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Fancy a sugar-rush? Meet Will Cotton, the world's first candyfloss artist

The baker-cum-painter – and director of Katy Perry's super-kitsch California Gurls video – raids the sweetshop of 21st-century desires in his candy-coated fantasy worlds

By Aindrea Emelife

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A detail from Cotton Candy Katy, 2010, by Will Cotton. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

"I have a sweet tooth. It's a big part of my life," says artist Will Cotton. "And the symbolism of candy is so strong." In his worlds of excess, sweets certainly dominate: he bakes elaborate backdrops and sets, then photographs women floating on clouds of candyfloss, landscapes packed with lollipops, and giant hats made from macarons

He is the man behind Katy Perry's California Gurls music video, in which Perry frolics in Candyformia, a paradise of cupcakes and lollipops. "Katy Perry spraying whipped

cream ... that was her idea. It was such an interesting project to work on. Her personal symbolism and style, her iconography happened to be the perfect match for everything I'm trying to paint about." And so, after unleashing this slice of pop-culture pie on the world, his indulgent visual language was born.

It was a hard act to follow. But it inspired another work that Cotton created for Performa 11 in New York. In his performance work *Cockaigne*, he choreographed a live ballet and burlesque dance piece that celebrated cotton candy and, yes, whipped cream. "It couldn't have been more different than the Katy Perry video," he says. "But I loved working with whipped cream, and so asked myself: What is it about? What is the feel of it, the smell of it, the taste of it? It's the same with cotton candy. These materials are so enticing."



Persistence of Desire 3, 2014. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

Cotton bakes all the props himself. "My studio and kitchen are in the same space, so when I'm painting I'm eating macarons, the models are eating cotton candy, there is this delicious smell of baked goods ... My studio is like a whole other world, but the viewers only get to see the final thing! I wanted to share the experience with them." In 2009, Cotton opened a pop-up bakery-cum-art installation in New York, offering cakes that

have particular personal significance: his grandmother's butterscotch cupcakes, his mother's apple pie. "Of course it's fun to eat the props," he says. "But it turns out, if you leave a pile of cakes in the studio for a year, you get a bit of a moth problem."

The centrepiece of his first UK show, about to open at London's Ronchini gallery, is a large painting called *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which draws on Freud's theory of the uncanny; his saccharine landscapes are both familiar and unfamiliar. The painting features a female model in a storm of whipped cream, riding a fish made of ice-cream, naked all but for a flash of pink knickers and a crystalline crown. It sounds like a ridiculous, kitsch affair, but it contains a dark truth. Like society today, Cotton's super-fantasies unabashedly celebrate desire and reflect our own innate tendencies towards pleasure. "Candy," he says, "is the most universal metaphor for all pleasure-seeking."

All of his art comes with a harrowing aftertaste – it speaks of addiction and temptation, and an adult hedonism that no amount of sugar coating can mask. "When I started doing these paintings I was in a very indulgent period of my life, so I wanted to explore that metaphorically."

"I was a bit of an oddball in art school", he continues. "I was really interested in food advertising, so I painted things like the Pillsbury Doughboy". Emerging from the hangover of the 60s, Cotton then turned not to the abstract expressionists but to the Old Masters: "I just wanted to paint still life, really."



Will Cotton, *Molasses Swamp 2*, 1991. Photograph: Smithsonian American Art Museum/Courtesy the artist

Today, it is his ability to emulate the style of the Dutch masters he so adored that lends a reality to his mountains of meringue. "I want my works to look real," he says. "If I'm

painting macaron, I'm also eating macaron and smelling macaron. I want to get to that 'macaron-ness'."

Just like his vanitas predecessors, his work is always rooted in the reminder that everything is temporary. He bakes grand, elaborate sets, then allows them to disintegrate. "I don't know if this is true for other people, but I can say I've got, maybe, 30 years left and it's a happy thought to me. It makes everything much richer."

A lesson to be learned: if it's temporary, you might as well enjoy it. Will Cotton has not invented the art of pleasure, but he has broadened it. He paints the world not as it is, but as our desires, taken to their most base and childlike, would have it. Few cultures throughout history have been so preoccupied with personal pleasure as ours. This exhibition may be small, but it is a pleasure worth seeking.