

Sweet Sensation: Vistas of Candyland at John Hartell

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By Shay Collins

At first glance, Will Cotton's paintings and drawings appear whimsical. Best known for creating Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream" album cover, Cotton's works prominently feature puffy clouds in pink pastels. Yet, Cotton's paintings and drawings of gingerbread structures manipulate motifs seen in confectionery and are almost as prolific. Prof. Mark Morris, architecture, curated *Will Cotton: Vistas of Candyland* at the John Hartell Gallery to showcase Cotton's adherence to "[t]he structural logic of gingerbread assembly."



Will Cotton, *Churro Cabin*, 2001, oil on linen, 75 x 100 inches. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery.

Certain forms have become ubiquitous in dessert decoration. Note the blunted teardrop of Hershey kisses, the stout cylinder of gumdrops and the pointed dollop of frosting. Cotton leaves these forms in their decorative role, but alters his depiction of their setting. Thick snow banks disappear, replaced by reflective lakes, desolate roads and floating rivers of caramel sauce. Intact in their original environment, the expected forms elicit a different effect.

In "Monument," Cotton's sepia depiction of a gingerbread house evokes an atmosphere of old-world dignity. The placement of a pretzel above the doorway directs attention to its carefully-planned twists. A lake mirrors another gingerbread house in "The Consummation of an Empire," nearly doubling the structure's presence in the composition. The peppermint columns cease to be joke structures, parodying an idea of

'house,' and are instead present as necessary, integral components of the building. Cotton focuses, too, on the gingerbread house as a product, or result of a process.

Morris states in his exhibit description that Cotton's structures exist "as part of a complete territory where Candy Land's locales . . . are realized with deadpan seriousness." Cotton recognizes the implicit fiction in gingerbread houses: A house supposes a resident. Cotton hints at the strange, half-realized tension between the human house creators and the (gingerbread) residents. Cotton only tangentially approaches the issue and intentionally omits any human form from the works.

Cotton also notes the technical process behind making a gingerbread house. Morris reports that Cotton "has taken cooking classes to better fabricate these painstaking miniature worlds." Furthermore, Cotton juxtaposes the common portrayal of pristine gingerbread houses against paintings and drawings of decay and chaos. "Cream" and "Old Faithful" feature geyser-like bursts of cream spurting over a landscape of jumbled icing and ice cream. Cotton carries his gingerbread houses from a purely imaginative, fantastical land into the unpredictable world.

Cotton incorporates such a translation into his creative process, capturing his structures at various levels of decay. Morris reports that, in Cotton's work, "[t]he decay of a single gingerbread house can be read across several paintings where vantage points shift and fogs descend." "Churro Cabin" and "Flood" present caramel sauce of the destructive force of the dessert world. The layout of the exhibit in the John Hartell Gallery includes pastel exercise balls, bowls of jellybeans and gumballs (I erred on the side of caution and didn't try to take any) and a vintage copy of Candy Land, a nod to the copy Cotton keeps in his New York City office. Morris's exhibit contrasts the childish decadence of candy with images of lonesome abandonment and destruction.

The paintings, importantly, do not recast gingerbread houses into an entirely gloomy or morbid realm. Rather, Cotton's works occupy a purgatorial realm, devoid of residential life and domesticity but neither plunged into complete disarray. The paintings exist in a sort of non-environment to isolate the forms and motifs from their decorative role. In a few of the works, the thick, cylindrical marshmallows look like water heaters and the chocolate sauce dripping off the roof becomes dilapidated shingles.

Cotton's abstract "Untitled," however, presented the most compelling image of the exhibit. "Untitled" displays pink and white oil paint, textured and segmented to look like freshly-squeezed icing, dripping off of the canvas. Removed from a cake or other confection, the very idea of the icing becomes non-concrete. The painting shows decoration with nothing to decorate, a common form completely divorced from its common function. Yet, "Untitled" also highlights the pervasiveness of confectionery motifs; even dripping off a canvas, we still see icing as icing and recognize its typical curves and spirals.

Cotton's more widely known work — "nudes at rest on clouds of cotton candy and portraits featuring models wearing sugary confections," according to Morris — employs

many of the motifs and forms that he explores in his gingerbread models. Cotton's website shows that he almost always painted gingerbread structures, nudes and portraits every year. Morris's focus on Cotton's structures, however, captures Cotton's sometimes overlooked, but philosophically potent work on motifs. The aesthetic beauty of cake decoration, or the brand recognition of candy shapes, attests to the perceptivity of Cotton's work.