

## Sara Cwynar Questions the Images That Comfort Us

'Marilyn', the multidisciplinary artist's latest exhibition, can be seen online at UK's The Approach

By [Kenji Fujishima](#)

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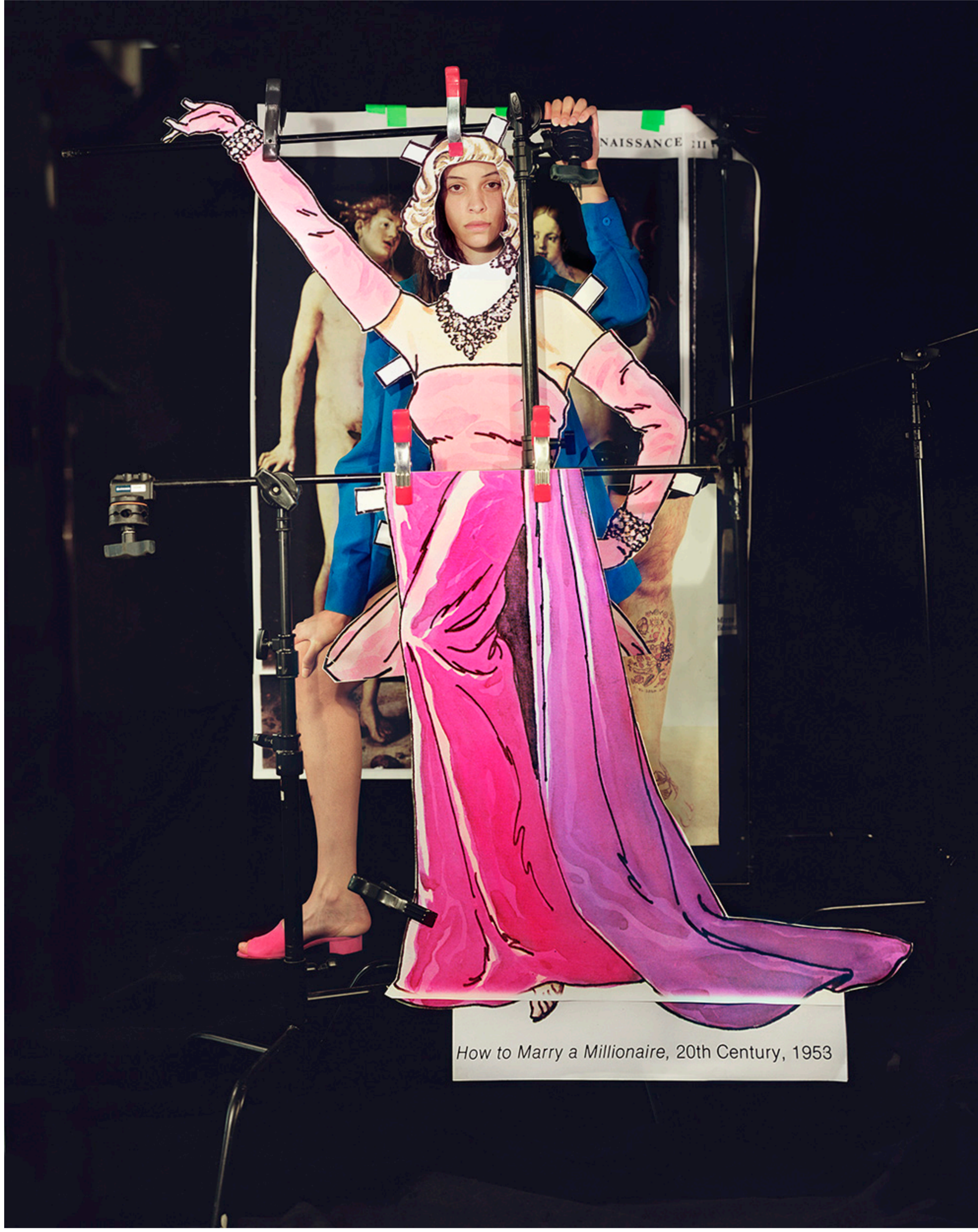


Sara Cwynar, Marilyn, 2020. Installation view – The Annexe. (Courtesy: The Approach)

Much about the world right now has changed, but judging by anecdotal evidence and news stories such as [this](#), our taste for consumption not only remains but has intensified since many of us have been forced to shelter in place. We all need to do what we can to either feel comfortable or stave off boredom, right? Such an environment makes it a uniquely interesting time to consider the art of Sara Cwynar, arguably the millennial poet-laureate of modern-day consumerism and image-molding.

