

Will Cotton

This New York artist's confectionery creations aren't as sweet as they seem

By Laura Eden



The Only Paradise Is Paradise Lost, 2007.



Ice Cream (study) 2, 2008.



Ribbon Candy Portrait, 2008. See Resources.



The artist in his Manhattan studio.

Many artists cite masters like Manet and Picasso as inspirations; Will Cotton, however, is more energized by the skills of Michelin-starred chefs. Examining the spun-sugar hat crowning a Sargent-esque beauty in his painting *Ribbon Candy Portrait*, he explains how he refined the headpiece only after consulting a pastry chef at the restaurant Daniel in Manhattan. "I just couldn't get it right, so I brought the drawings to his kitchen," says Cotton, who bases his fairy-tale works on traditional maquettes (scale models) of confections he constructs in his New York studio.

Whether armed with a paintbrush or a pastry bag, Cotton is in perennial pursuit of a "flawed Utopia," as he calls his images of pinup girls lounging like odalisques on cotton-candy clouds and landscapes of macaroon forests with chocolate rivers running through them. "These are places where desire is everywhere, yet real fulfillment is impossible," he says. "The sweets are a metaphor for pure indulgence—they exist for pleasure and nothing else." For his most recent series, showing through the end of March at Manhattan's Mary Boone Gallery, the artist painstakingly built nougat, chocolate, and wafer-cookie houses and shrouded them in plastic tents. He then used a smoke machine to pump in layers of mist. The resulting paintings depict ethereal, almost haunted wintry landscapes that evoke Hudson River School artists like Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Cole.

Cotton has found a loyal fan base among such collectors as Tom Ford and Beth Rudin DeWoody, who sees traces of 19th-century French art in his "lickable, luscious" images. "The paintings are beautiful to look at, but he's also great technically—even the way he does flesh tones is so highly skilled," says DeWoody, who recently purchased one of Cotton's candy-house paintings. "His stuff has staying power." ■