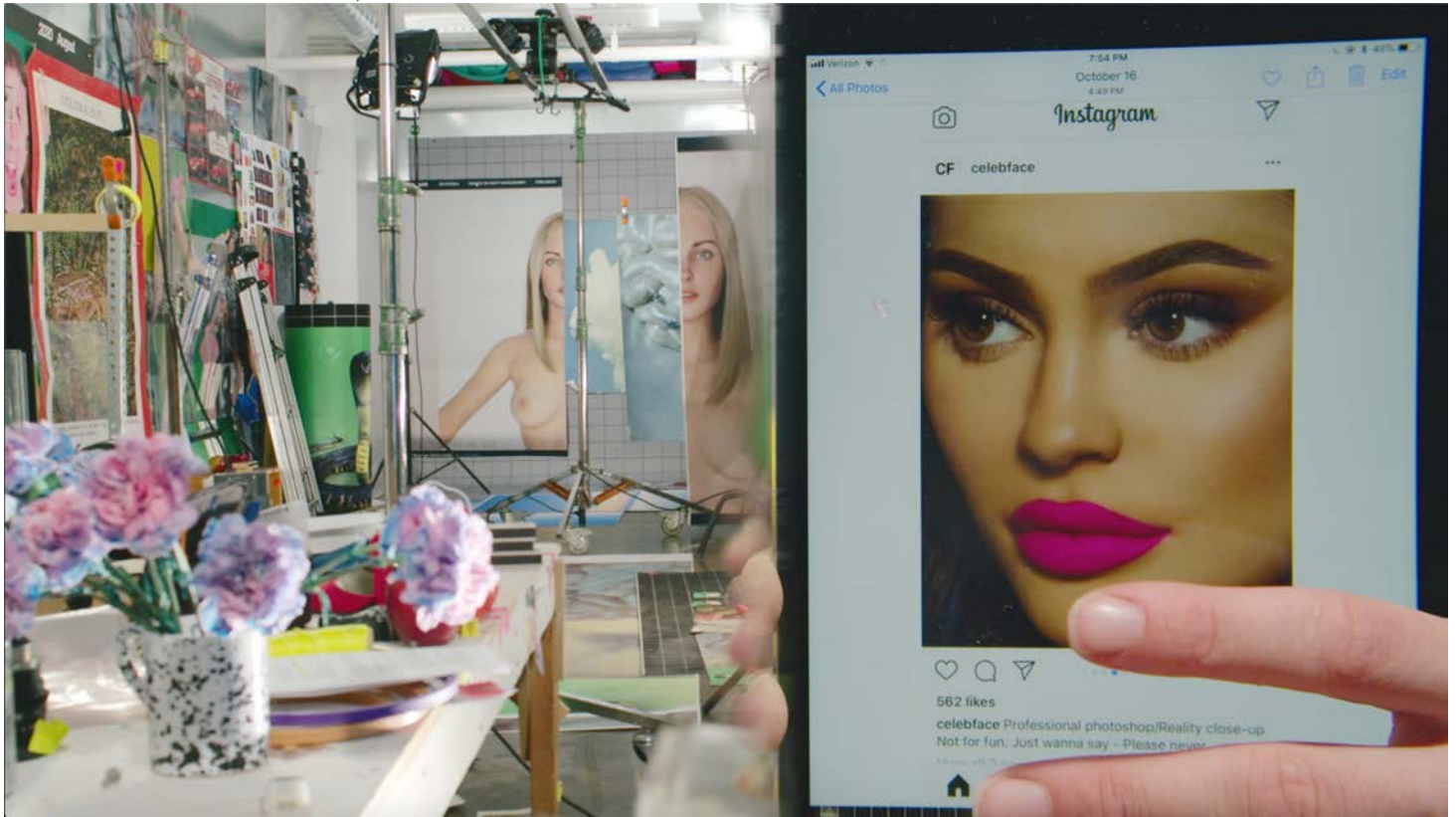


# The Importance of Meaningless Things: Sara Cwynar at ICA LA

BY SARAH FENSOM MARCH 3, 2022



Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life* (video still), 2021. Six channel 2K video with sound, TRT: 19:02 min., installation dimensions variable, edition of 3 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. All works © Sara Cwynar.

“Oh, this was Barney’s!” a group of Issey Miyake-clad septuagenarian women squealed in recognition. They were sitting on a red, elbow macaroni-shaped bench, watching *Glass Life* (2021), Sara Cwynar’s six-channel video installation in the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

*Glass Life* features footage of the upscale New York department store in its highly publicized last days. The footage is a rare cinéma vérité intrusion in the video piece, which is primarily a cascade of archival and pop cultural images, emojis, and self-portraits that scrolls endlessly down a grid, mimicking digital life.

