

ARTSEEN: WILL COTTON *Cockaigne*

By William Corwin

PRINCE GEORGE BALLROOM
(PERFORMA 11, CURATED BY STACY ENGMAN)
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While some curators and critics may bemoan the end of the era of the 12-hour-long performance piece, Will Cotton's debut in the arena of live-action public art, "Cockaigne," was a short and sweet representation of the artist's signature thinly veiled psycho-sexual imagery, which left the audience craving just a little bit more. The piece, like Cotton's art in general, was marked by its hermetic nature and precise quantification of lust, desire, and indulgence. While the two short dances, "Whipped Cream" and "Cotton Candy" began at 8 p.m., and each weighed in at under five minutes, it was the hour-long cocktail and candy reception prologue that served as a worthy counterweight to the action on stage.



Photo credit: Scott Catto.

Along the lines of some of the great debates—free will versus predetermination, democracy versus enlightened despotism—Cotton took a major stand in the whipped cream versus cotton candy imbroglio. In point of fact, both substances are mostly nothing, which may have explained the briefness of the performances, but it is that instantaneous reaction on the tongue that is at the heart of the idea of confection. The first act, “Fan Dance,” performed by burlesque mainstay Ruby Valentine to a violin duet by Caleb Burhans, was indeed light, frothy, and very creamy. Though it can be cast in a sexual light, it can be quite innocent as well; Cotton plays both angles frequently in his painting, as he did in the backdrop for the stage, which consisted of a monochromatic oil sketch of a large mound of cream. In Miss Valentine’s dance, to tripping ascending scales from the strings, the white feather fans, which generally are a vehicle of brief erotic exposure, seemed more like ends in themselves, describing light but thick circles in the air, while Miss Valentine fluttered behind.

“Cotton Candy,” the second act, presented the confection as a rather distant entity. John Zorn created a light-hearted melody propelled by a base percussive line of hand-clapping, and Charles Askegard provided a tight and not unexpectedly Balanchine-esque choreography for the three New York City Ballet dancers (Savannah Lowery, Georgina Pazcoguin, and Ana Sofia Scheller). Perhaps the dance referenced the excessive sweetness of the carnival snack, the fact that though it is easy on the eye, it is not that easy to eat—and also a bit grainy on the tongue. Cotton’s backdrop for this dance was his recurring cotton candy clouds. Christina Giannini’s costumes were similarly diaphanous for the first act, and pert and cute for the second.

The crowd milling about and jostling for drinks and cupcakes in the ornate Prince George Ballroom seemed largely unaware that it was a lead actor in the evening’s proceedings, but Cotton, an unobtrusive and largely silent emcee, is a deft master of 19th-century sensibilities, and ran his Performa piece consciously and overtly much like the Paris Opera, providing more time and space for the audience to mingle and assess itself than to actually sit and watch the art.

The initial sense appealed to was olfactory, and it was the smell of the whole project that left the most lasting impression. Perhaps this is because perfume is one of the most ancient and extravagant of indulgences, and is now frequently the final frontier of commercial packaging that today’s pop icons offer a voracious public. Cotton has never shied away from activating various visceral and sexual signifiers, and he certainly has no qualms about engaging art on its commercial levels, so there was no actual sense of crassness in a signature scent being created for the event. “Cockaigne,” the whipped cream fragrance, was handed out by young girls in tutus and cotton candy hairpieces, while other similarly garbed girls made cotton candy and filled champagne flutes.

The entire evening could have jumped from the pages of the self-titled Will Cotton monograph that has just been published. Much like the theme of the evening, these dances were an act of the artist indulging himself and seeing his fantasies lived out rather than a radical departure from the artist’s previous visual milieu. Cotton’s paintings have

never really been about something new—they are about delving into that very old, and very Freudian territory of childlike unremitting desire.

Cockaigne means “land of plenty” and was a medieval mythical paradise. A parallel between what that meant to a denizen of middle ages Europe and what it means to a post-*Sex in the City* inhabitant of New York was largely a function of the evening. Painter Pieter Breughel the Elder’s interpretation of Cockaigne was a depiction of overindulgence that engaged basic needs and desires. The imagery of peasants eating until sick and becoming fat evokes a sense of safety in overindulgence, a preparation for lean times ahead. Cotton’s interpretation focuses entirely on candy, the ephemerality and emptiness of sweetness. The world’s misconception that America is the Land of Plenty, and our own assimilation of that myth, has led to the production of artificial popular personalities who are so catered to that they hardly eat at all, and the direction of overindulgence is not to satiate a basic human hunger, but an obsession with refinement and perfection, often emaciated and lonely.