

Drill, Jason. "Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo." *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 29, 2024) [ill.] [online]



ARTSEEN | NOVEMBER 2024

# Sara Cwynar: *Baby Blue Benzo*

By Jason Drill



Sara Cwynar, *Baby Blue Benzo*, 2024. © Sara Cwynar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

Sara Cwynar's latest exhibition, on view at 52 Walker, embraces the creative power of exhaustion. Inspired by her own insomnia, Cwynar debuts *Baby Blue Benzo* (all artworks 2024), a 21-minute film—her longest yet—shot on both 16mm film and digital video, in an enclosed structure at the center of the gallery. The makeshift theater creates a roundabout corridor in the room where a series of photographs is installed, some pictures in multi-panel arrangements, others unframed and tacked directly to the theater's exterior. Posters of blown-up stock images are pinned and taped to the walls like giant billboards pieced together by modular components. Bright colors radiate from photographic collages of the film's models and props: a Ferrari in MoMA's collection, a pink peony, and countless other images sourced from the internet and Cwynar's personal archive. In an age where artificial imagery tests our perceptions of reality, the works raise questions about the production of value and desire in an image-saturated world.

*Baby Blue Benzo*  
52 Walker  
October 4–December 21,  
2024  
New York

Two years in the making, the film *Baby Blue Benzo* transforms sleepless distraction into a full-scale scrutiny of our contemporary image economy. Projected on two channels, the film seamlessly scrolls horizontally across an extra-wide screen in a novel animation style. The script begins with a male narrator (the voice of Paul Cooper, who has previously narrated Cwynar's films) describing his own fantasy image when he can't sleep: the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, the most expensive car ever sold at auction to date. The car quickly becomes a recurring motif and an object of desire that drives the film. The ensuing sequence of newly produced and found imagery, coupled with AI-generated visuals and sounds that cue various moods, can feel as surreal as a dream, if not a lucid state of exhausted alertness. Models and Cwynar's film crew pose with props and costumes as if for an editorial campaign; traffic crosses the Manhattan Bridge, seen through the film grain's nostalgic texture; ice skaters perform as if in competition; and Pamela Anderson makes a cameo, posing assuredly over a rousing punk baseline.



Installation view: Sara Cwynar: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.



Cwynar herself appears in the film, both on camera and in voiceover alongside the primary narrator. Early on, she connects the Benz to benzodiazepines, giving the film title its cheeky punch. She asserts her presence most forcefully when climbing into the Benz—not the prototype that sold for a record-setting price, but its only other comparable counterpart at Germany’s Mercedes-Benz Museum—clad in a Ferrari red racing suit. Over a hyperpop Charli XCX track, she grabs the steering wheel and later traces the Mercedes-Benz logo with her fingers. She alludes to a popular music video trope when posing in front of the car, assuming control when she stakes a claim to its publicity image in a voiceover. It’s a memorable scene that exposes the Benz’s appeal as a product of its own reproduction, stressing the depth to which its image configures the narrator’s desire.



Installation view: Sara Cwynar: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

The color blue features strongly, as do red, green, and yellow. In concentrating on baby blue, Cwynar not only addresses gender-based marketing as an arbiter of value, but she evokes a color often recognized to inspire feelings of trust. Complete with blue carpeting, the exhibition coaxes us to trust the images we see, or at least reminds us that what we see informs what we accept as truth. *Encyclopedia Grid (Weather)*, reprising a 2014 series, explores this very question. Cwynar's finger appears to press individual images against a fiery red background sharpened by the pale blue wall behind it: gray and blue cloud formations fall into, mostly, disastrous fires toward the bottom of a loosely arranged grid. Anchored by a horizontal yellow ruler, the composition seems to document shifting associations with the weather over time, hinting at the power of images to shape our definitive sources of knowledge.

