

The Telegraph

Will Cotton: the painter who made Katy Perry his muse

Will Cotton's paintings of sugary utopias bridge the worlds of art, pop and fashion.

Hermione Hoby meets him

By Hermione Hoby

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Will Cotton's portrait of Katy Perry, *Cotton Candy Katy*, 2010, Oil on linen, as used on her album *Teenage Dream*

Will Cotton's studio is so pristine, so utterly spotless, that stepping foot in it feels like trespassing into perfection. Even the chairs around his kitchen table look as though Tom Ford himself (a collector and sometime subject) got down on hands and knees with a tailor's tape to perfectly calibrate the millimetres between them. I didn't expect this – artists' studios are meant to be riots of creative chaos – but then I realise what perfect sense this makes.

Cotton is a 49-year-old painter whose enormous and sumptuous oils of gingerbread houses, root beer waterfalls and other sugary utopias, haven't just made him a star in the art world, but a darling of the fashion industry too, with his visual language frequently co-opted into photoshoots and ad campaigns. They've also won him an especially high profile fan in the singer Katy Perry, who so loved his work that she commissioned him to paint the cover of her 6 million-selling 2010 album *Teenage Dream*, which depicts the global pop star floating naked on a candyfloss cloud.

His paintings are rendered with an Old Masters devotion to realism and an earnest, and perhaps even more old-fashioned, pursuit of beauty. In other words, he paints untenably perfect images, and does so perfectly.

He tends to work from maquettes of real, or partially real confections and so I'd expected (or rather, childishly hoped) for extravagant, edible mess. Instead, there is not a stray cake crumb, frosting smudge, or trace of icing sugar to be seen. Nor does he think he'd ever include his maquettes in a show: "It would be like seeing behind the curtain, it would destroy the illusion."

The neatness, he explains looking almost abashed, helps him work, but I suspect it's as much a matter of sensibility as practicality.

He shows me *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a huge painting that will be the centrepiece of his forthcoming show at the Ronchini gallery, which, surprisingly, marks his London debut. In it, a queenly young woman nude but for a silver crown and pink knickers rides a giant, fish-like creature made of ice cream, emerging from a lake of the same substance.

Written down, that sounds ridiculous, but rendered in exquisitely realistic oils, the image somehow has a solemnity. I find it particularly hard to draw my eyes away from her intent and serious expression.



Will Cotton: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. 2014. Oil on linen

"I'm glad you say that because that is really important to me," he says. "There's something that could be construed as frivolity in a lot of the paintings and it's not the way I think

about them - they're not whimsical or silly or frivolous. Her seriousness hopefully points in that direction. My question is always, how do I make this into a total environment that's believable within its own parameters. So if she's in a place where everything is made of ice cream, what does this creature that's arisen from that substance look like and how does it behave and most importantly, what does it represent?"

When I ask him the answer to that last question he demurs. "I'd rather make you wonder about that," he says, smiling. A moment later though, he offers his own interpretation: "The impossibility of real satiation of her desire, and at the same time this object of her desire that's taken animate form."

In talking about his work Cotton frequently uses the word "believability". For a painter of fantasy landscapes, this might seem paradoxical, but he takes his draftsmanship seriously. For many years he's had a life model come to pose once a week and now has stacks and stacks of figure drawing homework.

"You can look at this figure," he says, gesturing to the photo-perfect portrait of the young woman astride the fish, "and not be disturbed by the ways in which it's not right." With the imperfect brushwork of even moderately good figure painters, he explains, "you'll look at [a painting] and think, 'oh yeah it's an interesting painting... and she has kind of a funny arm.' Suddenly that wrongness just takes too much of your attention and you're unable to look at the things I would like you to look at, like, what's she doing there."

In other words, he wants, "the significance of how well she's painted to take a back seat to the fact that she's in a particular situation."

He's often asked why he doesn't just work with digital imagery instead. "Frankly I ask myself that," he laughs, "because it would be a hell of a lot easier and there's probably some Photoshop wizard out there who could do it better than I."

But, as he explains, "because of the vocabulary and cultural history of painting we have an ability to suspend disbelief." In contrast: "I think we have this built-in mistrust of photographic imagery now – we expect everything to be Photoshopped."

Cotton was born in 1965 in Massachusetts and grew up in New Paltz, a small town in rural upstate New York. He drew almost obsessively and remembers that even as a very small child he felt he "needed to jealously guard that time for myself. If I was working on a drawing I just didn't want anything to interrupt me."

Aged 14 he was making pocket money mowing neighbours' lawns at the rate of five dollars a go. Then, he sold a little watercolour of a house to a friend of his grandmother's for twenty five dollars. "Which is," he says with a grin, "a lot of lawns."

