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WILL COTTON

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Artists

Will Cotton Knows His Sugar-Spun World Isn't For Everyone. He's Too Determined to Care

Right now in New York, Cotton has candy-colored solo exhibitions at Galerie Templon and at Rockefeller Center.



by **Katie White** • May 30, 2025

Will Cotton knows his sugary sweet fantasy world isn't to everyone's taste.

"There's been a fear of beauty and a fear of sincerity," said Cotton during a conversation in his Tribeca studio. "Though I can't say I'm one hundred percent sincere," he added with a quiet smile.

Behind the artist were monumental paintings of unicorns, cowboys, and glittering mermaids, all in their final stages. These works are now on view in "Between Instinct and Reason," his solo exhibition at Galerie Templon in New York (through June 28). The exhibition follows a 2024 show "Trigger" with Templon in Paris.

Since the 1990s, Cotton has conjured up this high fructose realm filled with colossal cotton candy clouds, icing-heavy cakes, chocolate seas, and totemic lollipops. Beautiful women with flowing tresses often appear, like pin-ups, sometimes negligibly clad, resting, poised, within these Willy Wonka visions. Cotton calls this place Candyland.



Will Cotton, *The Unicorn Dreams of a Showgirl* (2025). Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris, Brussels, New York
Photo © Charles Roussel.

Unicorns and cowboys have entered this lexicon over the decades, imagery Cotton considers a part of an American iconography he is creating. His palette is frothy, pale, and, often, very pink. The backgrounds of his works are based on maquettes he's built himself—molds, or, at times, actual cakes he's made. These over-the-top vignettes teeter on camp, but feel, at once, disquietingly sincere, and have garnered, unsurprisingly, a fair deal of critical dismissiveness. Jerry Saltz once called his work “bonbons for the rubes.” In 2000, Roberta Smith wrote, for her part, that the “paintings on their own, are like simple carbohydrates, they don't supply much nutrition.”

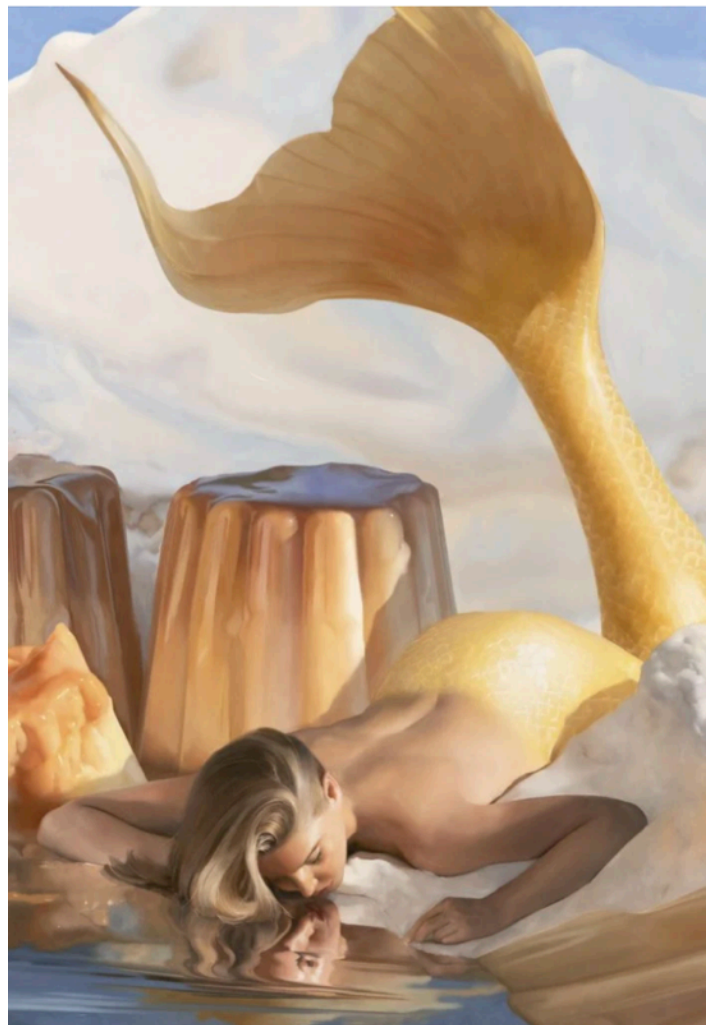
Still, decades on, Cotton (b. 1965) remains a fixture of the New York art world, with a loyal following and regular exhibitions. His work is still recognizably his—and doesn't feel as dated as one might have expected 25 years ago. Cotton is now at an interesting moment in his career, too. Though he's shown with Templon in Europe for 15 years, “Between Instinct and Reason” marks his first solo show with Templon in New York (He'd previously exhibited with Mary Boone, where he had his first solo show in 2000). Right now, his works are also on view in a site-specific exhibition at Rockefeller Center featuring monumental murals and sculptures (through May 31). Held within an iconic and grand landmark building, that exhibition is meant to evoke questions surrounding spectacle and visual pleasure.



