

## Will Cotton

By Greg Lindquist

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Will Cotton in his New York studio, 2008, photograph by Greg Lindquist

**I'd like to talk about two aspects of your work today: the relationship to landscape and the relationship to photography, digital photography in particular. You consider your paintings to be landscapes, which fascinates me. Could you talk a little more about this?**

Sure. In a way, it's very simple. In a painting, if it feels like a scene you could walk into, it's a landscape space. If it's something you could reach into and grab an object, it's a still life space.

A lot of it also has to do with point of view, in the past I made some paintings of still lifes, which usually means you're looking a little bit down on something. When I started making these paintings, wanting them to feel like they're monumental in scale, I moved my viewpoint down, so that you're actually looking *out* at or *up* at the scene. There is a scale shift happening.

**Do you think the scale of the paintings is important to you as well?**

I do. I've experimented with that a lot. I make small paintings from time to time and they don't have the same impact. I know it sounds simplistic, but a large painting is more effective in making the subject appear large. I know it's not always the case—there are some Hudson River School paintings that aren't that big and they feel vast. I think that it's because the things that I am painting are so much associated with smallness that I have to do everything I possibly can to make them feel monumental.

**Do you think your notion of landscape has changed with the addition of figures in your work?**

I hope not. My hope is that you'll look at this picture and think, here's a landscape painting that happens to have a figure in it, as opposed to reading the image as simply a figure painting. It's really more about making a picture in which the environment tells the story, a narrative landscape.

**Are there any landscape painters that you look at historically or contemporary?**

Ah, yeah, there are a lot. I became interested in the Hudson River School: Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole. This arose partly out of a search for my roots as an American painter. This is something that had always troubled me—I've always been attracted to the European painting tradition, but on the other hand, I feel so American. I feel like this is the place that I come from and understand. So, I wanted to get a little more familiar with what that means, and I've found that I feel a kinship to those painters.

I was reading about Frederick Church and that he had visited the American West and South America—these, which were at the time, very exotic places. And then he made paintings of these places that people had never seen before. And in doing so, introduced this entirely new landscape to the public that people were very excited to see. And I thought, “Wow, that's exactly what I want to do: to build a table-top landscape in the studio and then make paintings of it. So the paintings become a record of this exotic place that existed temporarily, but something no one will ever see in person.

You had asked about landscape painters. I feel in terms of process, a real relationship to Claude Monet, in that, here's a painter who actually constructed scenery. You know, you think of all these paintings of the lily pond and the Japanese footbridge—these aren't things that he was walking out through the landscape and just stumbled upon, these are things that he very deliberately built. And with specific views in mind, with these ideas in mind that this is what I am going to paint, very much like I do in my studio. Church, for that matter did some of the same things, up in Olana, in Hudson, New York. He did a lot of landscaping around a house he built up there, specifically with that idea in mind. That landscaping process, I think, is phenomenal and it points to the earthworks of the 1970s.

**Talking about your process: Have you always painted from photographic references?**

No, in fact, even now, it's not all from photographic references and I've done enough of both that I think it is fairly seamless. This painting for example is not painted from the photograph, it's painted from a maquette on the table. There was a lot of mechanical, perspectival stuff that I worked out. The perspective was kind of bothering me in trying to lay out these waffle cookies, on the gingerbread trailer house. I worked out a system with a string on a very long wall in the studio, so that I could grid out the whole perspective of the picture, then find and plot out the waffle pattern. Let me mention that it's a very different mechanical process than working either from life or a photography, kind of a constructed version.



Will Cotton, Cotton Candy Sky 2006 oil on linen, 72 x 84 inches Courtesy the Artist

In this one ["Cotton Candy Sky," 2006] there were photographs involved — photographs of cotton candy that I shot up on the roof, in daylight. The model posed on this table on a pink bedspread to pick up the source of the pink reflection. That way I could work both from a live model and a photo reference.

Another really exciting element of using photography now is the chance to do some digital manipulation as a sketching tool. That I can shoot these pictures of cotton candy on the roof, for example, and load them into the computer and then start playing with the color, which is something in the past that I would have done in a preparatory painting—trying to work, well, what color the sky is going to be, how the shadow compares to the lights, am I under a gray sky? And those are things I can play around with in Photoshop as well.

**How do you feel about that in terms of knowing how they feel and the actual texture of them—for example, in making the chocolate pool?**

Because it's such a new and strange world, I feel it's something I have to touch, I have to go to this place. Building the maquettes allows me to do that. I guess, if I were a fiction writer, I would be one of those writers that has to go and live the life of the character to be able to write it realistically. I don't feel at all that I am the sort of person who can just use my imagination and say, "This would be like this and this would be like that." And mostly because it's so surprising. You can think, okay, "Gingerbread house, I know what that looks like." But- there are things you learn in actually building it, how the light looks coming from behind, the opacity of the frosting casting a shadow through the interior, through the gumdrop. These are things that wouldn't even occur to me.