Another photograph, *Apple on Sky I*, underscores the exhibition's digital surrealism most succinctly. In it, a crisp red apple—an age-old symbol of human temptation—floats against a cloudy blue sky, calling to mind Magritte as much as Apple Inc. It hangs in a black metal frame with custom white inscriptions along its interior edges, resembling the edge markings on film; nearby, Cwynar installs five similarly framed photographs side-by-side as if to unspool a strip of film around a gallery corner.





Installation view: Sara Cwynar: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

With *Baby Blue Benzo*, Cwynar manages to untangle the impulses provoked by the mass circulation of images online today, which rivals a scale that even Warhol couldn't anticipate. The exhibition design encourages visitors to circle the gallery before entering the theater, as if witnessing a product assembly line of photographs manufacturing the film in real time. After my visit, I circled the loop one more time before re-entering to watch the film again, this time drawn even closer to a cache of images I'd seen minutes before.

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**Jason Drill** is an arts researcher and writer based in New York.

Fateman, Johanna. "Can't Look or Can't Look Away? Our Critic on Mesmerizing Video Installations by Steve McQueen and Sara Cwynar." *Cultured Magazine* (October 16, 2024) [ill.] [online]

# CULTURED

THE CRITICS' TABLE CLOSE LOOKS ART

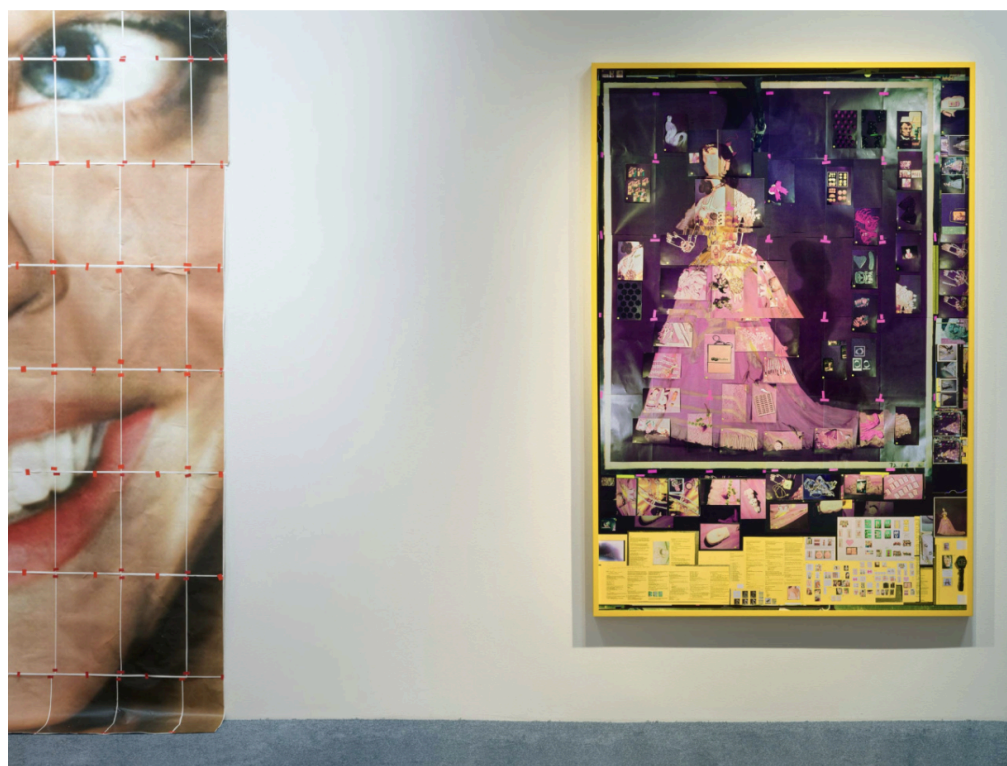
## Can't Look or Can't Look Away? Our Critic on Mesmerizing Video Installations by Steve McQueen and Sara Cwynar

Steve McQueen and Sara Cwynar's installations in New York challenge viewers to confront trauma, aspiration, and art's unsettling power.

