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Those empty calories can be so appealing

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Will Cotton's paintings are based on the old-fashioned idea that art should look good, whether or not it's good for you. At Michael Kohn Gallery, the New York painter's L.A. solo debut is filled with beautiful landscapes made of ice cream caves, lollipop forests, spumoni streams, peppermint hedges and cotton candy clouds. Many are home to solitary blonds, brunets and redheads, each lovelier than the last, as deliciously sinful as anything in the background and, like supermodels, used to being the center of attention.

The same can be said of great paintings. Throughout history, masterpieces have held nothing back—and often have gone too far—in luring viewers into fantastic worlds whose presence resonates in the real one. Although Cotton's paintings seem to promote the illusion that the ravishing women in them exist for you alone, they are accompanied by so many nods to famous precedents that private fantasies are supplanted by multiparty romps through art history.

A quick glance at the four oil paintings in the first gallery reveals the influence of 1970s Photo-Realism, John Currin's recycled regionalism, Lisa Yuskavage's campy Americana and Matthew Barney's theater of aristocratic absurdity. Francois Boucher's Rococo confections and Jean Honore Fragonard's deliriously frilly images from the 18th century are also extravagantly evoked.

In the second gallery, 18 ink, chalk and charcoal drawings recall Jean Ingres' exotic nudes, Edgar Degas' awkwardly modest bathers and Wayne Thiebaud's cafeteria desserts. A hint of Claes Oldenburg's Pop Surrealism drifts through some of Cotton's sensuous drawings, especially the five that feature cotton candy—and use the sugary treat as an implicit form of self-portraiture.

In all of them Cotton masterfully mixes midcentury pinups and soft-core porn with the pointed humor of "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory." Good ol' American wholesomeness meets ancien regime decadence.

But the most telling precedent for Cotton's art is that of Mel Ramos, an often overlooked Pop painter from Northern California who has juxtaposed lithe women and mouthwatering goodies in funny paintings since the mid-1960s. Cotton is pure second-generation Ramos. Despite the stylish elegance and finishing-school impeccability he brings to his pictures, there's no hiding their middle-class earnestness. It's their best feature.