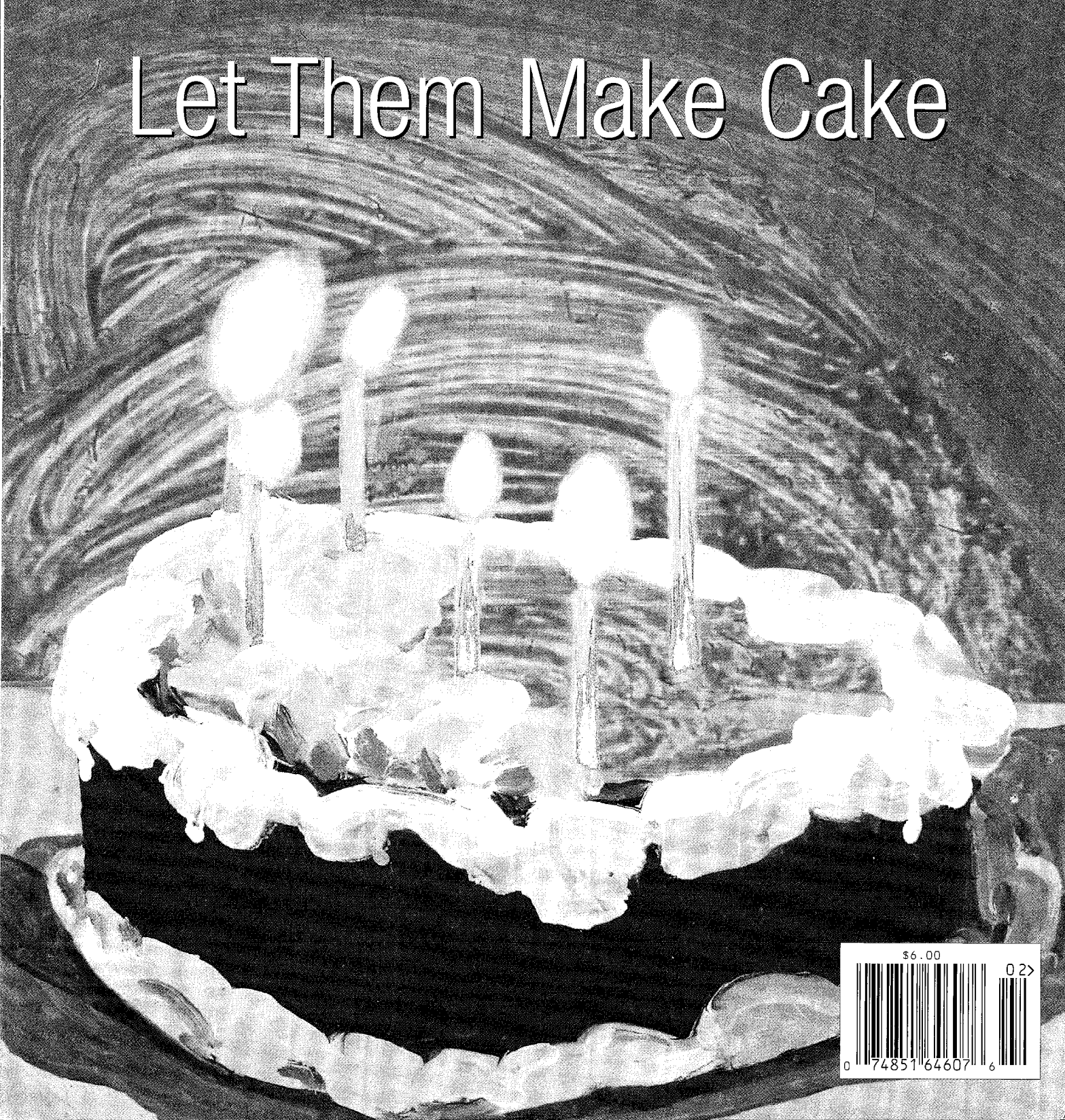


Dynamic Duos: Artist Collaborators ■ Picasso: Guitar Hero

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ARTnews

Let Them Make Cake



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Not Just Desserts

For some artists, cake is a subject. For others, it's a medium

BY NICOLE J. CARUTH

Will Cotton has painted landscapes of sweets for more than a decade. But in 2009 he turned his attention to actual confections, opening a temporary bakery inside the retail space Partners & Spade in New York. Cotton and his assistants (who wore cupcake tiaras) filled the store with lemon and gingerbread macaroons, butter cream-topped cupcakes, apple-caramel tarts, chocolate-raspberry treats, and fluffy pink-frosted cakes (matching the cotton-candy clouds of the artist's paintings). At prices ranging from \$2 for