WORDS

**Johanna Fateman**

October 16, 2024



Sara Cwynar, "Baby Blue Benzo" (Installation view), 2024, 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.



*Welcome to Close Looks: a semi-regular column from our critics. This series of long-form reviews dives into buzzy and under-the-radar shows alike, revealing the trends, ideas, and controversies that shape what's happening—and what's to come—in the art world. For this installment, two striking moving-image works, now on view in New York, demand CULTURED's Co-Chief Art Critic Johanna Fateman's queasy attention.*

**Steve McQueen** through Summer 2025  
Dia Chelsea | 537 West 22nd Street

**Sara Cwynar** through December 2024  
52 Walker | 52 Walker Street

Two short films floored me—sickened me, even—in different ways last week. Each is the crescendo of an impressive solo exhibition. Steve McQueen's *Sunshine State*, 2022, is the main event of a terse career-spanning show featuring just three works at Dia Chelsea, and Sara Cwynar's tour de force *Baby Blue Benzo*, 2024, titles her extravagantly makeshift, heady environment at 52 Walker. While the artists' video installations diverge dramatically in tone and subject matter, they have enough in common to buzz in my thoughts as parallel preoccupations. Both continuously fold the past into a dreamlike present, using found and manipulated historical material; both use voiceover to unsettling, hypnotic effect; and both are shown as monumental, panoramic projections. Most notably, they share a structural precision, a loyalty to their chosen formal conceits, that's dazzling and draining to witness.

McQueen, never easy on viewers, this time asks nothing less of us than to stare into the sun. The bitterly titled *Sunshine State, 2022*—which is, as those familiar with the artist's sensibility might guess, not a smiling advertisement for Florida—opens with two views of our fiery star from outer space. (The two-channel work is shown on adjoining screens that bisect the cavernous gallery, so the film can be watched from either side.) The double image works as a kind of existential establishing shot: The terrifying molten sphere, which fuels life on earth, sets the stage for a story of near-death, told in the artist's own voice.



Steve McQueen, *Sunshine State* (Installation view), 2022, Dia Chelsea. Photography by Don Stahl. Image courtesy of the artist and the Dia Art Foundation.

The show coincides with other major projects by the Oscar- and Turner Prize-winning artist-filmmaker—*Bass*, 2024, an immersive, abstract work in sound and light currently fills a 30,000-square-foot gallery at Dia Beacon, and McQueen's new feature *Blitz*, a WWII drama set in London, opens in theaters on Nov. 1. But of these events, the presentation of *Sunshine State* seems particularly well-timed this fall, in the United States. It is an excruciatingly personal work that speaks to the long, inherited half-life of trauma.

It is more than that, too: As the British McQueen recounts his immigrant father's experience as a worker who traveled from the West Indies to Florida to pick oranges, we are reminded—by the film's pointed title—of the symbolic significance of the troubled and troubling place. The Sunshine State is home to the seat of would-be authoritarian power at Mar-a-Lago and a metastasizing hotspot of the right-wing culture war, where, among other travesties, the discussion of “critical race theory” is banned from public schools.





Steve McQueen, *Sunshine State* (Installation View), 2022, Dia Chelsea. Photography by Don Stahl. Image courtesy of the artist and the Dia Art Foundation.

The roiling orange expanse of the sun, accompanied by an incantatory preamble, is the sole instance of color in an otherwise black-and-white film. The remainder is composed of altered footage from *The Jazz Singer*, 1927, whose plot concerns the dilemma of the Jewish character Jakie Rabinowitz (played by Al Jolson). Raised by his rabbi father to become a cantor, Jakie instead finds his true calling in musical theater—performing in blackface. The latent violence of minstrelsy becomes the visual substrate for McQueen’s monologue, but in the filmmaker’s repurposing of the footage, Jolson’s application of blackface makeup is a subtractive gesture. It makes him invisible rather than dark. As a scene from *The Jazz Singer*, shown in the negative, plays forward on one screen, and a positive version runs backwards on the other, McQueen tells of his father’s narrow escape from vigilante executioners in the Jim Crow South.

