

Art in America

Will Cotton at Mary Boone

By Edward Leffingwell

May 2000



Will Cotton, *Devil's Fudge Falls*, 1999, oil on linen, 96 x 144 inches

The white light that rakes across these excessively consumable "landscapes" selectively illuminates their studied surfaces. Directing this alien incandescence onto boulders, cataracts and glacial fields of pastries and confections, Will Cotton manipulates the stark effect of chiaroscuro that an artist of more historical inclination might have used to pick out a saintly figure among the profane. But there are no saints in Cotton's world. Instead, the light's harsh insistent presence nearly obliterates his subjects, another effect of theatrical staging that draws attention to the man behind the curtain. It discloses the artist as food stylist-furbishing effects, wrangling Oreos, caught with sticky fingers. There are peanuts, peanut M&Ms and peanut brittle for *Cracked House* (1999); red and pink iced cookies, candy hearts and long-stemmed dipping strawberries surround the chocolate pool of *Love Me* (1999-2000). Cotton tops one excess with another to give us these cartoons of eternal, hi-cal frozen moments, decently brushed and big at 6 by 6 to 8 by 10 feet.

Shifting the gaze from one painting to another, the viewer can forget everything but a glimmer of highlighting as it strikes some tiny, senseless feature in each painting: a credible

frothing of molten chocolate, bubbling drops in an orgasmic geyser of creamy milk. Cotton's is the landscape of Toy Story, where unseen giants make magic with the studio talent. The high-concept store is imagined, cast, maquetted, carefully lit, certainly photographed, perhaps tweaked on the Mac and writ large by an opaque projector on the linen beyond.

Like John Currin and Cecily Brown, Cotton updates some traditional art-historical concerns, in this case tracing a clean line from Caravaggio's shafts of light to setup photography, with appropriate asides to Pop and Photo-Realism by way of Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Estes and John Clem Clarke. These artists all speak of attachment to the recognizable (however illusory) and of the consumerist romance; their themes are immediate gratification, availability, abundance. Looking like things Pop, but possible harder to do, Cotton's paintings do not question photographic representation. They are comfortable with the mediated world. Cotton replaces critique with irony, in the detachment of his enumerative branding resembling the affectless rants of Bret Easton Ellis.