

## As his latest show opens, painter Will Cotton reflects on the Will Cotton - Katy Perry art-industrial

By Jed Lipinski

May 11, 2012, 10:38 am

In early 2010, the painter Will Cotton, whose new exhibit is at the Mary Boone Gallery's Fifth Avenue location through June 30, received an email from the pop star Katy Perry that would determine the course of his career since.

Perry, who had seen some of Cotton's work online, expressed an interest in a few of his candy-themed paintings. Cotton, who lately had been cutting images of Perry out of fashion magazines, informed her that those paintings were already sold.

Nevertheless, the two struck up a correspondence. In the ensuing months, Cotton created the cover art for Perry's album *Teenage Dream*, painted a series of large-scale portraits of her (two of which Perry owns), and acted as the artistic director for her 2010 video "California Gurls," which has been viewed over 100 million times online. Cotton himself found his profile significantly raised as people started taking notice of his moody confectionary realism.

But in the months that followed, something strange happened.

"About a year ago, I was watching TV when this hair-color commercial came on," Cotton explained last week at Mary Boone. The commercial—for Clairol's Nice 'n Easy Colour Blend Foam ("It's foamtastic!")—featured two women reclining in a landscape of fluffy pink clouds. These clouds, Cotton noted, looked a lot like the ones that Perry lies in, naked, during the "California Gurls" video, a lot like the clouds Cotton uses in a whole lot of his paintings.



*Will Cotton's latest homage to Katy Perry, 'Crown', Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery*



(Above left: Cotton Candy Katy, Cotton Candy Venus, paintings by Will Cotton; right, three frames from the Clairol Nice 'n' Easy campaign.)

Since then, Cotton has continued to see what he believes are references to his work. “It feels almost epidemic,” he said, adding that he recently began keeping an archive of Cotton-esque advertisements—girls in cotton candy clouds, models with cupcakes on their heads—torn from the pages of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Cosmopolitan*.

“For years I’ve been clipping images out of magazines to use for inspiration,” he said. “It’s always been a one-way dialogue with pop culture.”

“But in doing a video that reaches 100 million people,” he added, “it’s as if pop culture finally decided to respond.”

The fallout of this curious scenario, and the resulting evolution of Cotton's style, can be seen in *Crown*, a new portrait of Perry that is one of six paintings in the exhibition. Based on a photograph that Cotton took of Perry in his live/work studio in Tribeca, *Crown* shows the pop star clutching a candy crown, seemingly lost in thought amidst piles of pastel-colored cakes. Cotton’s previous portraits of Perry depict her staring at the viewer, fully aware that her image is being captured, and correspondingly guarded.

In *Crown*, however, the famously shot-calling Perry (who since 2010 has also been through some changes, notably a high-profile marriage and divorce to Russell Brand) appears unaware of being watched. Instead, she seems overwhelmed by this strange candyland that she helped bring to life, and that has come to define her image.

“When I first noticed Katy, there was something about the way she presented herself to the world that felt both playful and confectionary,” Cotton said, standing before the painting in a crisp gray suit. “She presented herself as someone who would naturally jump into this scenery.”

But in actually casting Perry in that scenery, Cotton altered her original confectionary image. Today, part of Perry’s live show involves her riding above the audience on a cotton candy cloud.

“When I paint Katy now, I feel like I’m stealing from myself,” he said.

*Crown* is the first painting most visitors encounter at Mary Boone. It comes as a relief that the rest of the works aren’t quite as heady.

*Landfill* and *Trashpile* depict leaning towers of precisely rendered sweets—chocolate cake, donuts, French tarts, apple turnovers—whose obscene quantity renders the individual morsels almost unappetizing. *Nuthouse* portrays an intentionally foreboding landscape made from a gingerbread house, mint-leaf gumdrop trees and a distant meringue mountaintop. The scene brings to mind Joan Didion’s assessment of Thomas Kinkadee’s paintings, whose houses and cottages she found to be “of such insistent coziness as to seem actually sinister.” And yet the sense of menace is felt in most of the new paintings, and it’s a shift in mood, if not in subject matter, for the artist.

Furthering the foreboding theme is *Ruin*, in which a decaying gingerbread house shrouded in fog is rendered with ghostly greys and whites. Cotton, who bakes his carb-heavy maquettes in his studio kitchen, achieved the desired effect by leaving the gingerbread model on his Harrison Street fire escape for a few days.

In the back room of Mary Boone sits Cotton’s first sculpture: a collection of elaborate plaster cakes that seem to have been manhandled en route to the gallery. “I grabbed some of the cakes before I cast them,” he said. “It feels to me a little more abundant if I’m less reverent in my treatment of them.”

Early in his career, Cotton, whose interest in still life painting made him a “a bit of an oddball” at Cooper Union, took to painting the ad icons of sweets corporations. These included the Keebler Elf, the Nestle Quik Bunny, and Twinkie the Kid.

“They were part of a symbolic pantheon recognized by my peers,” he said.

But he grew dependent on the mastery of the original illustrators hand. “I wanted to remake everything,” he said.

Shortly thereafter, Cotton began painting large, empty Utopian landscapes made up of candy, pastries and melting ice cream. Around 2002, he started populating these landscapes, although the characters—mostly naked, model-beautiful women—were unrecognizable.



Then came the Katy Perry email.

Asked whether any studios had contacted him for art direction in the wake of “California Gurls,” Cotton said: “No.”

Had he expected them to?

“Yes!” he said, laughing. “I was bracing myself to say no to everybody, because that wasn’t what I wanted to do. I wanted to paint. But to be honest, I haven’t had to say no.” He stared again at the painting of Perry.

“That’s not to say I’m upset about it,” he added. “I see cotton candy clouds more often now, and I think: That’s good.”

*Will Cotton’s new exhibition is on view at the Mary Boone Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, through June 30.*