

L'OFFICIEL ART

Artist Sara Cwynar Talks Her Multiple Exposures

Sara Cwynar parses found objects and imagery in her work, bringing to light the already blurred boundary between the real and virtual.

05.25.2023 by Rachel Summer Small



Cwynar photographed by Aubrey Mayer.

Sometime last fall, Sara Cwynar was deep in what she dryly implies is a frequent pastime: perusing obscure image archives. Browsing The Met's online catalogs in search of World War II-era costumes, the artist happened to notice a group of photos depicting mannequin-like fashion dolls, staged individually on a plain studio backdrop, dressed in miniaturized versions of decadent formal attire. The collection, shot in the 1950s, ostensibly chronicles French fashion history. "But the outfits have nothing to do with anything 95 percent of people would have ever worn," Cwynar notes of the dolls' aristocratic garb. She was charmed by the marvelously odd characteristics of the series, and deliberately lingered on this archival detour.

While the doll images hovered in open windows on her desktop, Cwynar casually began scanning the avant-garde styles on popular shopping site SSENSE—when a set of intriguing parallels caught her eye. "I noticed that, on product pages, in the one-two-three poses of the SSENSE models, there was a doll that did each of those," Cwynar explains. Evidently, an unspoken social consensus informing matters around photography makes it so that people "intuitively know how to pose, and everyone just repeats it, forever and ever."

"They're filtered versions of feminine ideals—the same as SSENSE," she adds. "That's kind of the ultimate theme, in aligning my interest in both of those aspects."

This epiphany became the flashpoint for Cwynar's new *Doll Index* series. In each composition, a patchwork of smaller pictures appears to cascade over a fashion-doll photo. Plucked from archival obscurity, the doll image, as a discrete background layer, creates the illusion of depth while visually anchoring a jumble of objects that are captured in the smaller images in the foreground.



"Ideal House, London (In Progress)," 2023.

Even those familiar with Cwynar's work may still struggle to decipher its precise allure. Such is the nature of the *Doll Index* series, the works being as aesthetically lush as they are fascinatingly, almost disorientingly, intricate—and in that very much echoing the process by which they were realized. Cwynar, like countless others in her multimedia-creator cohort, has long looked to eBay and other online platforms for an infinite selection of found objects. For the *Doll Index* concept, "I was trying to think about making a new still life out of all the stuff that's accessible now, and how many more objects you can have access to, or consider, since the original still life [was] made," she explains. "The doll [becomes] this organizing principle to try to control a tiny slice of that stuff."



"Nostra Signora della Misericordia Church, Italy (In Progress)," 2023.

The "tiny slice" packs a dizzying array of lapsed consumer goods, now officially retired to art objects: among them dinner sets, dentures, clothespins, toys, real and artificial fruit—plus a range of phones, from rotary landlines to Motorola's Razr flip-phone to old iPhone models. Having acquired all these and more, Cwynar proceeded to individually photograph each item, or group of items, against close-cropped sections of the doll image; taking hard copies of these new photos, she arranged them over a scaled-up print of the doll photo, matching respective backdrops to areas of the underlying layout. Rectangular yellow-paper printouts, which she situated across the lower edge, display dense blocks of text that list indexical information that "tracks the provenance of each item," per a written statement from Cwynar: how she acquired it, where it was shipped from, descriptive information, and the like. At last, with everything in place, she photographed each spread in its entirety with an 8x10 camera—a rarely used large format generating a negative 52 times larger than the standard consumer 35mm size—to produce a single cohesive photographic element as the final artwork. "There's a lot there, in these pictures," acknowledges Cwynar.