the macaroons to \$30 for the cakes, the treats quickly sold out. Cotton also displayed sculptures of piled-up imitation cakes, ornately "frosted" using acrylic in pastry bags, which were not for sale (his paintings go for \$50,000 to \$250,000 at Mary Boone Gallery in New York). "Eating other foods may be pleasurable, but cake is extraordinary in that it exists only for pleasure—there's no nutritional reason to eat it," says Cotton. "And that's why I find it so intriguing and wonderful."

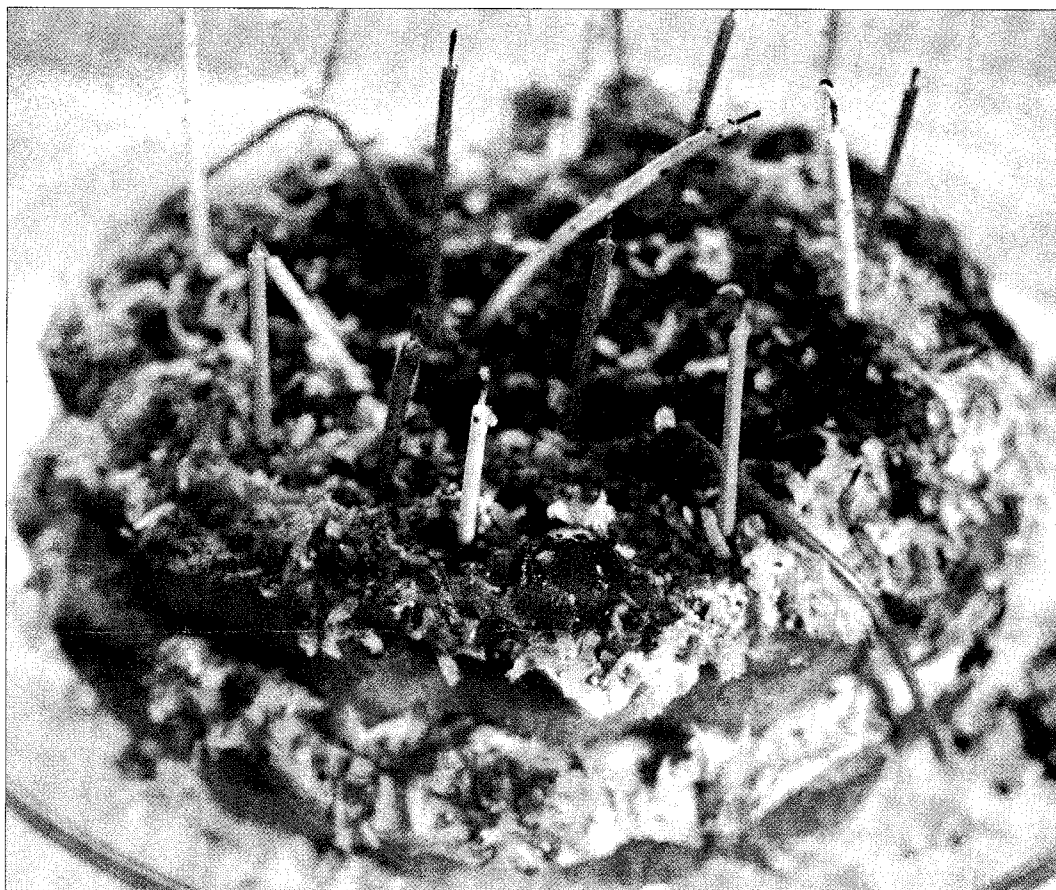
Cotton is not the only one fascinated by cakes. Cake in an artist's hands can become anything from a nonedible sculpture to a quickly devoured dessert, from an object of beauty to a symbol of gluttony. For some artists, cakes evoke powerful childhood memories, and for others, they become the basis for adult art happenings.