In a dreadful loop, with his script disintegrating, or becoming increasingly abbreviated into impressionistic shorthand with each cycle, the artist describes, four times, the night that Philbert McQueen leaves the workers’ camp with two other men to drink at a bar. Insulted and refused service at the whites-only establishment, one of the three cracks a bottle over the bartender’s head. They flee, hunted by dogs. Eventually, Philbert, hiding frozen in terror, hears the two gunshots sounding the murder of his companions. Perilously hyper-visible in the bar, his father survives by disappearing into darkness.



Steve McQueen, *Sunshine State* (Installation View), 2022, Dia Chelsea. Photography by Don Stahl. Image courtesy of the artist and the Dia Art Foundation.

*Sunshine State* delivers its gut punch more than once, and its baseline emotional intensity—the artist’s urgent intimacy—is unrelenting. In contrast, the appealing, arc-less fugue of *Baby Blue Benzo* administers unease gradually, coaxing viewers into an unwitting state of overdose. Approaching the end of the film’s 21-minute runtime, the off-gassing of new (blue) wall-to-wall carpeting, which blankets the expansive space of 52 Walker for Cwynar’s show, began to hurt my head and close my throat. The artist, who has long traded in a deconstructive strain of barbed and sutured beauty, outdoes herself with her intoxicating, toxic achievement here.

Photographic works relating to the film hang in the passageway leading to the exhibition’s screening room (a temporary, unfinished dry-wall chamber). The first print viewers encounter, *Pam, Plastic*, 2024, appears to be derived from the artist’s photo and video shoot of Pamela Anderson, which accompanied a *New York Times* profile of the actor last year. Posing against a backdrop of rumpled blue paper, wearing a white T-shirt and a slung-on dress of rhinestones and tulle, her figure partially obscured by a screen of bunched-up plastic wrapping paper, she seems stuck at a threshold between realms. Anderson halfway belongs to Cwynar’s world of craft materials, cutouts, shiny things, and consumerist make-believe.

Reality (of a sort) intrudes in foreboding pieces such as the *Encyclopedia Grid (Weather)*, 2024, which compiles snapshots of clouds and wildfire, like evidence, against a slick red ground. An index finger enters the frame of each picture as if to prove a point—about climate catastrophe, perhaps. In this still-image run-up to *Baby Blue Benzo*, the artist sketches her obsessive lexicon and gestures toward the mysterious methodology undergirding her work.





Sara Cwynar, "Baby Blue Benzo" (Installation view), 2024, 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

Like the benzodiazepine class of drugs referenced by its title, the film's defining mode is dissociative, following an insomniac's drifting illogic. (The artist has said she is afflicted by sleeplessness.) "Benzo" here also alludes to the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, the most expensive auto ever sold at auction, which figures prominently in the work as a replica and in reproductions, crystallizing Cwynar's theme of delusional aspiration.

Organized around two opulently staged scenes featuring models (sometimes wearing historical costumes in gorgeous, sartorial non-sequiturs), shot in a studio on circular camera tracks, her production veers—in look—between the excesses of a sky's-the-limit fashion editorial and a budgetless, DIY digital composition. Cwynar updates the approach of her feminist Pictures Generation forebears; in her crowded montage, I see Sarah Charlesworth's isolated, sepulchral luxury objects multiplied, subjected to a contemporary feminine or feminized binge aesthetic for the era of mindless scrolling.



Sara Cwynar, "Baby Blue Benzo" (Installation view), 2024, 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

Materials from Cwynar's personal archive mix with stock footage. A Detroit auto workers' strike, the Manhattan Bridge, and Los Angeles superblooms form a rich visual matrix for the film's "story"—or the string of entrancing intonements—narrated by a male and a female voice (Cwynar's own). The two take turns and overlap in inspired passages like, "I am a 1980s ice-skater. You are a caller on a giant phone. You are Pamela Anderson. You actually *are* Pamela Anderson."

