

MODERN PAINTERS

Let Them Paint Cake

By Charles Darwent
Summer 2001



Will Cotton, *Chocolate Thaw*, 2001, oil on linen, 75 x 100 inches

Sweet-toothed arties of the Eastern Sea-board will have had a good time of it so far this year, In February, a saccharine retrospective of cakes, pies and bubble-gum machines by the octogenarian painter, Wayne Thiebaud, went on show at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC. Non-dieting New Yorkers will be able to sample the same range of Thiebaud's confections at the Whitney from late June, having gorged themselves through April and May on the work of the artist's much younger partner in patisserie, Will Cotton. The thirty-six year old Cotton has just had his second one-man exhibition at Mary Boone's Uptown gallery, showing four large-scale paintings of landscapes rendered photorealistically in gingerbread, custard and meringue: geology by way of the Hershey Corporation, tectonics in royal icing.

While pondering the calorie content of all this, admirers of Thiebaud and Cotton may also like to muse over the place of the cake in Modern American still-life iconography. Delft had

damask and pearls, Paris apples and hanging rabbits. America, it seems, has Betty Crocker.

Why? An easy answer would be to see Thiebaud and Cotton's forays into junk food and ironising the whole idea of Mom and apple pie. Here is the reality of the American Dream: confectionery in such eye-dazzling profusion that it blurs into mere pattern (think of Thiebaud's wonderful 1961 *Pies, Pies, Pies*, on loan- aptly enough- from Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum), or, in the case of Cotton's *Custard Cascade* becomes the land itself. Like the kitchen-haunting dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*, it's possible to read these cakes and candy-canes as a puritan counterblast against the American culture of consumption: part of that peculiar moral schizophrenia in the US society that produces both social X-rays picking wanly at rocket salads in the Upper East Side and the vast lycra-clad bottoms of Dunkin' Donuts.

The only problem with this reading is that it doesn't quite seem to be borne out by the facts. The cakes in Thiebaud's 1963 painting of that name are by no means the hateful things of satire: actually, they're rather yummy. Among other categories into which critics have tried to cram Thiebaud is that of Pop artist, hoping in doing so to pigeonhole him as the eating man's Warhol. In fact, as a new book (*Wayne Thiebaud Paintings* by Steven Nash and Adam Gopnik), published to coincide with his retrospective shows, Thiebaud has always fought against his assumed Pop status. His preferred role models are Morandi and Chardin, suggesting that Thiebaud sees himself as a still-life painter tough court, and his cakes as high art.

But why cakes? Look at his work in the Whitney and you may find yourself preferring to ask: why not cakes? Stand in front of *Around the Cake* (1962) for a while and it will strike you that patisserie actually makes rather a good subject for oil painting. Its not merely that paint and butter icing look alike- the mark-making of the painter's brush and that of the baker's spatula both identifying genius of a kind- it's that they serve a similar function. Both are there to lure us into the depths beneath them; to suggest in two dimensions the attractions of a third. And that juggling of two and three dimensions, representation and pattern, makes Thiebaud (for all his sugary subject matter) a serious modernist, not so much the Warhol of the cake world as its Mondrian.

There is another quality to Thiebaud's confections, though, and that is nostalgia. Even when they were painted in the 1960s, the toffee apples and mint humbugs of a work like *Candy Counter* must have seemed pointedly retardataire. So, too, was the eau-de-nil and cream palette in which Thiebaud depicted them, reminiscent of nothing so much as the half-lit drugstores of Edward Hopper. Far from being satirical, these works try to rediscover in paint the thrill the infant Thiebaud had felt in sugar, that Thiebaud the adult artist had discovered in American scene painting: Proustian taffy.

There's the same kind of synaesthetic exchange going on in Cotton's work, and a comparable (if different) compact between the surface of his pictures and the surface of the things they portray. If Thiebaud's impasto suggests butter icing, the over-perfect surface and brittle photorealism of a picture like Cotton's *Chocolate Thaw* conjure up a patisserie's sugar-glaze with such acuity that your fillings hurt as you look at it.

But something else is going on in Cotton's paintings that has little to do with Proust and nothing to do with Hopper. If the topography of Cotton's chocolate world seems uncannily exact, it is because it is. The young, French-taught American builds dioramas in his studio out of actual confectionery- meringues, candy-canes, glace cherries, M'n'Ms- then takes photographs of them and paints his oil-on-linen pictures from the resulting stills.

To slice the cake another way, you might find it useful to think of Cotton less in terms of Wayne Thiebaud and more in terms of Thomas Demand. In building hyper-real models of actual places and then photographing them hyper-realistically, Demand lets us know that there is something perversely unreal about the places he likes to model. His deserted photocopy shops, escalators and recording studios are all about the dehumanising effects of technology, but they are also at least half in love with the technological process of dehumanisation. In the same way, it is the techno-geekiness of Demand's work- the layers of exactness and ingenuity- that depersonalises it, rids it of the messiness of the merely real, raises its subjects to the status of mythology. Demand is the Homes if the Copy-shop.

The same kind of thing is going on in Cotton's work, only in reverse. We are not, as Dorothy so sagely observed, in Kansas in a picture like *Chocolate Thaw*. We're somewhere much nicer: on the good ship *Lollipop*, where the bon-bons play and everybody's happy all day. And, what's more, it's not just real but hyper-real- which is to say, real in that spotlit, Technicolor way that only memories (which are inherently unreal) can be. It's a dream come true, or true-ish.

And yet there's something deeply unpleasant going on in this dream, something nightmarish and possibly apocalyptic. Finally, that long-forgotten utopia of childhood- a land flowing with chocolate and custard- turns out to exist. And what do we find in it? The opposite of Thiebaud's cuddly pictures: not the comfort- food of Hopper and icing, but the cuisine monstrous of Hansel and Gretel. Somewhere in the appallingly delicious landscape of *Red Pop Ravine* is embodied another childhood truth: that you can eat gingerbread houses, but that gingerbread houses can also eat you.