Dustin Wayne Harris photographed cakes that he had asked women to bake for him after a date, as well as cakes made by friends. "I asked friends because I didn't have enough dates, and a lot of women said no to my invitation to bake a cake," he says. The resulting series, "Cake Mixx," was shown last year at the now-closed Heist Gallery in New York, where individual photographs sold for \$1,000. "I did the project because cakes are so visually interesting. They reflect the person who made them," he says. And, he adds, in this project they tended to demonstrate the baker's feelings toward him. His date Chloe's first cake, for example, had bright blue frosting and coconut

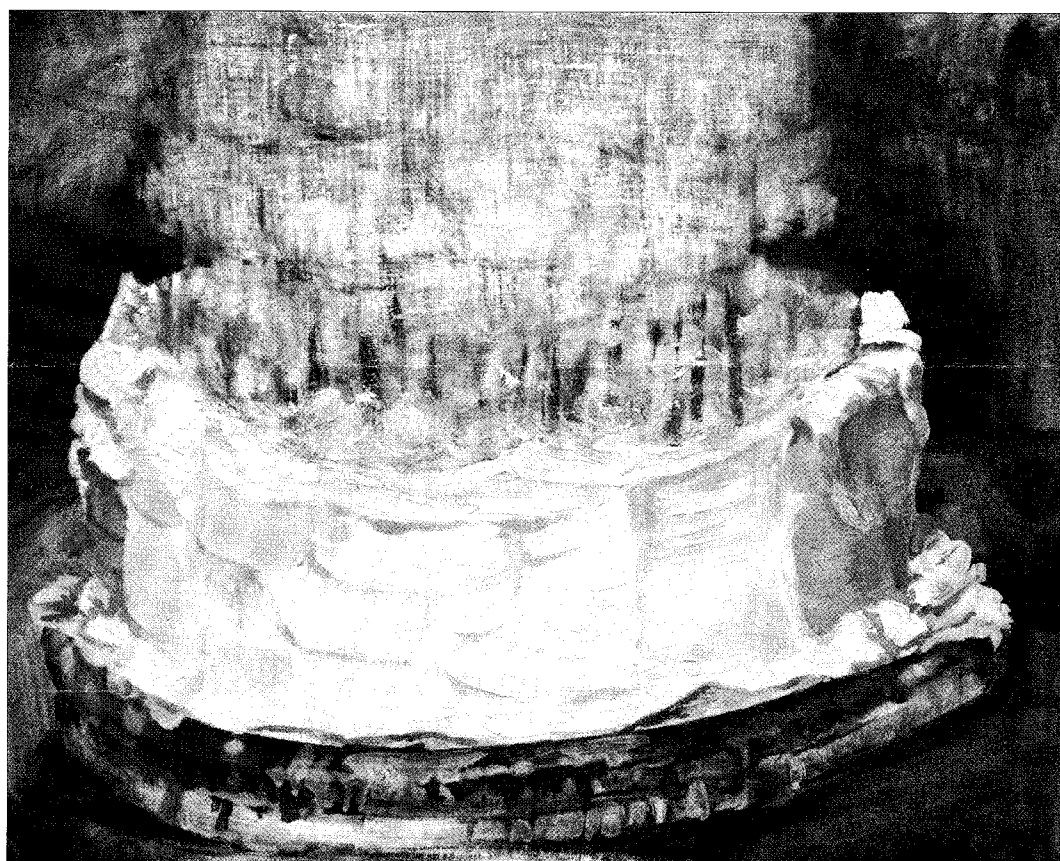
Nicole J. Caruth is a freelance writer and curator based in Brooklyn, New York.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