*Baby Blue Benzo* takes an unusual form. Thanks to an elegant animation technique, it seems to progress as a slender strip, moving forward (and sliding back) as though on a track, recalling the Fordist assembly lines and home gym treadmills that make fleeting appearances in its dense sequences. This linear motif is at odds with circling camerawork and the going-nowhere, hypnagogic narrative, yet somehow, this deceptive sense of progress leaves the strongest visual impression. It is, in part, this horizontality, this left-to-rightness that connects it to McQueen's two-channel *Sunshine State*. The films both want to be "read" as well as watched, it seems. They move your eye *across* the screen, and their haunting scripts could easily exist independently from their images.



Sara Cwynar, "Baby Blue Benzo" (Installation view), 2024, 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

Though neither film is long, both demand endurance. Cwynar delivers pretty and sexy things to the point of monotony, but once under *Baby Blue Benzo*'s spell, you forget it's an option to turn away. McQueen, of course, threatens to burn your eyes, dares you to leave from the first moment. The transfixing force of his challenge makes you stay.

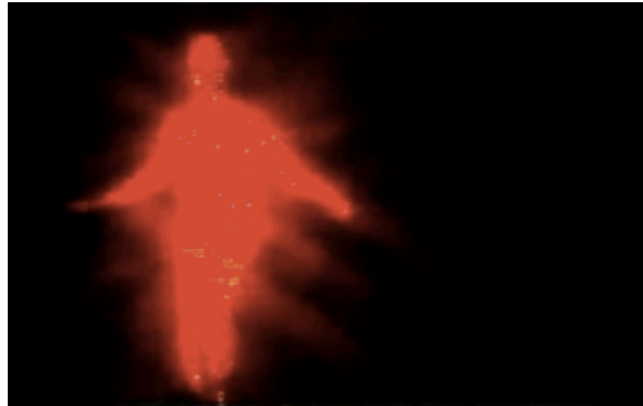


Falb, Sam. "The Shows You Need to See in New York This October." *Elephant* (October 8, 2024) [ill.] [online]

# ELEPHANT

## The Shows You Need to See in New York This October

Reframe is a monthly column in which contributor Sam Falb discusses timely openings to view in New York. Each edition offers commentary on the latest exhibitions, performances, and installations. Dynamic and ever-evolving, the content reflects the fluidity of the market it travels through.



(Header image) Jack Goldstein's *The Jump*, 1978. Photo courtesy of the gallery and artist.

This month's edition features a variety of emerging talent, mixed media, and galleries that have traversed various models ranging from pop up, to residency, to one-weekend extravaganzas. It was also a treat to learn from these artists and curators. Their visions range from capturing the future of their medium and a long career ahead, to a retrospective that charts historical trends and asserts important themes about our society writ-large. While a flurry of fairs, events, parties, and afters begin to take shape in the fall-winter calendar, these shows coax in a season rife with flavor and excitement for the blustery (but creatively stimulating) months to come.

4. 52 Walker: Baby Blue Benzo (October 4-December 21)

In the gallery's thirteenth exhibition, multi-medium artist Sara Cwynar presents a new film (where the title of the show gets its name), alongside a series of related imagery dotted throughout the gallery space. The fresh production is a combination of new work with the folding in of archival imagery found in her archive. Inspiration is drawn from the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, the most expensive car to ever be sold at auction (no, really), as well as larger themes including late-stage capitalism. A visual cameo from Pamela Anderson is included, as well as a sonic cameo from a Charli XCX track. Throughout the film, representations of the artist, hired models, and crew are depicted as the car flashes in and out amidst dialogue and musical experimentation. Cwynar's work with collage comes to the fore in the film as well – explosions, sculptures that could have been pulled from Greek antiquity, or a shot of Earth from the Moon, which are all players. The sonic landscape contains multitudes – think car sampling (revving and the like) as well as classical and pop music tracks. The dizzying interplay of details create a uniquely Cwynar-esque work, brazen, bold, and playfully thought-provoking.



