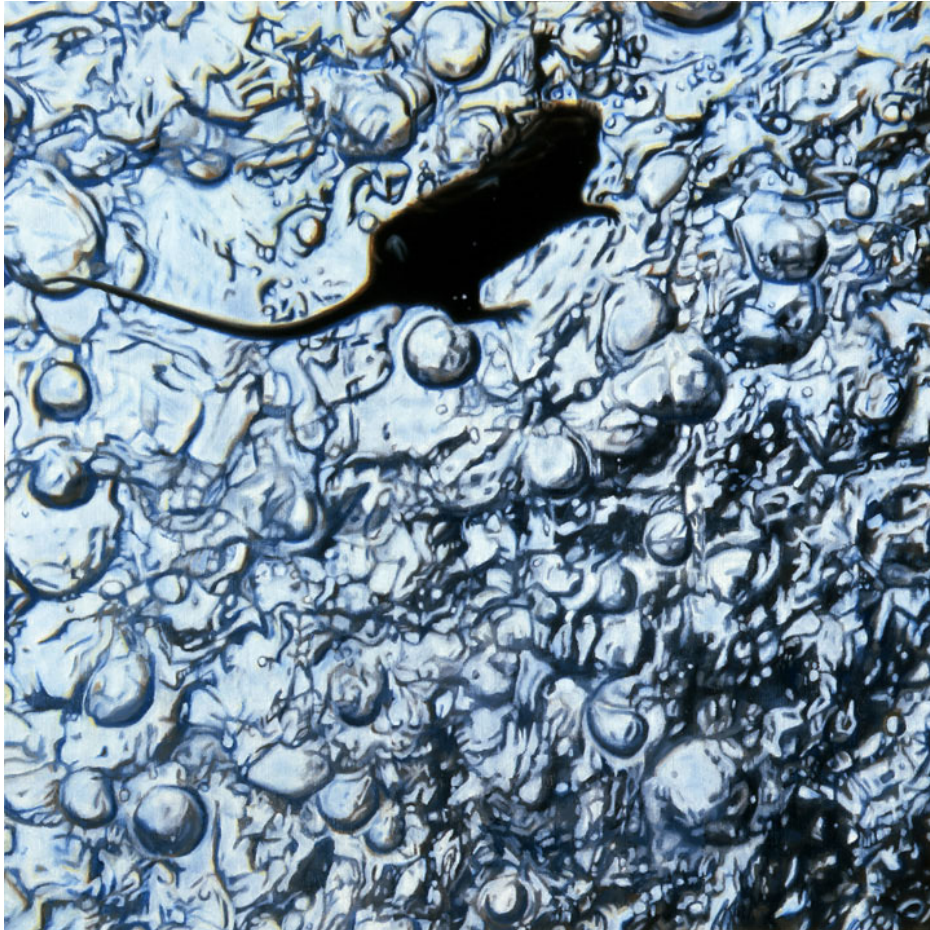
**AS:** I had a painting professor who used to walk into the studio, peer into a painting I was working on, rub his chin and say wryly "Stennett, have you found the solution?" At the time I wasn't sure if he was just fucking with me. Fifteen years later I keep coming back to a related idea—that art-making is simply setting up a problem and finding a solution. Some problems are more compelling and some solutions are more effective. Did you have any moments like this where a light went on for you?

**WC:** I don't really like painting from my imagination, I've always found that without a source in front of me I tend to over-simplify an image. So the first attempts I made at painting Candy Land were direct quotations from the board game, then one day it occurred to me that I could build a miniature landscape in the studio and paint it as though it was monumental. This process has been so useful to me that I've used it consistently for the last ten years.

**AS:** What was it like growing up in Melrose, Massachusetts?

**WC:** It's a funny thing about artist's bios, you read where someone was born and make a set of assumptions about their childhood in that place. In fact my family left Melrose before I could walk. I

grew up in New Paltz, New York. I spent a lot of time running around the woods with my brothers making up things to do. I built model airplanes and model rockets.



Adam Stennett, *Mouse Swimming Overhead I*, 2004, oil on wood, 12 x 12 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and 31GRAND, New York

**AS:** When did you know you were an artist?

**WC:** I was pretty young, maybe 16 when it was clear that there was nothing else I wanted to do with my time.

**AS:** I just finished an exhibition and find that I go through a restless, depressed period of a week or two after a show comes down but that the process of finding my way out of it inevitably leads to what comes next. Do you have any kind of ritual that you go through when you finish an exhibition or as you start to think about a new body of work?

**WC:** I do, I like to go and look at art.

What do you do for fun? Do you have any non art-related hobbies?





Will Cotton, *Untitled*, 2003, oil on linen, 80 x 120 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

**AS:** Snowboarding and soccer were two things that I really loved while I grew up in Oregon. I haven't done either nearly as much as I used to. I did play indoor soccer on a team called "kill all artists" for a while. It was a great group that included artists; Tom Sachs, Ryan McGinness, Dirk Westphal, Randy Moore and Bowman Hastie, poet, Sean Flaherty and dealer, Friedrich Petzel.

