

## Artist Will Cotton Talks Katy Perry

By Isabel Wilkinson

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Artist Will Cotton at work on April 5, 2010 in New York City. Inset: Katy Perry's Teenage Dream album cover. (Photo by: Michael Loccisano / Getty Images)

**Isabel Wilkinson: Your new pictures of Katy Perry mark the first time you've painted a celebrity. Why have you avoided painting famous people up until now?**

Will Cotton: There's always an iconography with a picture. And for years, I really wanted that to be my own. Prior to painting the Candy Land pieces back in the early '90s, I was making paintings that involved advertising icons—things like the Dough Boy—but I wound up feeling that those symbols were stronger than anything I was doing. I wanted to have a chance to come up with all my own iconography. When it came to the idea of painting Katy, I thought, "I know what I'm doing enough to bring my stuff to the table, so that her celebrity won't take over, and I can really make the painting I want to make."

**What was it like working with Katy Perry on the "California Gurls" video, and bringing your candy-coated worlds to life?**

The big difference was that it was very collaborative. It's so much work. But of course what that means is that there a lot of people who have their own ideas and what it means to be in this world that I've been painting about. There's a lot in that video that I

wouldn't have ever thought of. Like that whole whipped cream thing—that was Katy's idea.

**What has painting Perry for the *Teenage Dream* album cover and collaborating with her on the “California Gurls” video done for your work?**

The reason I chose Katy and nobody else—I had torn pictures of her out of magazines, because she was just the kind of character that I wanted to paint. She's very over-the-top, she's very sugary, saccharine. As sweet as can be. By painting the [*Teenage Dream*] cover and working on [“California Gurls” video], it disseminated this imagery in a way that the art world just never can. It's a totally different scale. The video had 100 million hits on YouTube. That's just way beyond art-world scale.

Back when I was making pop iconography and looking at these pop icons, that was me looking at advertising culture and being influenced by it. And now, I can get an email from a 12-year-old girl in Brazil who knows my imagery because of the Katy Perry album cover and video.

**Is that something you've always wanted?**

Well no, in fact. It's quite a surprise. It's never been a goal. The goal of art-making in general is communication. I don't think we're taught to expect to have a large audience. And now, in some small way, I do. There are a lot of people who know what I've been thinking about because they've seen it through those channels. I have a lot of new Facebook friends. I don't know quite what to make of it.

**There are images from the music video that inspired your painting?**

I did do a few paintings now based on the video, so that's a real back and forth dialogue, which is very fun and exciting for me. I made a painting of the scene with Katy licking an ice cream cone in a taffy forest. I started with a still from the video. They were sets I had built with collaborations with the other people working on this. In my painting, I changed what she was wearing, but kept the general composition the same, and kept it in the same format that the video was shot in. There was a lot that was not stuff I would have thought of, color-wise, composition, but I just really liked. It's one more way of throwing a good element of chance into the work, which I'm often looking for.

As an artist, it's possible to get tired of yourself. In fact, it's the reason I always build props first, because then I can be surprised by what I'm looking at. If I just thought in my mind, “I'm going to paint a girl with a whole bunch of ice cream behind her,” the ice cream I would paint would be a very generalized ice cream. But in fact, when I have a real ice cream, and it's melting and it's in daylight, it looks nuts! But that's what “real” looks like. Real is surprising. That's why I can get these kinds of scenes and make them transformative.

**In these new paintings, you also had to learn how to paint fashion!**

From the time I started painting the Candy Landscapes, I wanted to make the whole thing myself. I had to build this world, so for me, [these new works] were a total exploration into fashion. Because of the way I paint, I had to find a way to make them exist. For the

dress that Katy Perry [posed in], I took shiny foil cupcake papers. I was over at [designer] Cynthia Rowley's house, and she has daughters, and they have Barbie dolls. So I cut out the cupcake papers and I put them on a Barbie, and I said, "Cynthia, could you possibly make this dress? I would love to paint someone wearing this." At that time, I was starting to communicate with Katy, but I wasn't sure I was going to paint her. So I said, "Let's just make this thing, I don't know who's going to wear it yet, but we'll see what happens." As soon I found out Katy was going to come to the studio, I called up Cynthia with Katy's measurements, and said "can you make it to fit this person?" And she brought it over the day Katy came to pose, and finished sewing it right onto her.

**Your new portraits are all about specific women and less about the general female archetype that you've painted in the past. What's with the shift?**

It often has to do with answering questions. The first question I asked was: "Who is in this place?" And then I asked myself, "Who is she, specifically? What's she like?" These people all have some story. And one of the other things I feel when I'm looking at Old Master paintings, which I love to do, is that there's a kind of class hierarchy.

In terms of the class structure that you see so much in European portraiture, I don't think one feels that in America in the 21st century. But we have these other kinds of social structures now, like celebrity, who establish new hierarchies. Katy Perry has a status. I feel like that's signified in this painting. She's Queen Katy of Candy Land.

That's one aspect. But then Katy comes over to the studio, and I meet her and talk to her for a couple of hours. And you get to know this person—beyond her celebrity status. It's that combination of things that makes it interesting. I love Andy Warhol, but I wouldn't just go out and say "I'll paint Marilyn, or whatever other pop star—Justin Bieber." I don't feel interested in that.

**So what are you going to work on next?**

It's always the question I have the hardest time answering: "What's next?" Because I work very hard at not knowing. And I can honestly say I have no idea. There are a few things I'd like to do with [Katy] that may or may not happen. One of which is some set design for her tour. I know she's going to do a tour, and there are big-time set-tour people already working for her. But, because she's probably going to do things that reference the "California Gurls" video and this kind of imagery, I'd love to be involved in that.

**Are there other contemporary artists you're inspired by?**

The people I keep coming back to are friends of mine, such as Inka Essenhigh. I love the way she tells a story. She does it really fearlessly. She reminds me to not think about how I may be judged for making some images. There are an internal chorus of voices in an artist's mind. The first time I think, I'm going to paint a girl with a croquemouche on her head—there are a lot of voices that say "don't do that" for a lot of reasons—it's ridiculous, it's not going to look ironic or angry enough to be taken seriously; it's frivolous. But I have to get over all of those and think, "This is what I want to paint." It's kind of a leap of faith. I know there's a good reason to do this.

**You often depict women as Venus figures. How do you respond to the feminist critique of your paintings?**

I think about these things in art historical terms. When it comes to those questions, “By painting these paintings, are they somehow demeaning to women?” If they are, I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t mean them to be, certainly. I don’t think Venus paintings are demeaning. I think they’re celebratory. And that’s what I’m trying to do. There’s something of a painting of a woman that represents all women—and by extension, all of humanity—that I just find very exciting. It’s a nice distillation, I think, of what it means to be alive.

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