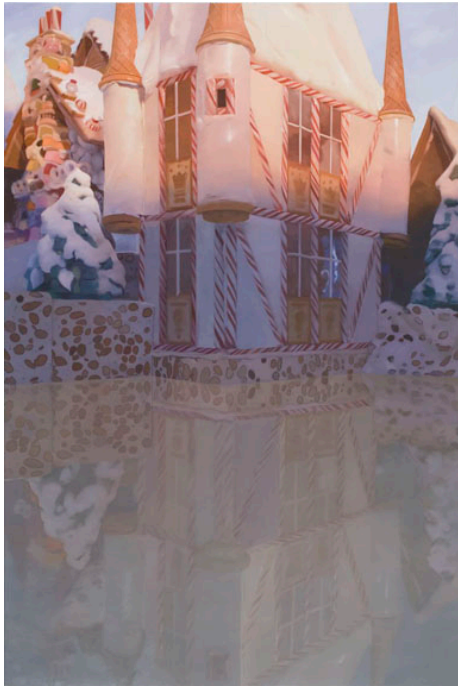


ARTFORUM

Will Cotton at Mary Boone Gallery

By David Frankel
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Will Cotton, *The Consummation of Empire*, 2008, oil on linen, 84 x 56 inches

It must have seemed a good idea at the time: to symbolize habits of consumption—habits of appetite and its indulgence—with images of candy and confectionery. Will Cotton began doing that over a decade ago, painting increasingly elaborate, increasingly accomplished landscapes made up of sugar products of all kinds, and as the years passed, and the stock market rose, his work felt to some all the more acute. His sweet tooth also attracted him to portraying conventionally beautiful women, usually naked or nearly so, except that they're often decorated—you can't really say they wear these things—with top-heavy headgear made of lollipops, marshmallow, or cake. Looking alluringly out from under their edible architectures, these women reprise the National Airlines ad campaigns of the 1970s, whose sexually inviting stewardesses (“I’m Mandy...fly me”) infuriated feminists.

It looks like fun to paint these things—I can stoke up a rush just describing them—and how does Cotton stay thin? He builds three-dimensional models to depict in paint—the way James Casebere builds them to photograph—out of sugar, and must have a kid’s dream of candy on hand in his studio at all times. Supposedly, though, he has a moral purpose” “It seems to me,” he has said, “the typical American appetite goes...straight into gluttony.” The sensory overload in his pictures comes out of his interest in the point where sweetness “becomes cloying, even repulsive.” These paintings, in other words, are meant to both attract us and turn our stomachs.

I was interested to see Cotton’s latest works with the financial debacles of recent months weighing down my gloomy footsteps. They’re mostly dated, 2008, which leaves unsaid whether they pre-or postdate the crisis, but I think were inspired by Thomas Cole’s “Course of Empire” cycle of the 1830s, which traces the rise and fall of an imperium somewhat like ancient Rome, through Cole had America in mind. Monument, at any rate, painted in 2009, must surely have been made in full awareness. The building it shows--part Swiss chalet, part classical temple, though with peppermint-stick columns and

whipped-cream snow—seems in relatively good shape, but I guess the misty white fog around it is meant to portend doom, like the shadow creeping up the sides of the ice-cream-cone castle in *The Consummation of Empire, 2008*. Meanwhile the roof of the gingerbread house in *Alpine Ruin, 2008*, has definitively fallen in. But the women seem pretty much unchanged, all coy promise.

Like his slightly older contemporaries John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage, Cotton treats a jokey pop-culture iconography with a good deal of traditional brush skill in the hope that the latter will give meaning to the former. Yuskavage makes the trick work, in spades, but I wonder about Currin and Cotton. To satirize a culture of consumption, to stick its gourmand habits down its throat, at a time when it may already be choking to death—is that delivering sweet comeuppance or, alternatively, is it gratuitous and a little clueless? Cotton may have to do some thinking to gear his trademark topic to a different age. The real question, though, is whether his art has ever been that subversive. He is someone who knows how to paint, and who I'm sure gets real pleasure out of painting, out of his own ability to turn the mucky past of oil and pigment into syrup and spun sugar. For an audience that cares about paintings, that's not nothing—but socially relevant? Please.