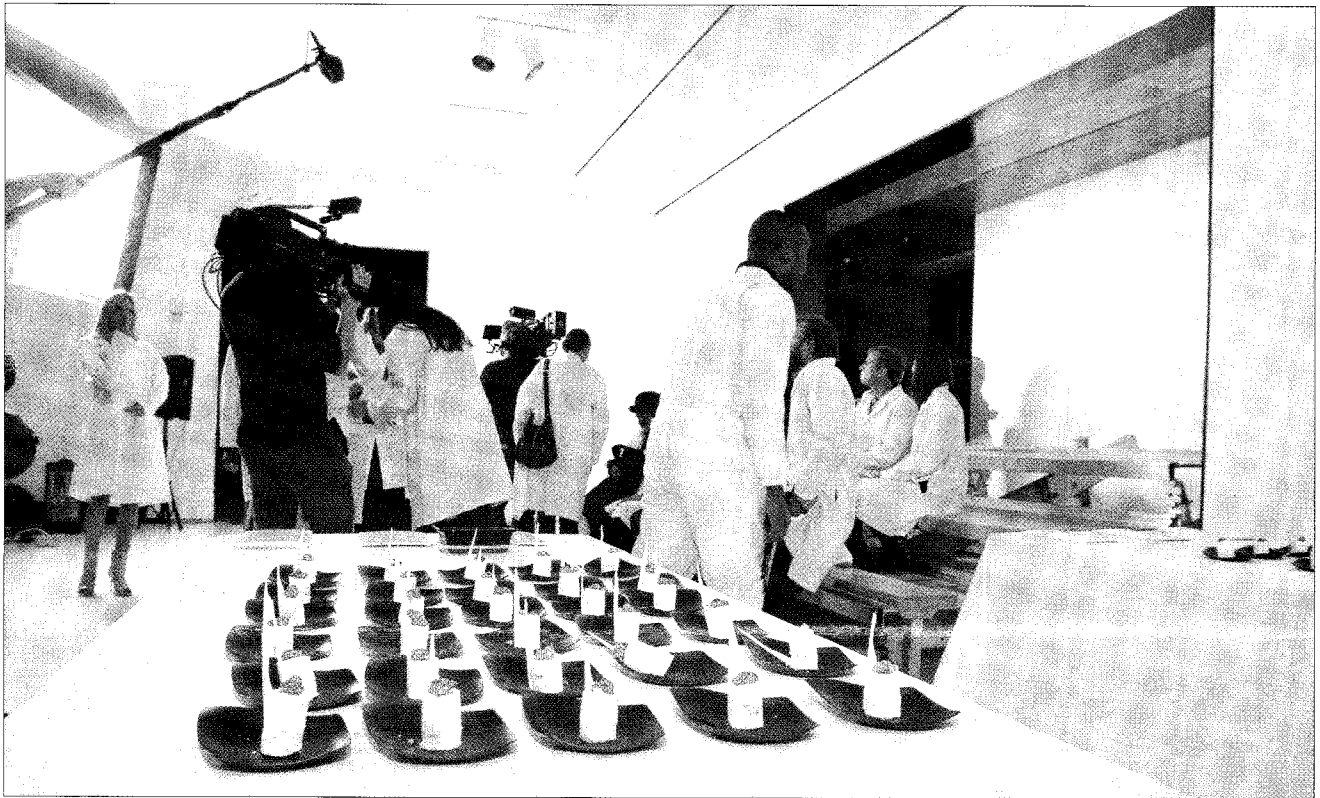
OPPOSITE Victoria
Howe baked and
photographed
*Artist Tribute
Series Cake #2,
David
Wojnarowicz,*
2010.



Dustin Wayne
Harris's
photograph
Chloe, 2009,
named after the
woman who
baked him the
cake.

