

Will Cotton at Mary Boone Gallery

By Joyce Korotkin

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Art historical reference and the inclusion of the figure have taken on an increasing importance in Will Cotton's meticulously painted candy-scapes of forbidden desire. Two works are of particular interest in this regard. With the simply ravishing Cotton Candy Cloud, the artist reaches a stunning new level of seemingly effortless painterly brushwork. Within a hotbed of roiling pink sugary thunderclouds, reclines a sultry, beckoning Titan-haired nude, as dramatically painted as a Carravaggio, as pellucid as a Turner or Hudson River Landscape sky, and as overtly sexual as a porn magazine centerfold.

Pre- or post-coital, her pink-tinged skin recalls the lavender powder of John Singer Sargent's scandalous *Madame X*, and is as cloyingly sweet and edible as the cloud itself. A latter day Olympia, she is a visual feast, inciting lust for the two most primal and rigidly repressed human needs and desires: food and sex. Food, specifically a naughty indulgence in the forbidden sweets that release endorphins, has long been Cotton's signature metaphor for seduction. Like dancing with the devil, in these works Cotton opens the door wide and invites the temptress in.

In earlier works, the figures were additions to the candy-scapes, almost as if they were another form of candy to be savored. Here, the figure and ground, as it were, are wedded seamlessly, but the figure, as in classical painting, takes precedence. This is evident in his image of an Odalisque, referencing those of Ingres and Magritte, who sits with her back to the viewer, slathered in what appears to be scoops of melting vanilla custard. Hung directly across the gallery space from *Cloud*, the two paintings engage the viewer in a dialog with art history that covers theoretical issues, such as subject matter, as well as formal issues of technique and style, in a manner that is at once witty and profound.