

### Will Cotton In Conversation With Ana Finel Honigman

September 4, 2007

Will Cotton's sumptuous oil paintings are in the soft focus, soft-core tradition of 18th-century masters Broc, Gerard, Franque and Fragonard. Like his predecessors, Cotton (who was born in Massachusetts in 1965 and studied art at New York's Cooper Union and the New York Academy of Art) paints beautiful, creamy skinned nudes amidst luscious surroundings. But while Cotton's paintings recall the sensuality and delight of his forefathers, he is far from a mere copyist. Instead of painting high on the sugar of that decadent lost age in art, Cotton updates his opulent source material by replacing pastoral love scenes with mountains of sweets and erotic treats.

Cotton's images have the feel of illustrations for the famous depression era ditty, 'Big Rock-Candy Mountain'. Yet while his images look like a hobo's fever dream born from sensual deprivation, Cotton paints in an era of plenty. And he paints for an era where delights, like candy, come in endless quantities but whose sweetness is poisoned by gluttony and guilt. Instead of painting lovers trysting, he paints solitary fashion models, whose alone- and aloofness reflects self obsession, porn fixation and masturbation.

Candy for Cotton is what dark lush forests were for the 18th masters; an ideal of plenty and a site for temptation. There are no consequences depicted in these hedonistic scenes, but viewers know that outside the fantasy indulgence will have its price. Whether the models are his scenes' protagonists, or just eye-candy, they never appear satiated or at peace. As we know, Candy may satisfy emotional needs and frivolous fancies, but in the end it only distracts the body from its genuine hungers, producing fat not fulfilment. Like the fatty foods he paints, Cotton's paintings might appear light, but they are heavy with meaning.

As lavish as Cotton is with the luxurious offerings in his images, he is equally generous towards other artists. In addition to producing some of the most succulent and lovely images on view in exhibition spaces from Manhattan, Paris and Los Angeles to the East Hamptons, Cotton hosts life-drawing sessions and artists salons which have become a major hub of the most talented members of New York's art community. Artists such as Inka Essenhigh and Ellen Alfest cite Cotton's salon as central to their own artistic development.

Cotton is currently on exhibition alongside Cecily Brown, Eric Fischl and others in 'Sex & Sensuality' a group show at the East Hampton Salomon Contemporary gallery run by James Salomon, who is also the associate director of the Mary Boone Gallery. Cotton will have work in 'In Monet's Garden: The Lure of Giverny' from October 12 to January 20 at the Columbus Museum of Art, where his paintings will hang with twelve Monets and work by ten other contemporary artists translating the beauty of the Giverny Gardens.

**ANA FINAL HONIGMAN:** Do you think of your art as "sweet"?

**WILL COTTON:** Sweet is such a delightful and complex word. It represents everything I want to paint about: the pure, the fragrant, the desirable and the dream of complete indulgence in a perfect world. But sweetness taken to an extreme degree, as it is in my pictures, becomes cloying, even repulsive and that's where it gets interesting for me.

**AFH:** Do you feel your work is not taken sufficiently seriously because of its deceptively light and sensual subject matter?

**WC:** I think there are people who miss the point. When I started working with this subject matter about ten years ago, I made a very conscious decision to compose the pictures in a way that referenced the grand tradition of American landscape painting and to do so without irony. In an art world in which the paradigm of avant-gardism dictates a very tired and obvious formula, I felt that the most subversive and potent gesture possible was to make pictures that are both sincere and well executed.

**AFH:** In what way are your paintings sincere? If you are intentionally pushing the imagery's salient sweetness to the point of being "cloying" and "even repulsive," then aren't you using the imagery ironically?

**WC:** Sincerity doesn't exclude irony, but most importantly it means I want to be willing to tell the whole story in all its intriguing contradictions. To me a thing isn't attractive or repulsive, it's both. In the same place and at the same time.

**AFH:** Why were you referring to American landscape paintings?

**WC:** I was initially drawn to the Hudson River School when I learned that many of the paintings were made specifically to incite a feeling of awe and a desire to experience the new frontier. This struck me as a particularly American kind of propagandist message that I wanted to reference in my paintings. I love the idea of showing someone a picture of a place they've never seen before that might inspire them to want to go there, to force them to imagine what it might be like to experience such a place.