Cwynar, with her rigorous commitment to visual pleasure, has a canny ability to expose a consumerist phenomenon and our part in it, all the while making us enjoy it. The result can feel like a beautiful, deftly told joke. And sometimes the joke is on everyone: the high-end department store suffering the indignities of clearance sale hospice; the shoppers turning over “80% Off” tags to reveal prices that are still out of reach (cashmere *is* cashmere, after all); the cavernous AFK space cowing to digital primacy; and those of us observing it all.



Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life* (video still), 2021. Six channel 2K video with sound, TRT: 19:02 min., installation dimensions variable, edition of 3 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. All works © Sara Cwynar.

*Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue* marks the New York-based Canadian artist's first exhibition in Los Angeles. *Glass Life* is one of four recent video essays in the show, and each work tackles a unique aspect of imagery and its consumption under capitalism. But they're all unified by similar questions: can the world be understood through its objects? Its pictures? Its data? Its add-to-cart popups?

In her collage and photographic work, Cwynar arranges objects and layers images. This new body of video work builds on that practice. She re-photographs her own photographs and archival images. She builds sculptural constructions, photographs them, prints the photographs and re-photographs them. She takes stock images, collages them and re-photographs them. She assembles it all with narrated text and performance. Cwynar uses existing images and re-represents them, showing the trend as it ebbs, the object when it's obsolete, the moment when we don't know why we still care or why we ever did in the first place.



Sara Cwynar, *Red Film* (video still), 2018. 16 mm film transferred to video, TRT: 13 min., installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. All works © Sara Cwynar.

In *Red Film* (2018), a group of dancers in monochromatic red outfits undulate in front of printed works of Western art. “Cezanne. Susan. Matisse,” the narrator drones, as pieces of makeup glide through a factory, a woman in bright red lipstick pouts, and a hot red 1980s convertible sits parked in a studio. Red is a color associated with beauty, the film argues, an inherited notion that’s sold back to us constantly through cosmetic and luxury items.

At several points of the film, the artist is seen hanging upside down, like the hanged man of the tarot in the act of surrender or Odin in Yggdrasil, ritualistically hanged from the Tree of Knowledge to learn how to decipher the runes. “Color,” the narrator says, “like time or language decided on by someone else, handed down, placed upon us.”

*Rose Gold* (2017), examines the desire for things we know are gimmicks outright. Cwynar references Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism”—the way desiring under capitalism can feel pleasurable, even constructive, though we know it’s oppressive, stupid.

The film was inspired by the rose gold iPhone that Apple released in 2015 (Rachel Mead described the color as “gold for people who already have enough gold gold” in *The New Yorker* that year). “Rose Gold is having a moment,” the narrator says, as Cwynar scrutinizes the way color can become fashionable and ultimately, out of date (think: millennial pink in the 2010s or mustard yellow in the 1970s).



Sara Cwynar, *Soft Film* (video still), 2016. 16 mm film transferred to video, TRT 8:00 min., installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. All works © Sara Cwynar.



Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life*, 2021. Six channel 2K video with sound, TRT: 19:02 min. Courtesy the artist; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. Installation view, *Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 5–May 29, 2022. Photo: Jeff McLane/ICA LA

Outdatedness is central to *Soft Film* (2016), in which Cwynar contemplates the afterlife of objects. She takes the velveteen jewelry box as its starting point, stacking the glamorous objects in columns and stroking their plush, time-faded exteriors with probing fingers. The boxes originally functioned as signifiers for the more expensive items held inside. Now they're sold on eBay or Etsy as collectible objects in their own right. But who collects them? Cwynar, for one (the narrator croons, "I can't sleep so I comb eBay"). What is their meaning (if any)? Their value (if any)?

The artist links the suede-like boxes to soft misogyny—the subtle forms of discrimination hurled at women. As the film progresses, Cwynar connects the changing value of objects to how people are valued. "Can I understand anything about this man from his picture?" the narrator asks as vintage photographs float onto the screen. She incorporates images of floppy disks, plastic presidential busts, and the Twin Towers.

Looming behind all of the works in the exhibition is the algorithmic vortex of acknowledgement, acquisition, and indoctrination. Cwynar shows how images and objects make us feel seen, validated. But she also reveals how we value exposing their lack of importance and acknowledging their outmodedness. How we like to watch things come to an end and eulogize them after. How we like to shout at the screen, "this was Barney's!"

[Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Sky Blue/Grass Green](#)  
 Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA  
 February 5–May 29, 2022

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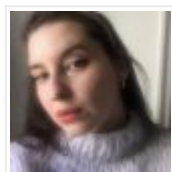
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