Sara Cwynar, still from Baby Blue Benzo, 2024 © Sara Cwynar. Photo courtesy of the gallery and artist.

Simons, Baya. "How to spend it... in October." *Financial Times* (September 27, 2024) [ill.] [online]

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# How to spend it... in October

14 brilliant things to do, buy and eat this month, as recommended by HTSI writers

SEE

Sara Cwynar explores power and desire in a new exhibition in New York



A still from Baby Blue Benzo, 2024, by Sara Cwynar © Sara Cwynar. Courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker

## Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo

**Where:** 52 Walker, 52 Walker St, New York

**When:** 4 October to 21 December

**Click:** [52walker.com](https://52walker.com)

A 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, the most expensive car ever to be sold at auction, is the recurring motif in [Sara Cwynar's](#) solo exhibition at New York gallery 52 Walker this month. In the exhibition's centrepiece, a series of collages turned into a rolling film, the car's smooth silver curves appear alongside found photographs and newly produced visuals

of nude statues and drawings and photographs of glamorous men and women from throughout history. The resulting film is a playful exploration of desire, technology and power. **Baya Simons**



Halperin, Julia. “With Her Most Ambitious Project Yet, Artist Sara Cwynar Filters Our Capitalist Era Through a \$142 Million Status Symbol.” *Cultured* (September 24, 2024) [ill.] [online]

CULTURED

PULLED FROM PRINT ART

With Her Most Ambitious Project Yet, Artist Sara Cwynar Filters Our Capitalist Era Through a \$142 Million Status Symbol

The Canadian artist's new film, the center of a new 52 Walker exhibition, takes on car culture to dizzying effect.



All images courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

WORDS  
Julia Halperin

September 24, 2024

“I can’t sleep ... Of course I can’t sleep, because there is too much to look at.” So intones the narrator of Sara Cwynar’s *Soft Film*, 2016. For more than a decade, the Canadian artist has made videos and photographs that explore the ties that bind together capitalism, desire, misogyny, and information overload in the digital age. Her latest film debuts at 52 Walker, David Zwirner’s Tribeca outpost, on Oct. 4. Two years in the making, it is her longest and most ambitious yet.

While much of Cwynar’s oeuvre explores items marketed to women—from dolls to clothes to makeup—this film, titled *Baby Blue Benzo*, takes as its point of departure a decidedly masculine lust object: the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupe. The compact silver car sold for \$142 million in a secretive auction in 2022, becoming the world’s most expensive automobile. “I wanted to make a film about the arbitrariness of value and how things become important to certain people,” Cwynar explains.



Sara Cwynar, *Baby Blue Benzo* (Film Still), 2024.

The roughly half-hour-long video, shot on both digital and 16mm film, includes archival footage of car crashes and assembly lines, a dream sequence of ice skaters dressed in car-racing costumes, and shots of a bikini-clad model reclining on a fake replica of the prized vehicle. (Cwynar even hired a former car commercial narrator to enthusiastically cheer, “The Mercedes Benz!”)

Cwynar shot the fake car footage on an LA soundstage alongside other theatrical, oversized props like a giant clock and a piece of fake meat. It’s a nod, in her eyes, to Surrealism as both an expression of dreams and an increasingly common source of inspiration for advertising. The film alternates between a fast-paced, tightly stitched collage of industrialization (the urge to acquire, produce, and accelerate) and a slower register that embodies the anxiety of insomnia (the urge to slow down).