**AFH:** Do you perceive the indulgences depicted in your paintings as quintessentially American?

**WC:** In a way, yes, though I'd qualify that by saying that I don't intend these pictures to be an indictment of American consumer culture. It's easy to find European historical precedents for this kind of decadence and excess (the court of Marie Antoinette is something I also like to reference in my work) but it seems to me the typical American appetite goes well beyond the French gourmandise and straight into gluttony.

**AFH:** How differently do you feel your work would be received if you were a woman painter painting your images of food and female flesh?

**WC:** When a painting goes out into the world the question of authorship ceases to matter, it's relationship to its creator is over and a new relationship with the viewer has begun. Any amount of guessing about the artist's motivation is pure speculation and as such, totally uninteresting to me. Is the painter male? Female? Gay? Straight? Does he/she love or hate the subject? The only real experience in art is between the viewer and the work, no back story and no guessing about what the artist meant.

**AFH:** Optimally that probably should be case, but biography often influences viewer's interpretations. Do you think an artist's motivations should be irrelevant to how their art is received? If so, why would artists give interviews?

**WC:** Biography has great entertainment value and there's no doubt that knowing an artist's intentions can shed light on the work but to limit one's interpretation to an analysis of the artist's bio is to unnecessarily limit the complexity of potential readings of the piece. I think there's a very natural tendency to want to do this, I'm guilty of it myself but I'm suspicious of that process. I think we run the risk of oversimplifying and stereotyping the artist. Now, as for an artist's motivations, it's not possible to know, and that's the beauty of the process. I can look at a painting I've just made and take a guess about how it came into being and what that might imply about me, but that's no more or less interesting than what anyone else might have to say about the image. There are literally millions of little decisions that are made between the initial thought and the finished piece and I can't make a cogent verbal argument for most of them. What we wind up with is a thing that exists outside the realm of language, that has the possibility to communicate with anyone that might cross it's path and so there's no reading that's more correct than any other. That said, I believe that those who are in the business of writing about art have the potential to do a great service. Good art is a potent raw material, ready for interpretation, and a good writer is capable of pointing out meaning and specific cultural relevance that even the artist might not have been aware of.

**AFH:** Should artists advocate the meaning of their work to viewers? And if so, are certain viewers' opinions more valuable than others?

**WC:** I'm happy to talk about process and the things I'm interested in, but to me the most exciting thoughts about a painting are those that I haven't been able to articulate myself. Since it's not possible to be culturally omnipotent there will always be ways to read a painting that I could never have thought of. Similarly, because a painting is likely to remain more or less the same over hundreds of years while everything around it changes we can't expect any one meaning or reading of the piece to remain relevant.

**AFH:** Do you think critics, collectors or other artists are more capable of interpreting, not just responding to, art than, lets say, layman viewers?

**WC:** I have to hear from all of them because you just never know. There's not one group among those that you just mentioned that hasn't impressed or disappointed me at some point. But this kind of democratic analysis is predicated on the decision that the object is worthy of contemplation. If anyone, critic, artist, or layman, dismisses the piece outright as not art then no worthwhile discussion can take place.

**AFH:** Your life-drawing sessions became a real hub of the New York art community. Are you still hosting them?

**WC:** They've become more impromptu and much smaller at the moment but it's remained an important part of my own studio practice.

**AFH:** Conceptually, your work addresses the lures of hedonism and self-indulgent temptations. Has painting such delicious fantasies helped you modulate your own daily desires?

**WC:** Desire is an important part of the process, and my interest in it lies in the unsatisfiable. Insatiability. As Lacan has pointed out the state of desire depends on lack, and so for that to persist, it's most important that desire is never totally fulfilled. The object of desire exists only as fantasy and is therefore maintained by its own impossibility.

**AFH:** Do you feel you have a Platonic ideal, an ideal image, of this fantasy? Or are all the images you depict equally representative of this fantasy?

**WC:** What I'm sure of is that I've never completely articulated the thing I'm trying to describe. When I've just finished a painting I'll very often look at it and think, "yes that's it, and . . ." and it's the "and" that leads me to want to make the next painting.

**AFH:** Do you see corollaries between today's affluent society, and the prevailing aesthetic, and the era of Rococo you reference in your paintings?

**WC:** The dream of paradise, of a land of plenty, is a thread that runs through all of human history, not just in the affluent times but in fact very often in the lean as well. The best art making exists outside of current events and isn't dictated by economics.