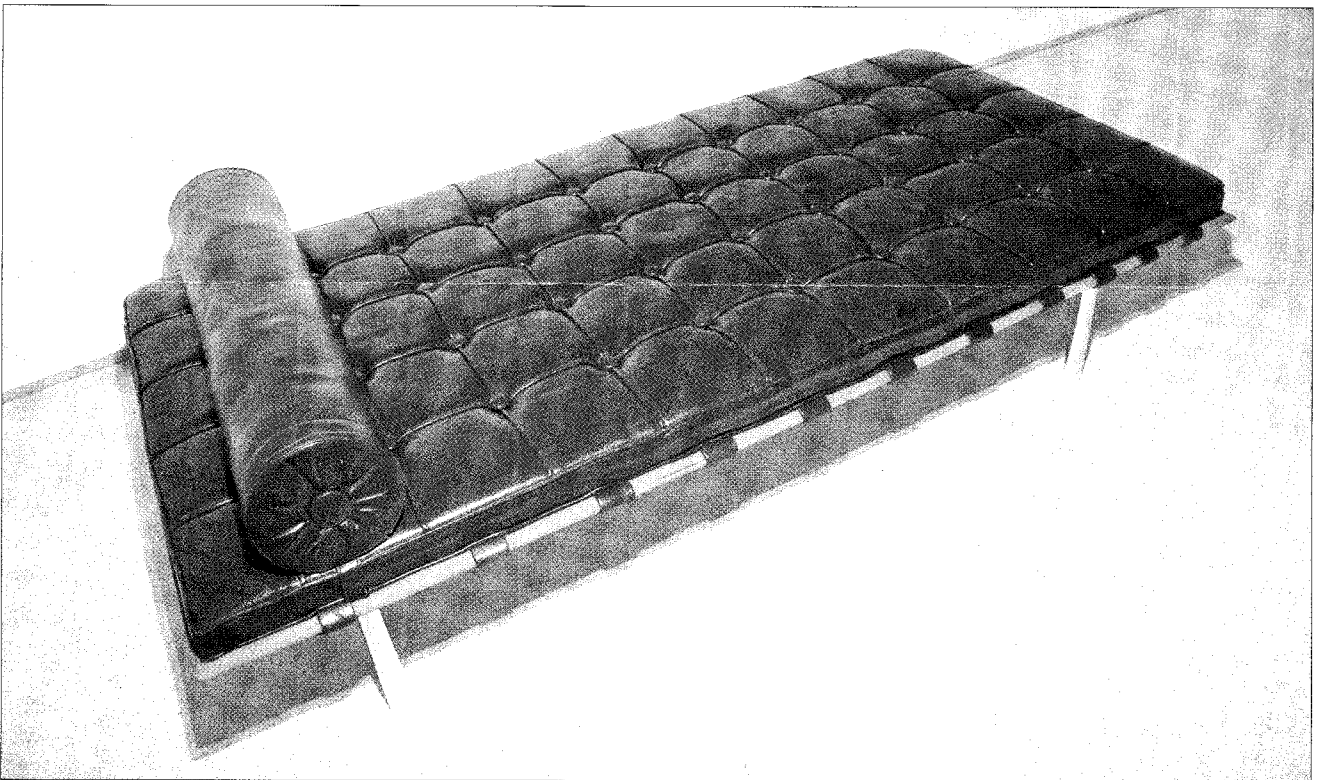


Clare Grill's
painting *When
You Get That
Old,* 2009.



ABOVE In *Abramović Experiment*, 2009, Marina Abramović directed guests to put on white lab coats before eating almond cake with lychee.

BELOW Leandro Erlich and pastry chef Guido Mogni's chocolate-cake replica of Mies van der Rohe's "Barcelona Daybed," 2009.



COURTESY KREEMART, NEW YORK (2)

flakes clinging to its edges, a sign that “the relationship had promise,” says Harris. Her second cake was dull and flat, with what looked to be a stab wound at its center. Harris enjoyed capturing the imperfections of cake, introduced either by the baker or during transport (one cake was sent to New York from California). “I like the melancholy of all these objects. They’re kind of pathetic, these smooshed cakes,” Harris says.

Harris didn’t eat any of the cakes baked for him. And many people resisted eating the cake that the collective Los Carpinteros commissioned at Art Basel Miami Beach in December. It was created by chef David Schwadron to resemble raw, bloody meat, and was served only to holders of a ticket (designed by Los Carpinteros), as at a butcher shop. The event was the work of Kreëmart, an organization that encourages artists to explore dessert as a medium. In 2009 Kreëmart presented more-attractive confections, at an event at Haunch of Venison in New York pairing artists and pastry chefs. Leandro Erlich, working with pastry chef Guido Moggi of the restaurant Sant Ambroeu, created a chocolate-frosted life-size replica of Mies van der Rohe’s “Barcelona Daybed.” Marina Abramović, partnered with Dominique Ansel, the pastry chef at Daniel, presented *Abramović Experiment*, a performance that involved white lab coats, gold leaf on guests’ lips, almond cake, and lychees. “Art can be, like a cake, both nourishing and fun,” says Kreëmart cofounder Raphael Castoriano, an art adviser.

Franco Mondini-Ruiz makes cake sculptures by layering 13 to 14 round canvases on top of one another. Each canvas features a painting that relates to the person for whom the cake is commissioned, which can be viewed by disassembling the layers. The cakes, which sell for \$5,000 through Colton & Farb Gallery in Houston, “tell the story of a person’s life,” Mondini-Ruiz says. “What I like about them is that they fit into a tradition. Think of the wedding cake. For centuries, cake has been a symbolic, sacred sculpture.”