For Cwynar, these segments are two sides of the same coin. “The dreaming, sleeping part is about trying to reform yourself in a world where all these things are offered to you, but none of them are things you can access,” she says. The drive to possess and the drive to rest are twin expressions in our cacophonous, late-capitalist world—one where we’re all constantly yearning for both satisfaction and relief.



“Issue 348: DE-OBJECT fall 2024.” *e-flux* (September 6, 2024) [ill.] [online]

# e-flux



Courtesy of *Flash Art*.\*

September 6, 2024

**Issue 348: DE-OBJECT fall 2024**

[flash—art.com](http://flash—art.com)  
[shop.flash—art.com](http://shop.flash—art.com)  
[shop.exacteditions.com](http://shop.exacteditions.com)  
[Instagram](#)

“DE-OBJECT,” *Flash Art*’s fall issue, focuses on artists who explore acts of recomposition and decomposition, the undoing of objects and their constituent parts, whether organic, kinetic, ephemeral, gustatory, olfactory, or simply in a state of flux that lends itself to a thematic designation.

In this issue Louisa Elderton writes about **Mire Lee**’s work: “Her abstract installations often evoke the body in its amalgam of form and material: corporeal masses gaping or pierced, leaking or writhing, barely holding themselves together.” On the occasion of her Hyundai Commission at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, from October 8, 2024, to March 3, 2025, Lee is the subject of the first cover story of this issue. She was photographed in her Berlin home by Hyesoo Chung, wearing outfits by Hyein Seo.

A number of artists seem to be grappling with similar approaches to physically mutable yet ultimately eternal forms. **Anicka Yi**’s desire to continue making art from beyond the grave is investigated by Dean Kissick in this issue, while **Rirkrit Tiravanija** discusses with Hans Ulrich Obrist the idea of activating art collectively. The two long-time friends discuss a redistribution of value, particularly in reference to Tiravanija’s retrospective “A LOT OF PEOPLE” at LUMA Arles, organized in collaboration with New York’s MoMA PS1.

**Sara Cwynar** was invited to create a special self-portrait for the second cover story of the issue, which also includes a collage of stills from her new video work *Baby Blue Benzo* (2024), set to be showcased in her solo exhibition of the same name at 52 Walker, New York, from October 4 to December 21, 2024. Author Elijah Jackson posits how Cwynar’s “preoccupations and vocabulary of the image maneuver between discipline, place, and degree of physicality, unsettling any concept of the real.”

The third cover story is dedicated to **Sandra Mujinga**, whose solo exhibition *Time as a Shield* will be on view at Kunsthalle Basel until November 10, 2024. Mujinga, wearing Kuboraum & Innerraum glasses, was photographed by Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. in her studio at ISCP, New York. Bernardo José de Souza beautifully describes her chimeric, ghostly, elongated otherworldly beings, pondering whether they are “warriors, robots of sorts, rebels, or mercenaries. Are they humans in disguise, or is disguise a humanoid feature? Are they there to look after us humans, or, conversely, to defeat humankind?”

Also in this issue: **Sylvie Hayes-Wallace**, in conversation with Margaret Kross, discusses her cages and grids, which are containers for everything and nothing; Natasha Hoare considers the practice of Norwegian-Nigerian artist **Frida Orupabo**, known for her unapologetically confrontational digital creations that often explore the sexualization and objectification of Black bodies; Amy Jones delves into **Marina Xenofontos**’s multifaceted practice and how it shifts and reverberates like an echo; Mariana Lemos acutely elaborates on **Eva Fàbregas**’s oozing, pastel-hued creations, which will be featured in Manifesta 15 in Barcelona; **Elizabeth Jaeger**, in conversation with Estelle Hoy, gives a detailed and humorous view of her creative process, starting with rare encounter with a pelican; and Caroline Elbaor looks into **Jack O’Brien**’s practice, which pivots around the production of queer desire and consumption under later capitalism.

