

Simple Thrills

By Michael Rossi

Will Cotton, Nov. 2-Dec. 8, 2001, at Jablonka Galerie, Brüsseler Strasse 4, Köln D-50674, Germany.



Will Cotton
Churro Cabin
2001

On Nov. 2, 2001, a steady crowd of people filtered in and out of Rafael Jablonka's adjunct gallery on Brüsselerstrasser in Cologne. The space, which is co-run by the former installation artist Linn Lühn, was hosting its second show, the debut exhibition in Cologne by New York painter Will Cotton. Cotton has gained art-world renown for dreamy candyland paintings, in which lollipops are trees, chocolate chunks form the topography and lakes of viscous syrup threaten to overrun the scene.



Chocolate Forest
2001

The layout of Jablonka's Brüsseler Strasse gallery is like a sparse, white railroad apartment with three cubical spaces. The first room, which opens onto the street, is the gallery proper. Cotton's large paintings filled the space, and it was difficult to step back to look without feeling in danger of sinking into the looming candy swamp.



Flooded
2001

The middle room serves as an office, and gallery-goers periodically emerged munching on some of the enormous candies on offer -- chocolate-covered marshmallows and wafer bars the size of a child's arm. The overall effect was giddily surreal, as people grappled with huge marshmallow poofs in front of Cotton's candy tableaux.



The studio maquette for *Flooded*, 2001

Cotton had four paintings in the show -- three large canvases and one smaller -- all alluding to temptation and making suggestive analogies between food and kinky sex, sin and nourishment.

Churro Cabin is an image of a log cabin made from the inexpensive Mexican pastry, sitting on the banks of a turgid cider swamp. Around the cabin are churro stumps, as if cut down for building, while a virile churro tree emerges provocatively from the center of a donut.



Kiss Me
2001

In *Chocolate Forest*, another large painting with a literally descriptive title, a variety of dipped chocolate trees surround a languid chocolate pond. A jewel-like zückerwerk tree glistens, a golden drop oozes from the side of a chocolate covered cherry and a pregnant bubble swells from the syrup, ready to burst.

The most decadent painting in the show is one in which a pert Valentine's Day lollipop demands "Kiss Me." The lollipop glows a warm, sexy, lippy red. It sprouts from a frosted-candy rose garden, and the roses are pink and white and frilly. The painting is so tempting that we want that kiss, even though it would certainly melt our teeth.

Cotton's work makes an obvious equation between sugar and paint, and painting and confectionary, starting with a diorama constructed in his studio from actual candy. Once the diorama is complete, it's cinematically lit and photographed, and the painting is started. The process gives Cotton's works a fairytale quality, quite different from a straightforward still life of sweets.

In fact, it's this distanced but ornate glamour -- the artist's indulgence in painterly curlicues and deep chiaroscuro, for instance -- that is so attractive in Cotton's work. He creates a model of the artist as a modern decadent, with an attendant focus on indulgence and the simple thrill of beauty. His paintings are reminiscent of Watteau or Fragonard in their glee and refinement. They exist for their own exoticism.

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