He went on to study at the Manhattan art school Cooper Union where he was hopelessly out of step with its prevailing spirit of avant-garde provocation. The [Hudson River School](#), the

group of mid-19th century American artists whose realist landscape paintings were heavily imbued with Romanticism, were a major influence. His heart lay with poetry, not theory.

“I wanted to paint pictures of flowers,” he says. “I wanted to paint pictures that were recognisable in the first place!”

Cooper Union packed him and a couple of other apostates off to the south of France where Cotton gleefully threw himself into plein air painting.

“I got a portable easel and went out into nature and did what’s considered to be a ‘Sunday painter’ activity. It couldn’t feel less relevant in the contemporary art world of the 1980s - and probably still [couldn’t].”

After graduating, living among the assault of Manhattan’s billboards, he began to think about the ubiquity of advertising images and how, “we’re constantly confronted with our relationship with our own desires.”

He started painting classic advertising icons – the Pilsbury Dough Boy, the Jolly Green Giant and so on – until, “I started to be bothered by the fact that the best things about my paintings were this kind of nostalgia value. You know, ‘look at this Mr Bubble painting’ and you’d go, ‘oh yeah! I remember Mr Bubble, that’s so fantastic!’ But it wasn’t my fantastic idea, it was some illustrator.”

And then he came across Candyland, the classic American board game that he and almost every other person of his generation played as a child.

“I looked at the board and thought, ‘oh my god I have this memory of that like it was a real place.’ So I start playing this game of, ‘what if it was a real place, what would it look like then.’ It seemed like a way that I could take charge, completely, and I no longer had to be beholden to the idea of somebody else, of the genius who came up with the Mr Bubble character for example. I also found this wonderful open-endedness in that thought. I could start posing these questions – what is poverty like in a candy utopia, what is blank like. And that, though I never suspected it at the time, has really sustained me for the last...” he giggles softly, “what, almost 20 years now.”

Central to all of this is the idea that, “we are, in 21st century America, living in Candyland. I feel like there’s so much about our surrounding environment that is metaphorically described by that word.”

The resultant paintings sealed his name as a contemporary painter of substance. Then, in 2010, Cotton received an email from a woman interested in them named Katherine Hudson. It took a moment to realise that this was the real name of a person better known as Katy Perry. The pop star and the artist struck up a correspondence and Cotton ended up painting her for the cover of Teenage Dream and then directing the video for Perry’s 2010 hit “California Gurls”. It’s a kitschy, riotous romp in which Perry, clad in a cupcake brassiere, traverses a life size Candyland overseen by a dice-throwing Snoop Dogg.

Cotton was already interested in Perry's image before that career-changing email, having seen pictures of her wearing, "some really wonderfully ridiculous costumes."

He adds: "I think we shared an interest in mid-century American pin up painting. I thought, this is the sort of person that I want to put in my paintings."

His painting of her now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. "It's pop culture becoming this real two way street," he says, with enthusiasm. "It doesn't mean that any 11-year-old girl who's watching a Katy Perry video will have any idea that it's my idea, most of them won't, but it still feels fulfilling because now you can think of cotton candy clouds and it's like it's... it's out there."

In fact, Cotton's visual language has become such a staple of the advertising and fashion worlds, that he's often found himself running up and down that two way street. He's not above designing packaging for the upscale macaron company La Duree, for example, or styling and shooting the starlet Elle Fanning for New York magazine in an array of confections.

Why, I ask him, do sweets have such a visual power?

"When you talk about desire and indulgence and temptation, we all have our go-to thing, whether it's alcohol or sex or, you know, you name it, but these end up being very specific desires. If I wanted to paint about my relationship to cocaine that wouldn't communicate to my mom –" he cuts himself off with a little amused frown, "– well, let's leave my mom out of it – it wouldn't communicate to the non-drug-using public, the themes and subjects I'm trying to talk about. Sweets for some reason, I'm not going to say have universal appeal in that sense, but they do have an existence for pure pleasure."

We talk a little about the fetishisation of the cupcake and its various successors.

"I've felt... a certain presence in all of that," he smiles and admits he has a very sweet tooth. "I think in the case of the cupcake and the macaron both, they're the right size and colour, so one can literally hold this beautiful little object of desire."

The legendary baker Dominique Anselm, creator of New York's hysteria-inducing and fiercely trademarked Cronut (a donut and croissant hybrid) is a frequent collaborator.

"I still have not had a cronut!" Cotton cries with mock outrage. "I went there one day and said 'Dominique! How 'bout a Cronut?' And he said, 'ah yes yes, you have to get here very early in the morning, Will.'"

In this imperfect world, alas, you have to queue for the real cake.

Will Cotton is showing at the Ronchini Gallery, London W1 (020 7629 9188; ronchinigallery.com) from June 25