

Arts

ARTS FEATURES »
Capture Photography Festival will present subtly subversive public art by Sara Cwynar

by Charlie Smith on March 23rd, 2022 at 11:54 AM



The subject of Sara Cwynar's *Umi*, coming to the Dal Grauer Substation on Burrard Street, is not trying to sell something to passersby.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND COOPER COLE, TORONTO.

Vancouver-born and Brooklyn-based contemporary artist Sara Cwynar has already hit the big time well in advance of her 40th birthday.

The Yale graduate's art is already in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and several other high-profile institutions.

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And soon, one of the former UBC student's photographic works will be visible to the masses in her hometown. That's because the **Capture Photography Festival** selected her for a prestigious commission.

Cwynar's *Umi*—a bold image of a woman lying on her back in a tomato-red outfit and matching shoes—will grace the Burrard Street façade of the Dal Grauer Substation from April until March, 2023.



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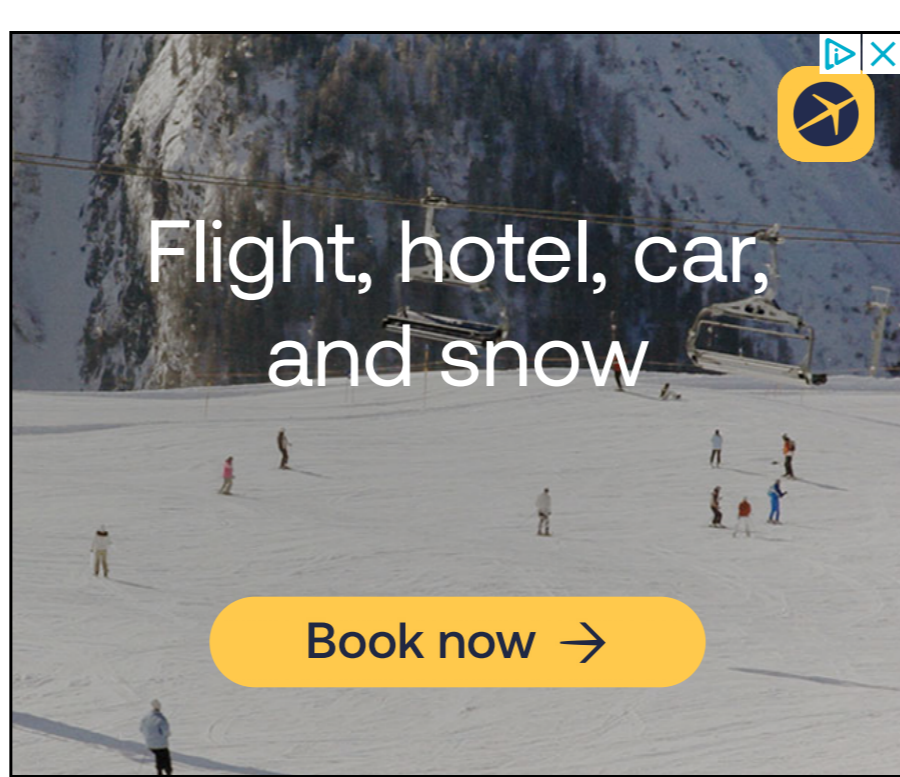
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The curator of this public art and the executive director of the Capture Photography Festival, Emmy Lee Wall, told the *Straight* by phone that the installation is "subtly subversive, in a way".

"What Sara and I both really like about this image is it's ambiguous," Wall said. "It's not a clear read. You can't see this woman's face. You don't know if she's happy or upset."



The pose is also unclear, she added, noting that the woman's hand is held on her forehead.

"Is she exasperated? Is she tired? Is she in ecstasy?" Wall asked. "It's just really not clear how she is feeling and what she's thinking."