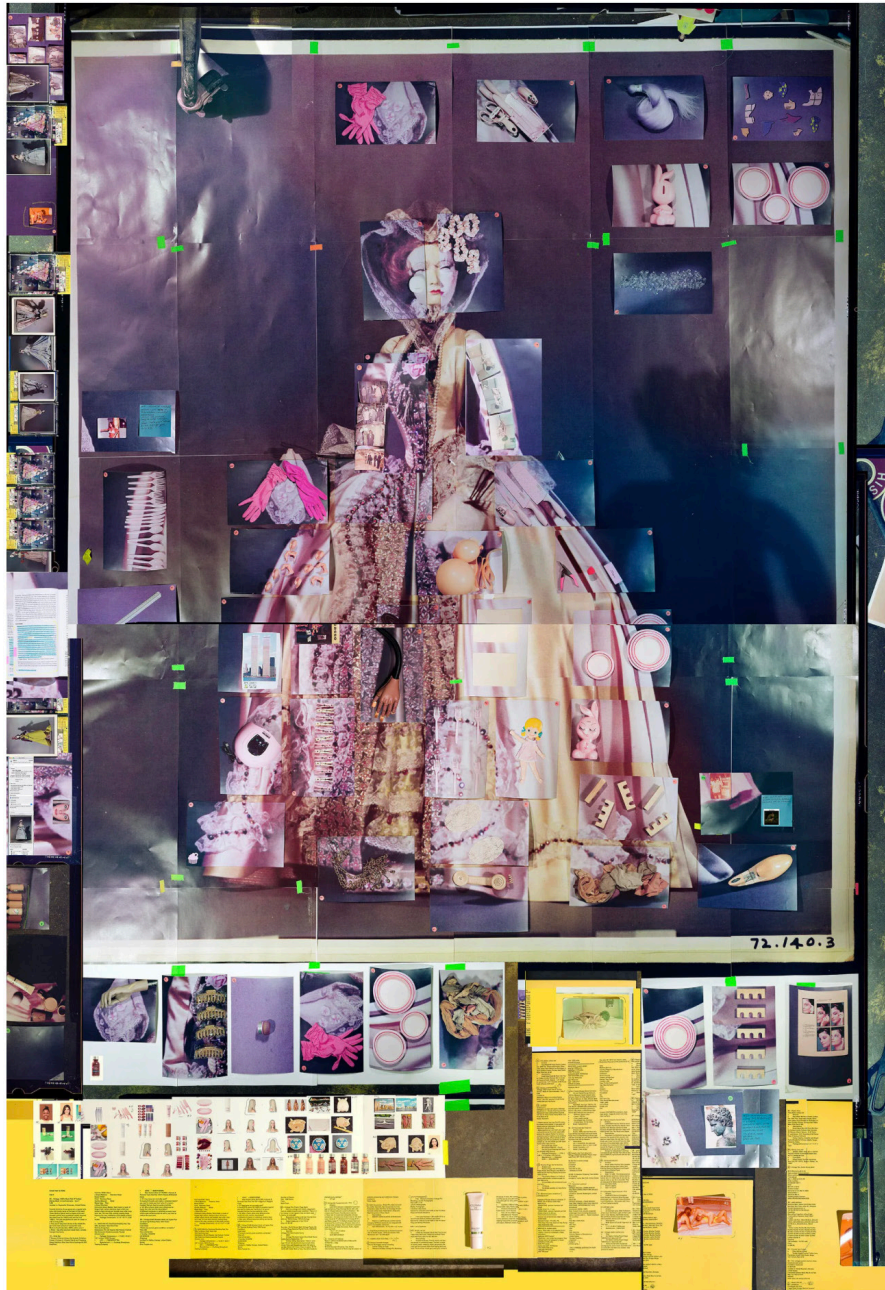
"Uxmal Ruin, Mexico (In Progress)," 2023.

"[This idea] plays into other themes of my work: If you have the picture of the thing, is it just as good as the thing? Or is it kind of the same to most people at this point? And is a photo an object? What does it do to blow it up and spend three weeks working on it in the studio in 2023?" she says.

And about that general "organizing principle" she mentioned? Well, for Cwynar, it's sometimes equally about the apparent lack of one. "In the doll photos," says Cwynar, "everything sort of connects. And when it doesn't, that's also part of the point."

The *Doll Index* series is set to be unveiled in *Next Level: Sara Cwynar S/S 23* at Amsterdam photography museum Foam on May 26. Another new series making its debut at the exhibition displays historically significant structures around the globe in single exterior shots, taken by Cwynar, along with an inset photo of the edifice's on-page encyclopedia entry. There will also be the premiere of a video-portrait study featuring [Pamela Anderson](#).

Meanwhile, selections from previous bodies of work will reflect Cwynar's trajectory since the early 2010s. Notably included is 2018's "Red Film," the last in a short-film trilogy that, in loose terms, considers objects in relation to their physical characteristics in the *desire-acquire-discard* cycle of consumer culture.



"Doll Index," 2022.

Last year, Dior asked the artist to put her own spin on the French house's iconic Lady Dior bag. Cwynar's two designs, which were released in November 2022, featured fixed grids of images—birds, crowns, lips, all from archival sources—on the quilted exteriors of two bags. That Cwynar's approach translates so seamlessly to an explicitly commercial endeavor is telling, especially to those otherwise quick to extrapolate a critical angle from her acknowledgment of the visual-consumer landscape: Cwynar surely reacts to the spectacle of all-encompassing imagery—but reactionary her work is not.

