

Will Cotton

By Ana Finel Honigman
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Will Cotton's lavish oil paintings are in the soft-focus, soft-core tradition of 18th century masters Boucher and Fragonard. Like his predecessors, Cotton paints beautiful, creamy-skinned nudes in luscious surroundings, but while Cotton's paintings recall the same sensuality and delight, he is far from a mere copyist. Instead of replicating the sweet innocence of that decadent lost age in art, Cotton updates his opulent source-material by replacing pastoral love scenes with mountains of sweets and erotic treats.

In the works on view, candy becomes for Cotton what dark lush forests were for the old masters: an ideal of plenty and a site for temptation. There are no consequences depicted in these hedonistic scenes, but viewers know that outside the fantasy, indulgence always has its price. Cotton paints in an era where material delights come in endless quantities, but whose sweetness is poisoned by gluttony and guilt. Instead of painting lovers trysting, he depicts solitary fashion models, whose aloneness reflects an age of self-obsession, porn fixation and masturbation. Whether his models are just "eye-candy," they never seem satiated. Candy satisfies emotional needs and frivolous fancies, but it only distracts the body from its genuine hunger, leading to fat, not fulfillment. Like the fatty foods he paints, Cotton's paintings might appear light, but they are full of conceptual calories.

In *Cotton Candy Cloud* (2004) a rosy redhead lounges in the center of billowing puffs of pink cotton candy, while a demure brunette sits perched on a mountain of chocolate in *Kisses* (2004). An untitled painting (2003) features a slinky topless model wearing a coy 1960s-inspired crocheted bikini bottom and cap, rolling between marshmallow bushes and lollipops in a pool of orange soda underneath dangling sticks of peppermint and taffy. Her blissful expression is understandable. But unlike her beatific counterpart, the African-American model in *Ice Cream Cavern* (2003) turns her face away from the viewer. Her back is tense as she lifts herself on one arm and vanilla ice cream runs down her thigh. Like other girls' late-night indulgences, this lithe model's enclosed ice cream ice-castle seems a curse as well as a comfort.



Will Cotton, *Cotton Candy Cloud*, 2004, oil on linen / olio su lino, 190,5 x 254 cm.