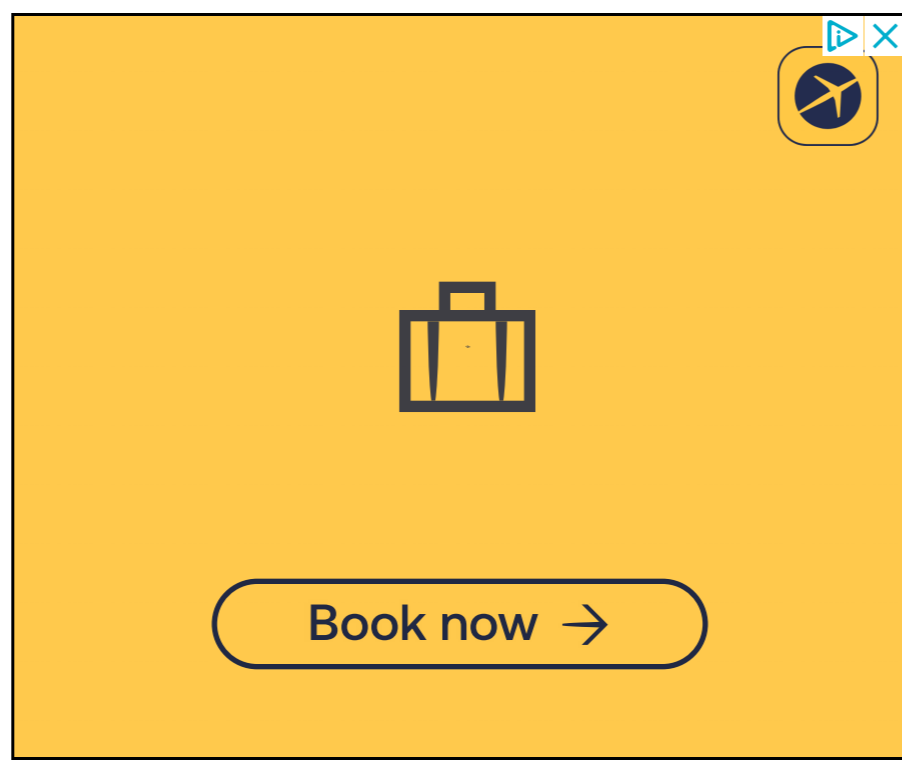
Cwynar, a 2020 Sobey Art Award winner, has a history of creating art that takes aim at the historic objectification of women. Her well-known Tracy series of photographs challenge conceptions of beauty, featuring her friend Tracy Ma as a model.

Wall said that the Tracy images are invariably overlaid with objects and images, often including makeup, in a multilayered and provocative manner, forcing viewers to think deeply about what they're seeing.

"I feel like she's really able, through her work, to reveal visual assumptions and biases that we may all have when we're looking at imagery," Wall said. "But we aren't even really aware of those because we're just so inundated with imagery constantly in contemporary society."

Wall emphasized that the image on the side of the Dal Grauer Substation is not inside an art gallery. Thousands of people pass by the site every day by vehicle or on foot. Unlike visitors to a gallery, the vast majority won't have a great deal of time to process something that's overly complex.

"I think the image she's created for us is perfect to see quickly and at a distance," Wall said.



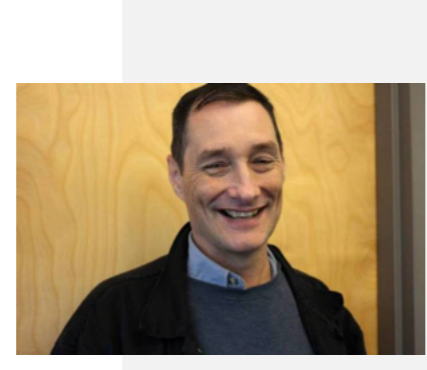
So why is it subtly subversive? Wall noted that most large-scale images of women in public are largely for the purposes of consumption. These women are typically smiling, meeting the viewer's gaze directly, often in advertising intended to sell products.

The woman in *Umi*, on the other hand, does not meet the viewer's gaze even though she has clearly been colour-coordinated in a specific shade. The cloth laid down below her suggests that she's participating in a photo shoot but her pose is something unexpected in this setting.

"She's not doing what she was told to do," Wall said.

The Capture Photography Festival's B.C. Hydro Dal Grauer Substation Public Art Project, Umi by Sara Cwynar, can be seen from April 1 to March 18, 2023.

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Charlie Smith was editor of the Georgia Straight from 2005 until September 2022. Prior to that, he was the news editor.

