

Arts Extra: Color Me Cool

NEWSWEEK's Peter Plagens paints a portrait of hot New York artists Damien (*sic*) Loeb and Will Cotton

By Peter Plagens

April 18, 2001



Will Cotton, *Flood*, 2000, oil on linen, 80 x 104 inches

April 12 -- It's hard to stay hip. No kidding, you say. But a high-school kid's finding just the right deep blue, "hard" baggy jeans, the right color-coordinated baseball cap with a really thick, embroidered team logo and the proudly proper earphones for the MP3 player that correctly accessorizes the whole joint is nothing--*nothing*--compared to what a New York art dealer goes through in trying to keep his or her stable of artists edge enough to satisfy the mercilessly trendy audience that prowls the sidewalks of Manhattan's currently chief art neighborhood, Chelsea.

TAKE, FOR INSTANCE, Mary Boone and her gallery's present exhibitions (up through May 5) of young painters Damien (*sic*) Loeb, 30, and Will Cotton, 35. Loeb paints dark,

photo-derived, pervasively sooty compositions (he shades with a lot of black) that look like rather static stills from neo-noir movies (say, "Red Rock West"). Cotton's candy pictures, on the other hand, are happily oversized renditions of confectionery fantasies delivered in suitably sugary colors. Save for the humming hint of something criminal in Loeb's paintings, and the glyceic goofiness of Cotton's, Boone's current offerings are what your Aunt Nellie would readily admit as "art." They both boast drawing skill, adroit paint handling and, above all, accessible imagery. Everybody can relate to movies and candy. So, what can possibly make this kind of stuff hip?

A little history is in order. Back in the 1980s, Boone, the diminutive, raven-haired gallery owner with a turned-up nose right off those old "Draw me and win a scholarship" matchbook covers, practically invented today's contemporary art world-the moneyed, fashion-conscious and entertaining one that replaced the old, grungy, hermetic one. Learning at the knee of the late, legendary Leo Castelli (the dealer who gave the world the likes of Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein), Boone introduced such artists as Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl and Barbara Kruger to the big time. Her artist luncheons at the Odeon restaurant in Tribeca seemed to get as much attention from the critics as her SoHo gallery's exhibitions did-which was a lot.

But in retrospect, the '80s turn out to have been a far different time than our own in one crucial artistic respect. For all their faults, the bombast of Boone's artists back then lent them a certain gravity. Schnabel's huge, broken-plate-filled paintings and vain pronouncements (he told a critic that his "peers" were actually "Duccio, Giotto, and Van Gogh") made Picasso seem almost shy. Compare that with the fey, mock-ingenuous artist's statement put out by Loeb for his exhibition in Chelsea (the location of one of Boone's two classy showrooms). It begins, in e-mail-ish all lower case, "this show is about how movies are better than life," and continues, a couple of paragraphs down: "unfortunately in real life you have to spend a whole lot of time making things look cool. these paintings were a bitch, i always had to bend and twist stuff so it fit in ... and it is fun to be able to make stuff look the way you want and not the crappy way it really happened."

Loeb is a high-school dropout (you can't tell from his writing?) who came down to New York from Connecticut with his buddy-and now pop-music idol-Moby. Loeb is something of a hunk, shows up at everybody's parties (and in everybody's published party photographs); he's regularly mentioned in Gotham gossip mills like The New York Post's Page Six. This kind of artist-as-fashionista-and-starlet's-arm-candy is what passes for hip in the art world these days.

But Boone is one of the most successful art dealers in the world, and Loeb's paintings-not just his looks-are what's supposed to capture the art world's attention. His show is a vague narrative, carried out in six big, very horizontal (all right, wide-screen) pictures meant to be seen in sequence as the spectator ambles clockwise around the gallery. First, there's a nighttime view of the "Big 8" motel somewhere in Texas. It's followed by paintings of a gloved man in a trench coat hurrying through some wilds in the dark (there's a stone something-or-other in the background that looks like it might be man-made), and of a poolside couple seen from a snorkeler's point of view. Then comes an Ann-Margaret lookalike sitting on a bed in a fancy New York apartment, a nondescript airliner interior and,

finally, an emaciated dead cow lying at the side of a desolate Western highway. What do they all mean? Nothing, really, except the hint that they might mean something mysterious, cruel and profound.

His art "is supposed to strike us as hip because the combination of the old-fashioned and the new is supposed to be quietly volatile," Plagens writes of Cotton's work. "Trouble is, one quality just cancels the other."

Loeb does have a bit of a way with paint, particularly in limning slightly fuzzy edges to objects on very rough, nubby canvas. But that's about it. His style as a painter is as shallow as his depth as an iconographer—just enough to imply a payoff, but nowhere near enough to deliver one. As if to balance the pretensions of Loeb, Boone's other gallery on Fifth Avenue displays Cotton's cheerfully inane subject matter—albeit arranged in complex "landscapes" that the artist actually constructs in order to paint—rendered in a very old-masterish way.

Cotton is supposed to strike us as hip because the combination of the old-fashioned (well-schooled technique, plus "nice" imagery that could lift Mayor Rudy Giuliani's new decency-in-art commission into a state of absolute ecstasy) and the new (the deliberately grandiose silliness of it all) is supposed to be quietly volatile. Trouble is, one quality just cancels the other, and Cotton's pictures end up merely flat, chalky and "so what?"

These are difficult times for high-end galleries that not only want to make money (that seems to be the easier part, even in our days of downturn) but maintain some art-world street cred as well. Boone's two shows try to accomplish that by giving us art that's so simultaneously normal (very-easy-to-read paintings of people and candy) and weird (what are these people up to? why is the candy so big?) that we'll be fascinated with them. Since we're dealing with two young-guy artists, the hoped-for parallel might be the way that Johnny Depp and Matt Damon are, at the same time, both teen-dream material and really good actors. The problem here is that Cotton and Loeb come off much more like artists' equivalents of Freddie Prinze Jr. and Pauly Shore. But who knows: perhaps among the art-world audience—which always seems to detect an extra wrinkle of hipness most people never get—those two guys are considered about as cutting-edge as you can be.