

How Katy Perry Wound Up Nude on a Cotton-Candy Cloud

[Tomás Mier](#) August 24, 2023

Will Cotton working on "Cotton Candy Katy" Courtesy of Will Cottonnone

One day in early 2010, the artist Will Cotton was scrolling through his email and found a message from someone named Katheryn Hudson. She wondered if some of Cotton's 2004 paintings — a series called "Cotton Candy Clouds," which depicted pinup girls laying nude in a pink sky — were available for purchase. They weren't. But after Cotton took a closer look at the email, he realized who, exactly, was emailing him. "Are you [Katy Perry](#) the singer?!" he wrote back.

Cotton and Perry struck up a correspondence, and after looking at some photographs from around Perry's 2008 debut, *One of the Boys*, Cotton knew she was the perfect model for his style of art. So instead of selling her a painting, he offered her something else: "You have just the looks/style I look for in a model (pin-up burlesque), perhaps you'd like to pose for a painting?" he wrote.

"I wonder how you knew it was me, that's alright, I like you! ACTUALLY I am a massive fan of your work and the offer of sitting for a picture must be cashed in," Perry wrote back. "I have some ideas and I'm sure you have titanic amounts."

That email exchange — signed by Perry with "with a cherry on top!" — would end up birthing an iconic image: a nude Perry laying on a pink cotton-candy cloud for the cover of [Teenage Dream](#), which was released 13 years ago today. Few know that the cover art for the singer's most-recognized album is a painting titled "Cotton Candy Katy," made and conceptualized by Cotton,

whose work depicting women in a Candy Land world predates *Teenage Dream* by more than a decade. Cotton and his work also played a critical role in the art direction for the pop magnum opus, and in another key visual of Perry's career: her ["California Gurls" music video](#).



"Of all the people who will ever see my work in my lifetime, and well beyond, it won't ever be close to the people who've seen the album cover and 'California Gurls' video," Cotton says. "That's not art numbers at all, and that makes me really happy. They might not know me or my work, but they know

the painting."

After several of those early 2010 emails, Cotton invited Perry to his studio in New York's Lower East Side. "I'm just there waiting and hear this crazy commotion: tires screeching and a crash. When I go to the window, I see that a motorcycle ran into a car," he recalls. "It was paparazzi following Katy as she was coming into my studio ... I had never seen anything like that before."

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Perry came up the stairs nonchalantly, along with her entire team and hundreds of shoes and dresses to choose from. Cotton and clothing designer Cynthia Rowley had also created a dress out of cupcake paper for a Barbie doll. Rowley ended up making it into a real costume that Perry wore and posed with for three paintings: two coquettish portraits titled "Katy" and "Cupcake Katy," and "Crown," which depicts a surprised Perry holding a lollipop headpiece while surrounded by pastel cakes. (Some of the images were used in the cotton-candy-scented album packaging for *Teenage Dream*.)



Cotton and Perry Courtesy of Will Cottonnone

“The beauty of meeting Katy is that she felt like the living embodiment of what I was looking for in human subject matter,” Cotton says.

For the "Cotton Candy Katy" painting, he rented a cotton-candy machine and had Perry "lying basically naked for the whole afternoon" as he took pictures of her for the art piece. Perry mentioned the possibility of making the painting the cover for her upcoming album. Cotton hesitated, he remembers.

"It's funny to say this now, but at the time, I had to think about it. There's this whole thing in the art world about being noncommercial," he says. "This sounds insane now, but I didn't want to diminish how I was seen as an artist."

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He realized, though, that allowing his art to be the album cover was his way of giving back to pop culture after taking *from* it in his own work. In an email shortly after their first meeting, Perry wrote him, "I'm glad I planted the seed about the packaging with you and hope you are still inspired to let the idea come to life ... We're really excited about this package because, as it's looking, this could be one of my last if not my last physical package I ever do. The future looks more and more digital each day ... which is boring!"

Perry played him some of the record during the process. At the time, Cotton says, she already had a sense that *Teenage Dream* would make a big cultural impact. "She was like, 'This is going to be the album. This is the one,'" Cotton remembers.



"Cotton Candy Katy" in progress Courtesy of Will Cottonnone

Cotton had started using Candy Land themes in his art in the late Nineties. He was living a "deliberately hedonistic life" in the New York art and club scene, and wanted to present his experiences in a way that felt universal. His first painting in that space was of a gingerbread trailer house, and soon his candy-themed landscapes began to capture the "insatiability, temptation, and desire" that he was feeling in his real life. The Perry paintings — with

their colorful candy backdrops and nude imagery — run parallel with the *Teenage Dream* themes of infatuation, indulgence, young love, and experimentation.

A few months after the *Teenage Dream* cover art was locked down, Cotton heard from someone on Perry's team, informing him that a lot of his work was also being used as inspiration for the singer's "California Gurls" video, featuring Snoop Dogg. They asked if he'd be willing to join as an artistic director for the visual.

"Videos often reference artists and art without acknowledging them, so it was really cool they were doing that," Cotton says. He worked closely with the director's creative team to make a 3D "Candyfornia" game board using real sweets and pastries for the video. The visual ends with another look that has become key to Perry's career and image: After walking through the sugary game board, she dances in a large cupcake bra and bright-blue wig.

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Three months after *Teenage Dream* dropped, and as its title track sat in the Top 10 of the *Billboard* Hot 100, Perry wrote Cotton an email with the subject line "long overdue." In it, she thanked Cotton for surprising her with another unexpected painting of her.

"It's been a bit of a whirlwind since we first started together and now that the holiday's coming I can kinda enjoy it 😊 So... I wanted to say thank you for the amazing, gorgeous surprise," she wrote. "I'm flattered and so grateful to have been able to create with you."