

Self-Portrait

Will Cotton



Will Cotton, *Chocolate Wave*, 2002, oil on linen, 71 x 79 inches.

SWEETS

In 1996 I built a mountain of cakes in my studio. In the end, it was over six feet tall with a big gingerbread house on top. I added forests of lollipops and candy canes, gumdrop retaining walls, even a small chocolate stream. As I sat and stared at my creation and made drawings and photographs, I realized I was in Candy Land, that I could completely give myself over to the sensation that I was sitting in front of a strange new landscape. I felt like an explorer looking at the Grand Canyon for the first time. I had painted landscapes in the past, but always from nature. Suddenly I saw a way to create an entirely new reality. With sweets as the fabric of this new universe, I found that I could now make references within the landscape genre to the issues of temptation, indulgence, and excess that had long been part of my work.

MAQUETTES

When I start a new painting now, I always begin with a sketch and a shopping list. I recently

made a root beer waterfall in my studio that required four gallons of ice cream, fifteen gallons of root beer and twenty industrial size sheet cakes. A fiberglass undercarriage, fitted with two powerful pumps, was required to constantly circulate the root beer from the lower basin to the top of the waterfall. In the end, the model only worked for about thirty minutes before it disintegrated into a gooey mass of cake and melted ice cream. Knowing this would be the case, I shot digital video footage of the whole operation which I later referred to while making the painting.

PAINT

Even though my process involves drawing, model making, and photography, the final product is still oil on canvas. Paint still has the greatest potential for creative expression. It has a physical presence and an ability to record even the slightest gesture of the hand. I often work from photographs but my work isn't photorealist. Although I find photography to be very useful as a reference for painting, I'm not interested in reproducing the look of a photograph. I do however, want my pictures to look very real, to look so convincing that the viewer can be won over by the artifice and believe they have seen a new real place.

FIGURES

This past summer I began putting people in my candy landscapes. I see the figures both as inhabitants of the place and as objects of desire themselves, just like the candy and cake that surrounds them. This meant building much larger studio mock-ups, in which the models would be in scale with their surroundings. For a piece called Sugar Beach, I covered my studio floor with over 200 pounds of sugar. I asked the three girls posing for me to eat a lot of sugar, to look both sated and slightly nauseated. I was painting in France at the time, near a town where the local baker made huge meringues, at least twelve inches across. I spread these around the scene to function more or less like rocks or shells. I'm planning a piece now which involves several figures posed in an ice cream landscape but I've got to wait a couple of months until the studio will be cold enough to build the set.