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Adding a stroke of originality to a staged scene

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Certain photographers, such as Gregory Crewdson and James Casebere, go to great lengths to construct sets and orchestrate scenes to photograph. Yasumasa Morimura constructs his scenes based on great master paintings; he disguises himself as a character in them and shoots a photo.

Here's another twist: Painter Will Cotton stages elaborate scenes, photographs them, and then makes a painting from the photo. Like Morimura, he ties his work up in a great art historical loop. Where Morimura's references to great painting demand engagement with his work, Cotton's material -- paint -- ties his work to the canon. His process is contemporary and hip; it takes money and effort. Photographs made like this are hot products in today's art world. Painting a staged scene is a conceit that could make it even hotter.

Cotton has a piece up at Mario Diacono at Ars Libri. The untitled painting is willfully provocative. Like Crewdson's work, it's constructed to push a lot of emotional buttons. This is one in a body of work depicting women and girls amid giant sugary treats. Here, a nearly nude woman lies on a bed of yellow and orange cellophane. A jungle of giant candy canes, rolls of toffee, and sprigs blooming with cotton candy fill the background. Cupcakes and ice cream cones clutter the foreground.

The woman is a typical art historical odalisque -- a reclining female nude. She's offered up, as are the sweets, to tantalize. It's over the top yet skillful, intentionally not revealing all: The woman, garbed in white-knit panties that look like icing on a cake, lies with her back to us, her eyes closed. She's a mystery, which makes her all the more enticing. The painting presents such a fantasyland that it confronts the viewer with his or her own desire. Packaging the image the way an art director might put together a splashy ad, Cotton spells out how desire objectifies and drives consumer culture.

A mere photograph of this scene wouldn't have the same power. It would look merely like the centerfold of a men's magazine. By painting the image, Cotton bestows it with gravity. We look more carefully, more respectfully. He appropriates slickness for contemplation. The image still titillates, but it makes you think, and that combination needles you. It's a powerful package.

Bird's-eye view Joseph Barbieri is best known for his jewel-toned, satirical paintings of birds in human situations. In his secret life, he paints landscapes; until recently, he hasn't shown them. Both bodies of work are on view at Gallery NAGA.

The bird paintings continue to delight. Crisply painted, they portray comical little narratives. Many have artist protagonists. In "Green-Eyed Monster," an art student sits behind a canvas and regards his professor with alarm. The teacher, like Big Bird but in shades of green and wearing a blue, three-piece suit, dominates the canvas with nervy energy. Barbieri has said this

painting shows the moment a teacher recognizes greater talent than his own in his student: It's frenetic and funny.

Barbieri's colors pop off the canvas. He gives them rein by using simple forms. In "Antoine" a bird pilots an orange plane. The stellar night sky drops behind. A turquoise windshield casts a strange shadow on the intrepid pilot, making for a heady, dreamy mix of tones.

It's hard to imagine that the soft and muted landscapes were painted by the same artist. His small Italian scenes whisper through veils of mist. "Monterosso al Mare" looks down upon a lush green slope dropping to the sea. Barbieri's penchant for brightness shows subtly in the pale greens and blues of the satiny water. He also makes good use of form: the land meets the sea in a vertical seam, not a horizontal one, as we'd expect, and that gives the viewer the sense of toppling down the hill.

Ultimately, the landscape paintings are simpler. They aspire not to make a point but to meditate on beauty. It'll be interesting to see if somewhere down the line these two distinct sensibilities ever blend.

A look back at the '50s Lillian Orlowsky, who turns 89 this year, has seen and experienced a lot of 20th-century American art history. She worked for the Works Progress Administration in the '30s. She lives in New York and Provincetown and was an early student of Hans Hoffmann when he taught in Provincetown. The show of her work at Acme Fine Art examines her paintings from the 1950s. Like many artists of the time, you can see in her work a Cubist emphasis on form giving way to a delight in expressionistic, colorful brushwork. She's an accomplished and serious painter, if not a major one.

Each of these takes off from a still life but is purely abstract. One piece from the '40s shows a deft shuffling of precise forms, shapes connecting and then going off in their own directions. A piece from 1950 has the shapes still defined, but they're more jumbled. A 1958 work, in contrast, shows an exuberant collision of passages of color, gem tones fluttering around a central axis. The color passages interleave, as the forms did before. In many of these paintings, small bits of color scatter in the way light passing through a prism casts on a surface. These later pieces feel less as if Orlowsky's trying to show her viewer something, and more as if she's simply painting -- which is what a painter should do.