

TEMPLON

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PRESS RELEASE

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WILL COTTON
Between Instinct and Reason
7 may – 21 june 2025



Sisters, 2024, oil on canvas, 120 x 87 in

TEMPLON New York is proud to present its first exhibition by American painter Will Cotton. In this new body of work, *Between Instinct and Reason*, the artist continues to reflect on pop culture and a new American mythology. In Cotton's world of sugary treats, pink unicorns, and hypermasculine cowboys, he is now introducing a new player: the mermaid.

In these monumental paintings, Cotton depicts glossy scenes of seductive sirens who are as beautiful as they are potentially dangerous. They tempt cowboys with baked goods and encircle them in oceanic whirlpools; they gaze like Narcissus into their own watery reflections and engage in serious discussion between one another. We observe them from afar in their natural, candy-laden habitat, and in other instances are captivated by their hypnotic gaze. Just as the cowboy tries and fails to tame the unicorn, the mermaid cannot be controlled by anyone. She can, however, control whomever she pleases.

The mermaid as we know her has captivated Western imagination since before the Middle Ages, with the first images of hybrid female sea creatures appearing before the first century. Like unicorns, ancient mythology and medieval tapestries often depict sirens as dangerous and violent towards men, diametrically opposed to our contemporary *Disneyfied* version of the innocent little mermaid. Cotton is interested in America's "defanging" of these mythological creatures, and his new works investigate the complexities and nuances of a character that is often simplified to a trope. These paintings are not meant to be didactic—the artist intentionally blurs the line between good and evil. Cotton champions the mermaid as the strongest

Address: 293 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10001. Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am - 6 pm Press contact:
camille.desprez@templon.com tel.: +1 212 922 3745, @galerietemplon

female character, unimpacted by moral standards and unthreatened by external forces. A siren will seduce and drown a sailor on a whim simply for her own entertainment. Using her singing and physical beauty, she ensnares male counterparts to satisfy her own desires. Subverting even the viewer's gaze, never subject to the desires of others, the mermaid lures us in with predatory agency.

Born in 1965, Will Cotton studied at the New York Academy of Art and the Beaux-Arts de Rouen. He has long exhibited at the Mary Boone Gallery (New York) and the Jablonka Gallery (Cologne). His work has been exhibited worldwide, including the San Francisco Museum of Art (2000); the Seattle Art Museum (2002); the Kunsthalle in Bielefeld, Germany (2004); the CAPC in Bordeaux (2005); the Chelsea Art Museum in New York (2006); the Triennale Bovisa in Milan (2007); the Musée Marmottan in Giverny (2008); the Cornell University Museum in New York (2014); and the Orlando Museum in Florida (2017). He is also known for his artistic projects in a wide variety of fields, from pastries with Ladurée, collaborations with pop stars such as Katy Perry and fashion spreads with Elle Fanning for New York Magazine. Concurrently with this exhibition, Cotton was invited to transform the iconic landmark Rockefeller Center, displaying a series of sculptures and drawings throughout the building featuring his cowboys, unicorns, and baked goods. The installation is part of Art in Focus, produced in partnership with Art Production Fund, and will be on view through May 31, 2025.