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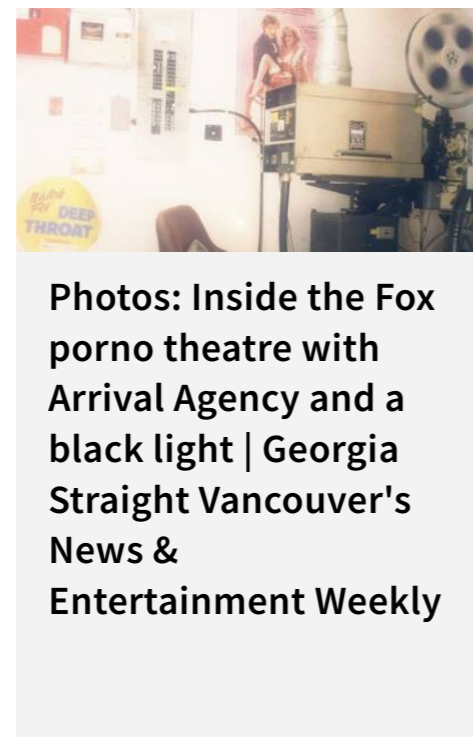
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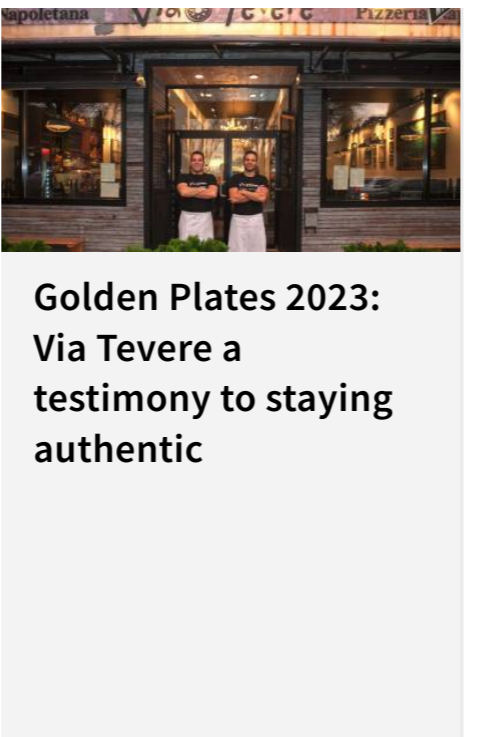
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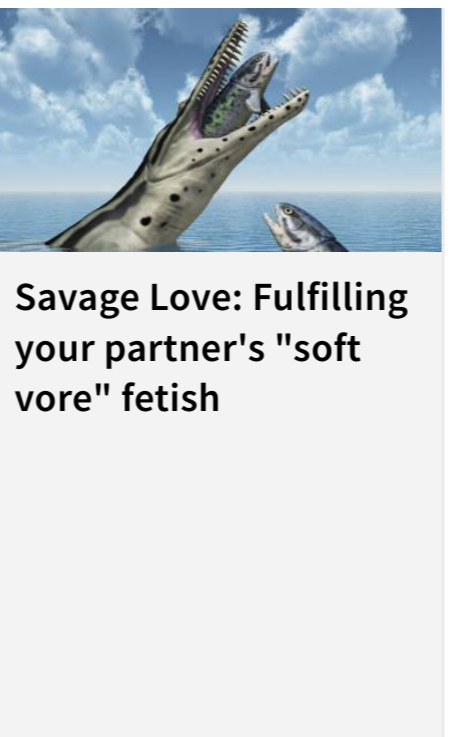
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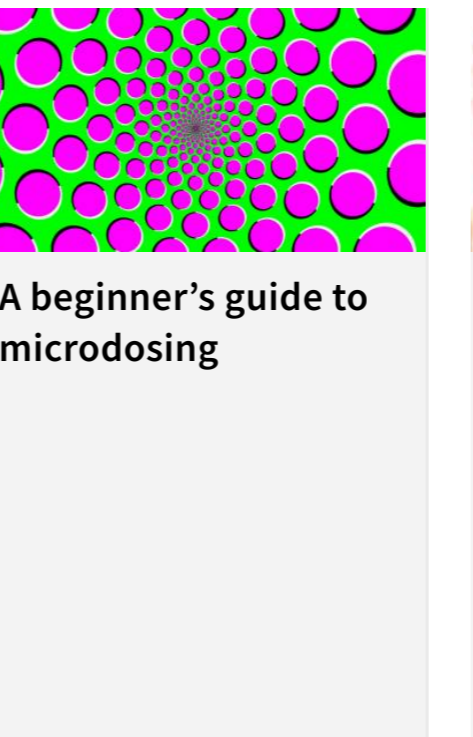
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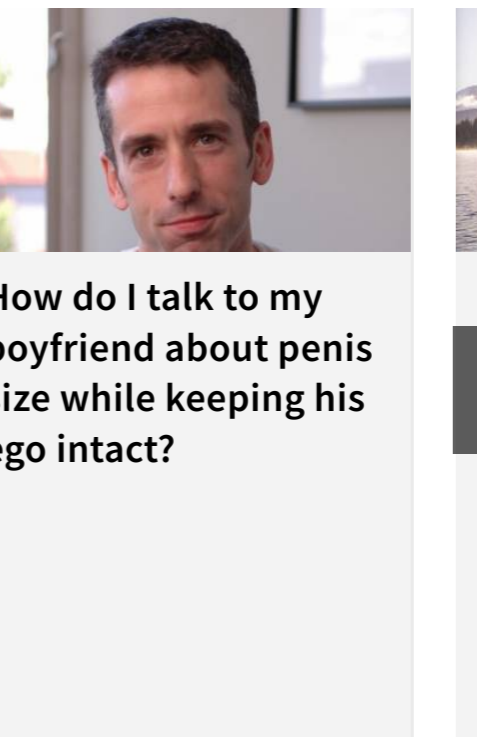
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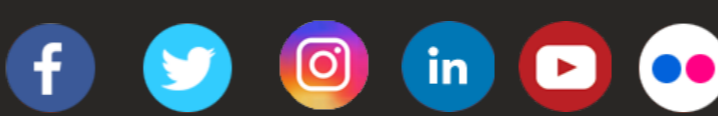
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