The Vancouver-born, Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary artist, who has been active throughout the 2010s, recently had an exhibit at The Approach in London called Marilyn, which, like most events in the global art world, had to be cut short because of the coronavirus. But, thankfully, Cwynar has made much of the exhibit—featuring canvases, looped installation videos, and a centerpiece short film called Red Film—available to view online [here](#).

For those making their first acquaintance with Cwynar's work through Marilyn, the experience is bound to be both dazzling and disturbing. Dazzling because Cwynar, a graphic designer herself, makes her canvases—many of them collages featuring cut-outs of advertisements, glamour photos, and postcard reproductions of older artworks, among other such kitschy images—so visually seductive. Yet, the disturbing element of her work lies in just how immediately eye-catching her assemblages are: she's pointedly using the aspects of advertising to critique its artificiality. For Marilyn, Cwynar worked with models from the e-commerce fashion website SSENSE.com to further add to the subversive allure of her work.



Sara Cwynar, Ali from SSENSE.com (How to Marry a Millionaire), 2020. Archival pigment print mounted on Dibond. (Courtesy: The Approach)

That sense of subversion can be perceived, among other pieces, in the photograph above, subtitled "How to Marry a Millionaire" after the 1953 motion picture starring Marilyn Monroe. Featuring a SSENSE.com model named Ali, the work clothes the subject in a hand-drawn reproduction of a famous pink dress worn by Monroe. It also includes reproductions of one or two older Renaissance paintings behind her. In the world, as Cwynar represents it, even older works of art can be turned into little more than commodities, fit to be bought or sold as posters or postcards (or simply turned into grist for people's Instagram posts). A more direct expression of this strain of her artistic vision can be seen in her "Louis Vuitton Jeff Koons Rubens bag", to which she adds a whole host of magazine cutouts and art postcards to Jeff Koons's reproduction of a Peter Paul Rubens painting, with Rubens's last name emblazoned on the front, on a Louis Vuitton handbag.

That collage approach extends to her looped installation videos, in particular, "Scroll 1" and "Scroll 2," in which the camera seems to move back and forth or up and down what could best be described as mood boards of advertising iconography, glamour photography, and various other types of glittering images and props. Then there's "Fausta," which features a woman posing and adjusting herself in a photoshoot against a colorful floral backdrop; and "Pantyhose Factory, Italy," in which Cwynar's camera captures pantyhose being stretched and molded in rather suggestive ways on an assembly line. And in Barneys New York, Cwynar wanders around the luxury department store before it closed back in February, taking special note of all the extravagantly high prices of some of its goods even after massive markdowns.



Sara Cwynar, Marilyn, 2020. Installation view. (Courtesy: The Approach)

The pièce de resistance of Marilyn, however, is Red Film, the 13-minute short film that's the culmination of an unofficial trilogy of experimental shorts. With her previous shorts Soft Film (2016) and Rose Gold (2017), Cwynar supported her rapid-fire montage of kitschy imagery with a similarly collage-like running voiceover narration of made-up quotes from a wide variety of writers and philosophers (Baudrillard, Heidegger, Barthes, and many more), deconstructing such images. In Red Film, Cwynar adds a moody electronic score (by Drew Brown and Kaitlyn Arelia Smith) and dance (choreographed by Marie Lambin, performed by Lambin, Nicole Rose Bond, Megumi Kokuba, Kate Nankervis, and Erin Poole) to the mix. And yet, compared to its deliberately messy predecessors, Red Film feels like the work of an artist who has clarified her obsessions. For all its frenetic surface activity, Red Film is a coherent commentary on the vicious cycle of capitalism, which, with the aid of modern media, perpetrates our physical insecurities, creating impossibly high standards of beauty that only feed into people's desire to consume more in the inevitably disappointing quest to reach such standards.

These days, most of us are thinking about what comforts us the most. Sara Cwynar's art, however, forces us to question even the objects that give us comfort. So maybe her art is relevant in the coronavirus era, after all.

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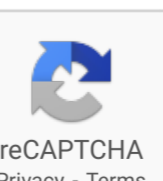
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