Will Cotton, *Sisters* (2024). Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris, Brussels, New York. Photo © Charles Roussel.

Recently, a new figure—the mermaid—has appeared in his pantheon, an exciting development for this artist. These mermaids, like in mythology, are dangerous figures, alluring, but impetuous. In one new painting, *The Abyss of Unquenchable Desire*, a mermaid with caramel blonde hair and a honey yellow tail, lies prone beside giant creme caramels, and stares, mesmerized, at her own reflection in a pool of rippled water. The painting is an allusion to the myth of Narcissus, a mortal of great beauty who fell in love with his own reflection, withering away and dying, a scene most famously painted by Caravaggio.

“Mermaids are known for luring sailors with looks and their song, and then drowning them,” said Cotton. “I think of mermaids as psychopathic entities who really are only in love with themselves.” In another painting, *Sisters*, two mermaids sit on scoops of ice cream. One peels the wrapper off of a cupcake, while the other looks on, perhaps desirously. Seduction, even obsession, is at the heart of what Cotton is after.



Will Cotton, *The Abyss of Unquenchable Desire* (2024-2025). Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris, Brussels, New York
Photo © Charles Roussel.

“By the mid-90s, I was living a very hedonistic life,” he said. “Me and my wife at the time started going out to all the clubs all night. I was doing lots of drugs and drinking a lot and really throwing ourselves into what felt to me like Candyland. I wondered: what would it really be like to be in Candyland? For me, it was wonderful and terrible at the same time. It’s fun, but when you get into drug addiction... it gets very dark.”

Cotton has, fittingly given his subject matter, a terrible sweet tooth. He finds himself obsessing over sugary confections. “I think about cake all day, pretty much every day,” he said, “I think the world is essentially a minefield of temptation.”

Unicorns, like mermaids, are a similarly tempestuous creature in Cotton’s world of pleasure and vice. “In medieval literature, the unicorn can only be tamed by a virgin. I don’t feel like that’s part of my mythology,” he explained. “The unicorn is willful and follows his own vision of exactly what he feels like at any given moment. He doesn’t have an agenda because if it’s something he wants to happen, it’ll be happening.” Many of Cotton’s paintings show unicorns throwing cowboys off their backs. “There’s this American mythology of the cowboy who tames everything, who breaks the horses and herds the cattle and has his way with nature. This is nature saying, ‘No, that’s not how it’s going to happen.’”



Will Cotton, *The Siren's Offer* (2024). Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris, Brussels, New York Photo © Artist's studio.

The unicorn could be read as a metaphor for the artist himself. Cotton's style of painting has existed out of step with the trends and movements of the larger New York art world. But the artist, who graduated from the New York Academy of Art, which is known for its rigorous, figurative approach to painting, has become, over the years, a champion of the school and generation of emerging artists with it.

Cotton's works can feel impenetrable at moments, as hyper-controlled as a glossy editorial, but there is something simultaneously low-fi and traditionalist about his approach that is oddly hypnotic. He paints every detail of his works himself (he's never been able to figure out how to use a studio assistant in that sense). "The artist's hand is the DNA of a painting," he said. His process is long and includes a series of detailed drawings, building maquettes, photographing models, collaging images from his reference library with Photoshop, and ultimately painting. The women in his paintings are based on models he's used time and again, and for the past number of years, he's made costumes for them.

Candyland exists within its own internal logic. His unicorns don't have wings because "I just don't believe it's possible. I don't think that animal's going to fly." His mermaid's accoutrements are made of wrappers and cellophane.



Will Cotton, *The Wave* (2024-2025). Courtesy of the artist and Templon, Paris, Brussels, New York Photo © Charles Roussel.

In *The Wave*—the centerpiece of the show and the most dynamic painting of the group— mermaids, the cowboy, and the unicorn come together in one image. A cowboy attempts to lead a pink unicorn through crashing waves. Two mermaids swim up on either side of him, menacingly, we know—they are luring him, pushing him, out to sea. Around them, waves crash in splendid blues and white sprays. Vanilla ice cream floats, abstractions of white on white, frame the scene, which is itself indebted to the language of historical seascapes. It's the largest work he's ever made. In *Candyland*, a moment of demise has finally arrived—and it feels welcomed. Like the pull tide of the ocean or the call of the siren, these are paintings whose lure one desires to resist, but that can, unexpectedly, pull a viewer out of their depth.