

# TEMPLON



WILL COTTON

*DESIGNBOOM.COM*, June 2014



will cotton at his studio  
image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

## interview with artist will cotton

will cotton is an american artist whose work spans across painting, drawing and sculpture. he's best known for the surreal scenes he creates from candy and cakes. in recent years cotton has worked on several high-profile collaborations such as those with luxury french sweet maker ladurée and with katy perry for whom he directed the 2010 music video 'california gurls'.

on the 25th of june, 2014 ronchini gallery, london will present the first ever solo show of cotton's work in the UK, where the artist will present several new large-scale oil on linen paintings. will told us more about his artistic influences, personal interests and desire to space travel.

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**designboom: can you remember the instance that made you want to become an artist?**

will cotton: when I want to describe something, I find myself reaching for a pencil and making a drawing. it's been like that as long as I can remember. I guess at some point, someone told me that this is the behavior of an artist, and I thought 'fine, that's me then'. I also happened to grow up near the frederic church estate in the hudson valley of new york. an early visit to the site, (known as olana) gave me the impression that an artist could live in a total fantasy world of their own making, and I really took to that idea.



beyond the pleasure principle, 2014,  
oil on linen, 80 x 108 inches,  
image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: who or what has been the biggest influence on your approach towards art?**

WC: I keep thinking of early childhood literature, the wizard of oz, grimm's fairy tales, C.S. lewis. there's something about these stories that exist just beyond the edge of the reality we know, but at the same time, seemed to me then to be totally plausible.

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for a long time now, I've thought of my painting as most akin to fiction writing. I want to literally paint a picture of something we may know to be impossible, but still not question it's possibility.

on the visual arts side, there's a 1567 painting by pieter bruegel the elder called the land of cockaigne in which the human subjects have found themselves in a place where virtually everything is made of food, several of them are asleep in an apparent post feast stupor. though I suspect the original work spoke to a culture familiar with famine, and probably existed therefore as a kind of escapist fantasy, I began to think of the idea of a land of plenty as a metaphor for contemporary america, and american tastes, my own included. this thought has sustained my practice, and held my attention for the last twenty years now.



the coming storm, 2014

oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches

image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

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**DB: how would you describe your approach to someone unfamiliar with your work?**

WC: my practice has become very process oriented. in the interest of painting the most believable picture I can, I've developed the habit of always beginning by building props, maquettes, costumes, and sometime life-size sets. these are usually built, and or baked in my studio/kitchen. this way I can really lose myself in the surprises and unexpected details of the subject, and in a very real way, I'm no longer painting something imaginary, because in fact, it's right there in front of me.



cotton candy katy, 2010,  
oil on linen, 72 x 84 inches  
image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: how would you describe the evolution of your work?**

WC: there was a time when I would literally go out looking for subject matter with an easel strapped to my back. I was just painting the world around me, just as I found it. then it dawned on me that if I worked in the studio from constructed maquettes that I built myself, it meant that I could have complete control over every aspect of the symbolism in the picture. that happened a long time ago now, but it really changed everything for me. the work has evolved more recently toward a greater rendering of surface detail, as I've come to see material description as another important aspect of storytelling.

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**DB: which medium or materials do you like working with the most?**

WC: it's very traditional, oil primed linen, oil paint, and walnut oil.



candy curls, 2006,

oil on linen, 34 x 24 inches

image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: which piece or collection to date has given you the most satisfaction?**

WC: that tends to be whatever is currently on my easel. I suspect this comes out of the eternal belief that the best work is just about to happen. when a picture is unfinished the possibilities are still infinite.

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frosting flowers, 2013,  
oil on linen, 34 x 24 inches,  
image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: please could you tell us a bit more about your new pieces?**

WC: I've noticed recently that as an artist gets deeper into the complexity of the subject at hand, it can actually appear from the outside as a kind of stagnation when in fact it's anything but. as I mentioned, lately, I've become more interested in rendering surface detail. how hard and shiny is the candy, how soft is the flesh, how fragile is the meringue. most of the core ideas that excite me at the moment, (desire, indulgence, self-denial) have already had my attention in one way or another for several years, but in my most recent paintings I'm paring down some of the more specific aspects of those questions. why does the dream of utopia always seem destined for failure? why are pleasure and guilt so inseparable?



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relic, 2007,

oil on linen, 65 x 50 inches

image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: what are you currently fascinated by and how is it feeding into your work?**

WC: I've become very interested in the way that most cultures all over the world seem to engage in some process of self-adornment. I've made a lot of work over the last few years that address this idea, by playing a game with myself, in which I imagine that the only materials the figure in the painting has at hand to decorate or clothe themselves with are made of sweets.

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consuming folly, 2010,

oil on linen 72 x 96 inches

image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: what hobbies or interests do you have that might surprise people?**

WC: NASA, space travel, astrophysics – I've collected some early apollo program blueprints and I desperately hope to go into space one day.

**DB: do you have any superstitious beliefs or rules that you live by?**

WC: the biggest surprise to me is that I've now settled into a studio routine that mimics the standard, monday-friday, forty hour work week. I've tried literally every other working routine, overnight, early morning etc. and eventually found the standard 9-5 to be by far the most effective.



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pastoral, 2009,

oil on linen, 60 x 72 inches

image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: what would you like to accomplish in the near future?**

WC: it makes my head spin a little to think about it. I've got a few paintings in progress, there's a ballet I'm working on with some friends, I've developed a real fondness for printmaking that seems ongoing, I'd very much like to do an outdoor sculpture, a short film, illustrate a book, opera sets... many things!

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taffy, 2007,  
oil on linen, 72 x 80 inches  
image courtesy of the artist, mary boone gallery, new york and ronchini gallery

**DB: what's your personal motto?**

WC: lately I just tell myself to 'be interesting'. but I wish I didn't feel this was necessary! to be more specific, and I'm really talking about the studio context here, any painting is made of literally thousands of brush strokes, all done in the service of describing the narrative at hand. so it's easy to forget that for a painting to be really good, each of those marks needs to have a beauty and a poetry of their own as well.