I remember you telling me that you played soccer growing up. Soccer in America in the 70s and 80s was a bit of an outsider sport. Do you think playing soccer might have opened your eyes to the idea that you did not have to do what everyone else was doing or encouraged you to look at the world differently?

**WC:** It's true at that time It was a kind of affirmation of outsider status to choose soccer over football. And being a particularly euro-centric sport it probably gave us more of an awareness of the rest of the world. Unfortunately, though enthusiastic, I wasn't a good player and spent most of my time at games sitting on the bench thinking about painting.



Will Cotton, *Ribbon Candy* 2008, oil on linen, 34 x 24 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

**AS:** You and I both exhibited at Glenn Horowitz Bookseller in East Hampton within the last year. I know you are an artist who sometimes references art history and enjoys art books. Jeremy Sanders at Glenn Horowitz often "curates books" that relate to the artist they are exhibiting. Are there any particular books you remember that were prominently displayed during your exhibition or is there a certain book that has been big influence over the years?

**WC:** A lot of the work I showed at Glenn Horowitz specifically made reference to mid-century pin-up illustration, and they pulled out some really great related material. One of my personal favorites is an artist named Gil Elvgren, who's work I'd love to own, but his auction prices have recently become prohibitive.  
I'd like to ask you the same question.



Adam Stennett. Potato Gun with Video Demo. 2008. Pvc pipe, krylon fusion paint, bbq igniter, wiffleball bat ramrod with 58 second video loop 54 x 12.5 x 7 inches



**AS:** My show at Glenn Horowitz explored ideas about conspiracy, self-medication and paranoia. It consisted of homemade drug recipe still lifes, two sculptural works representing two groups who did early LSD research as opposing soccer teams and a functioning Aqua Net hairspray powered potato bazooka. It was great to have books like *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, *Growing the Hallucinogens* and a first-edition copy of *'Masters of Deceit'* by J. Edgar Hoover inscribed to JFK nearby.

**WC:** Was it important to you to actually try out the drug recipes you refer to in the still life paintings, or



was the project more about the experience of looking them up.

**AS:** Researching the drug recipes and assembling the perfect kit for processing the ingredients was fun. Like anything else on the internet there is a lot of conflicting information or differing opinions about what is the best system and what are the dangers My deadline was a bit too tight to do too much sampling (which my dealer kept reminding me) It was fun to make him nervous with the possibility of sampling them.

**WC:** I know your work is very time consuming to produce and that you've had periods of an almost around the clock work schedule, what's a normal day like in your studio?



Will Cotton, *Kisses*, 2004, oil on linen, 75 x 100 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

**AS:** I've been trying to work out a more sane schedule but I tend to work best under pressure. When I'm really in the swing of painting for an upcoming show I will work without a day off for months at a time 8pm to noon the next day. I start with a big meal before and end with a big meal after so I don't have to stop for food. There seems to be a period of an hour or so at the beginning that it takes me to get up to speed so it is more efficient not to stop once things are rolling. I keep an army cot at my studio and often sleep there so I don't get out of the proper head. My studio has become my own little Ted Kaczynski shack.

**WC:** When an artist makes an apparent shift in subject matter it tends to be perceived as a whole new set of issues that have been taken on, but I suspect that's very often not the case. What's the thread that runs through all of your work?

**AS:** My paintings of mice and rats aren't really about mice and rats and I would assume that you would say your paintings of candy are not really about candy. I think artists often explore the same ideas throughout their careers, just with different tools. The subject matter or medium may change but the voice rarely does. My work tends to be about little things that are all around us and our intentional or unintentional awareness of those things.

What's next [for you]?

**WC:** I'm working on something three dimensional. This has been a huge challenge in that the materials I'm most drawn to are really impermanent, (things like frosting and ice cream), but recently I've found some great substitutes.

It seems to me that you typically have a substantial research phase of your work that precedes actually putting brush to canvas. You've become intimately familiar with the lives of mice and learned about the intricacies of various homemade hallucinogens among other things. What have you been looking at most recently that might find it's way into your upcoming work?

**AS:** I've been researching the martial art of zen archery (Kyudo), opiate containing medicines and tonics, self-sufficient living, and redacted documents about CIA programs involving mind control obtained through the freedom of information act. I'll start taking reference photographs for new paintings soon.



Adam Stennett. *Morning Glory Heavenly Blue with Grenades*.  
2008, acrylic on paper, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and 31GRAND, New York

*Adam Stennett was born in Kotzebue, Alaska in 1972, grew up in Oregon, and now lives in Brooklyn. His work is in numerous public and private collections and has been widely exhibited in the U.S. and internationally. He is represented by 31GRAND in New York City. For more information visit his website at [www.adamstennett.com](http://www.adamstennett.com)*

*Will Cotton was born in Melrose, Massachusetts and raised in New Paltz, New York. He studied at the École Regionale des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, France, and the New York Academy of Art, and he received a BA from Cooper Union in New York. He has shown at Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles; Galerie Jablonka, Koln, Germany; and Daniel Templon, Paris, France. He is represented by Mary Boone Gallery where he will have a solo show next Spring. For more information visit his website at [www.willcotton.com](http://www.willcotton.com)*