**Right, so you are making active discoveries?**

Exactly, yes, discoveries. And likewise, with the tactile element of all the sweets, and the chocolate, and "Oh my God, it has this transparency that drips off your fingers." These are visual cues that I paint into the pictures. They tell you things that make you know that this is real chocolate. It's really creating a believable fiction. That's what I'm after—as believable as possible.

**Are there any painters that you've looked at for these details?**

Yeah, definitely, I think I mentioned in the talk the Dutch 17th century still life painters. You know how you can really see the difference—if you look at a Manet still life, everything in the picture is pretty much made of paint. There are little areas where there's a transcendence and it turns into a flower petal or something else. In a Dutch still life painting, the glass will be just absolutely fragile and maybe cracked. And on the beer, the foam will be slowly seeping. And the crockery you will feel like you could run your fingernails over it. Every single texture, in other words is described in such a way that it becomes a tactile experience to look at a picture. That's something that is very important to me in painting these and it's something that was not really natural to me to come to. So, I had to learn how to really paint a picture and I hope you can see this more in the cotton candy painting, how in different areas I treated the picture differently, depending on the material that's being depicted.

**How has using digital photography affected your process?**

It's made photography more useful to me. I used the words "sketching tool" before and I'll say the same—it's exactly what it feels like. I'm not really good enough in Photoshop to do a final collage of the different things, so it's not like that, but, I used to be very frustrated when I would take an image, send it out to be developed and it would come back all wrong—not at all what I was thinking. So every single time I am referring to the image, I am thinking, "Yes, but—" Here is this whole scene that has a weird greenish cast to it. I am referring to it because I want to know what it looks like but as I mix the paint I am thinking, but make it less green, which is not very helpful.

Going to digital photography and making my own prints in-house, the color reference started to mean a lot more, less afterthought. It's by no means a complete image that I am then trying to faithfully trying to reproduce. If I felt like I got it in the photography then I'd probably not feel

the need to paint anymore. Though I don't think that I am in any danger of that because there's still so much in the image I can improve upon.

**It seems like you are reconstructing an experience through a variety of documentation.**

Yeah and it's not for any kind of trickery—it's always for expediency. If I could have this scene before my eyes twenty-four hours a day, that would be ideal and that's what I really want. Since that's not possible (due to melting, model schedules, etc.), I have all these other avenues that make it work for me.

**That seems to be a contradictory aspect to the work—that the candy disintegrates after a short period of time but yet there is a certain viewing time built into the work and then a certain period of time that it takes to actually make the painting.**

Yeah, you see the same kind of thing when painters are painting clouds of any kind, whether they are made of cotton candy or not. I've tried to do that kind of thing myself (painting outdoors), but it's just so hard. It is this ephemeral thing—it's a recording of this fleeting experience.

**How do you reconcile the interest in traditional technique to contemporary subject matter?**

Well, I guess again, I'd stress that tradition for tradition's sake is completely uninteresting to me. Knowing how to do these things is more for expediency. I have an image in mind that I want to make. If I have all the tools at my disposal to do that, I'm better off. Much of those tools are what I see in traditional painting. Many times when I go into a museum, I see something and say, wow that is the way I want to capture that idea. And that idea may be something I got off the back of cereal box this morning when I was eating breakfast. In my mind there is this absolute leveling—no hierarchy.

**So you're thinking about it in terms of appropriating technique where necessary?**

Again, but appropriating a technique not for the sake of appropriation or for conscious reference, but just because this is the best, most expedient way to get the idea across.

Sometimes, though not even the most expedient. When I did these, I wanted to figure out how to depict people in candy land—these women particularly, and there are so many potential ways to do that. In the end I wound up using some very specific references. I know my sources in other words. And I am thinking Bougereau and pin-up painting. These are the icons of femininity that make sense in my mind in this context, in a cotton candy cloud. So I'll specifically go there. And I don't want to paint this in a way that you can't see that. I want you to be able to see that. And that means that I have to have some sense of how to paint a Bougereau picture and how to paint a mid-century pin-up painting and that's where the desire to know technique comes in.

**So you're going after a sense of clarity to the vision?**

Yeah, clarity. And I hope in the process a lot of me comes through. I wouldn't be happy otherwise and I have thought about this a lot, too. It wouldn't be at all fulfilling to me to make a collage by sticking a Cabanel "Birth of Venus" in an advertising picture of a cotton candy cloud. That wouldn't be the end of the story. And I've actually tried literally to do that, just to see what it would look like—it looks terrible. So the end result is different than all of the sources and references.