A decade ago, Foam was integral to Cwynar's art world breakthrough as the first museum to present her work with 2013's *Everything In The Studio (Destroyed)*. Now, the upcoming exhibition promises new insight to Cwynar's practice, spanning her rapid ascent as an emerging artist and highlighting work from roughly 2014 on.

When Foam first contacted Cwynar, the Vancouver native was still working as a graphic designer at *The New York Times Magazine*. When asked how she wound up at the eminent glossy, Cwynar reflexively prefaces her story: "I was actually thinking about this last night... how random and lucky it was and how differently everything could have gone." She pauses. "Well, I mean, it was luck, and it wasn't luck."



Still from "Red Film," 2018.

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Cwynar's success is in no small part owed to the intense drive that she cultivated during her teenage years as a competitive figure-skater. (At 8, she became enamored with the sport in the aftermath of the Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding scandal and ensuing spectacle of the 1994 Winter Olympics.) "I was really, really good," she says. "But never quite good enough." Making it as a figure skater meant making it to the Olympics, she explains, yet that professional pinnacle is allotted to one, or at the most two, female contenders from Canada every four years. Of her near-decade on the ice, Cwynar fondly remembers "always wearing these crazy costumes and performing"—still, all that exposure dovetailed with accepting defeat as a virtual inevitability. "You're kind of bound to fail," she says.

Retiring her figure skates toward the end of high school, Cwynar, long acclimated to the pursuit of mastery over her blades on the ice, now readily appreciates how those double-edged objects of her teenage ambition carved her mentality as an adult. “Nothing was ever intense enough after being a skater—training for six hours [daily] and focusing that intensely,” she says. In contemplating her future, “being an artist, or doing anything insular, seemed so wonderful.” Plus, “Art was the only thing I ever found that seemed to have stakes that were as high.”



“Islamic Dome (Plastic Cups),” 2014.

Cwynar strategically chose a graphic design program at Toronto’s York University, “because I knew you could get a visa to move to New York with a graphic design degree—not with an art degree.” While she now seems mildly amused at her youthful zeal, her voice still registers its old resolve as she adds, “And I was so determined to move to New York.”

In college, her tenacity made Cwynar, in her words, “the most bonkers student.” Mutual “intense” dedication spurred a friendship with classmate Tracy Ma, who also ended up in New York. Since then, Ma, now a creative director for Frank Ocean, has occasionally played the muse to Cwynar’s photography. It’s as well that her likeness will be on display at Foam, in selections from a 2019 editorial for SSENSE as well as from the aptly titled 2017 series *Tracy*.

Another gamechanger for Cwynar: when a professor recommended her to *The New York Times Magazine* for the September 2008 issue's slate of all-student design contributors. Upon graduating in 2010, Cwynar took a job at a local lifestyle monthly that "wouldn't give [her] anything to do" and also kept her tied down in Toronto—and the young Cwynar was quickly growing restless. In a leap of faith, she emailed a contact at *The New York Times Magazine* from two years prior.

The staffer responded: "We always need freelancers. Can you come by next week?" Reluctant to let on that she did not already live in New York, let alone the United States, Cwynar cheerily agreed and caught an overnight Greyhound bus, portfolio in hand, pulling into the Big Apple some 12 hours later. That was July 2010. By August, she'd locked down a freelance contract and permanently moved to the city. The opportunity eventually became full-time, with Cwynar only leaving the magazine in 2013 to keep pace with the momentum of burgeoning art-world opportunities.



"Corinthian Column (Plastic Cups)," 2014.

The magazine still sometimes reaches out to Cwynar—and an assignment this past December brought her to fellow Vancouver-area native [Pamela Anderson](#)'s estate on Vancouver Island. There, the *Baywatch* bombshell sat for Cwynar amid a makeshift studio in her pool house. The artist, with the star's permission, had a film camera trained on Anderson to record the shoot.

A 10-minute video features the iconic Anderson as she snaps into sharp-eyed, elegantly seductive poses before defaulting back to a relaxed and smiling demeanor. The legacy of [Andy Warhol](#)'s "Screen Tests" is apparent here—though the bright, jewel-hued atmosphere feels particular to Cwynar's aesthetic. Anderson, posing with intent on a neutral studio backdrop, undeniably connects to the fashion-doll images. "She's kind of like image and object at the same time—and she totally knows it," Cwynar says. "She's fully aware of her own image and how people want her to look."

Even so, Cwynar, likely better than most, recognizes the impossibility of total creative control: "Chaos is the only constant, or truth," she says. "Poking at that, for me, is exciting."

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