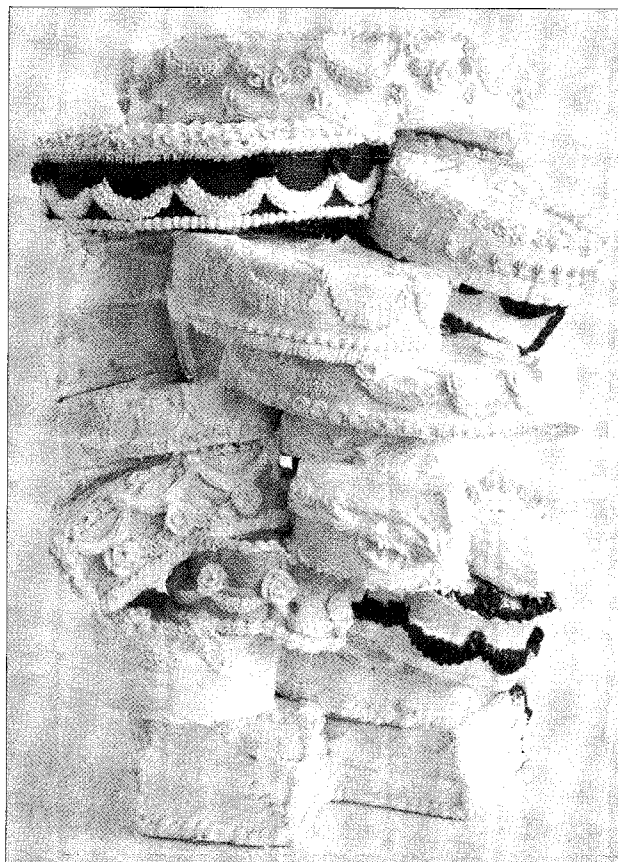
Cake turned up on canvas in the 16th century, when Pieter Bruegel the Elder (whom Cotton credits as an influence) painted rooftops covered in cake in *Land of Cockaigne*, a satirical rendering of a utopia emphasizing gluttony. In the Pop art era, Claes Oldenburg assembled his colossal soft sculpture *Floor Cake* (1962). Laurie Simmons later photographed cakes as humanized objects, giving them legs in high-heeled shoes. And Wayne Thiebaud has painted old-fashioned cafeteria-like dessert displays for more than 40 years. “Cakes can be so beautiful,” Thiebaud says.

Clare Grill has painted three birthday cakes, each based on a photograph from her childhood. “I like the idea that if you make a wish on your birthday candles, it will come true; that’s what these paintings are about,” says Grill, who has an exhibition at Edward Thorp Gallery in New York through February 19. While party revelers and the artist herself appear in the photos, cake is the sole focus of these paintings. Two of them, *Cake* (2008), exhibited at Caren Golden Fine Art in New York, and *Trick Candles* (2008), exhibited at Rare Device Gallery in San Francisco and Jen

Bekman Gallery in New York, sold for around \$1,200 each. Part of Grill’s fascination is in exploring what she can do with paint. “I like the way paint can look like frosting, smoke, or fire,” she says. “It’s fun to paint cakes, actually.” The artist’s treatment of white oil paint in *When You Get That Old* (2009) evokes the creamy, stiff peaks of cake frosting so strongly, you can almost taste it.

Sampling the cake is the point of Chinatown Cake Club. Pastry chef Victoria Howe created the private club to present cake tastings in an apartment in New York’s Chinatown. The

**Delight, 2009,
a sculpture by
Will Cotton.**



project has even generated a book, *Chinatown Cake Club: A Secret Bakery’s Recipebook for Cakes & Other Confections*, recently published by Heraklia Press. Howe’s elaborate menus, featuring multiple courses of cake, have always included a cake honoring an artist. She has paid tribute to Nobuyoshi Araki, Cindy Sherman, David Wojnarowicz, and Henry Darger. “I started thinking about ways to make a somewhat subversive cake using images that would usually not have a place with baked goods,” Howe says. The cakes are decorated with images by the artists, placed there using a photo-transfer technique involving edible rice paper. Howe also selects flavors with the artists in mind. “Araki’s color photography is very lurid, luscious, and saturated. So I wanted something garish,” she says. “Red velvet was a perfect choice. It’s decadent and uses a ton of food coloring. It’s a cake of excess.” ■