This fall’s installment of *Unpack / Reveal / Unleash* features Alex Bennett’s in-depth look at the painting practice of emerging Czech talent **Stanislava Kovalčíková**. The *Critic Dispatch* projects a utopian view of a new (art) world by Collecteurs. Starting with this issue, our city focus has a new look, concentrating on the architecture of museums and their impact on urban planning and the inhabitants of big cities. This issue’s *Focus On* is dedicated to **Paris**, in which Octave Perrault provides an incisive critical analysis of the architectural choices of certain art institutions. *The Curist* enters the special world of **Very Public** in Riyadh with Alaa Tarabzouni and Fahad Bin Naif in conversation with Oliver Farrell. *Letter from the City* is penned from Warsaw by **Lou Cantor**.

**Reviews**

Steve McQueen *Bass Dia:Beacon*, New York by Valerie Werder / Donald Rodney *Visceral Canker* Spike Island, Bristol by Frank Wasser / Marianna Simnett *WINNER* Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin by Philipp Hindahl / Katharina Grosse *Shifting the Stars* Centre Pompidou-Metz by Margot Nguyen; Jana Euler Oilopa *WIELS*, Brussels by Pierre-Yves Desaiwe / *Arcadia* Bally Foundation, Lugano by Michela Ceruti / Dana Schutz *The Island* The George Economou Collection, Athens by Nicolas Vamvouklis.

\*Image above: Cover: Mire Lee in her home in Berlin, wearing Hyein Seo, photographed by Hyesoo Chung, June 2024. Courtesy of the artist and *Flash Art*; Sara Cwynar, self-portrait, July 2024. Commissioned by *Flash Art*. Courtesy of the artist and *Flash Art*; Sandra Mujinga in her studio at ISCP, New York, photographed by Elliot Jerome Brown Jr., June 2024. Eyewear by Kuboraum & Innerraum. Courtesy of the artist and *Flash Art*.



"Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo' opens at 52 Walker" *Artdaily* (October 6, 2024) [ill.] [online]

## 'Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo' opens at 52 Walker



Sara Cwynar, still from Baby Blue Benzo, 2024. © Sara Cwynar. Courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

**NEW YORK, NY.-** 52 Walker is presenting its thirteenth exhibition, Baby Blue Benzo, which features work by Canadian-born, New York-based artist Sara Cwynar. This presentation focuses on a new film—for which the show is titled—shot on both digital video and 16mm and projected at monumental scale. To complement Baby Blue Benzo, a series of related photographs will be installed throughout the gallery space.

Engaging with vernacular photography and the moving image, as well as their attendant technologies, Cwynar's practice—which also includes collage, installation, and performance—explores how pictorial constructs and their related systems of power feed back into real life. Such projects as *Rose Gold* (2017) and *Baby Blue Benzo* consider color—namely, how its use and value are constantly renegotiated by the shifting conditions of consumerism, technology, and desire. Drawing from her background in graphic design and a lineage of postwar conceptual photography, Cwynar tampers with visual signifiers to deconstruct notions of power and recontextualize image culture in late capitalism.



In her new film, Cwynar combines newly produced video and photographs with found images amassed in her archive. The principal scenes for *Baby Blue Benzo* were filmed at a studio in Los Angeles, where Cwynar staged a surrealistic shoot—featuring two sets of circular camera tracks—with massive props and elaborate historical costumes that became a kind of stand-in for the artifice and arbitrariness of composing images. The artwork's central visual pillar is a replica of the titular 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, which is to date the most expensive car to be sold at auction. Throughout the film, the Benz along with the colors baby blue and Ferrari red are leitmotifs that surface again and again—the car, for one, variously appears as a custom-built replica, as a cutout, in photographed reproductions, and as a life-sized copy at the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany. Inserting her authorial presence, Cwynar incorporates filmed representations of herself in the Benz, of hired models and crew, and of friends and collaborators like Tracy Ma, a graphic designer she has depicted in previous projects. This amalgamation of images, all shown at varying scales, is unveiled in a continuous horizontal scroll across an extra-wide screen, a new animation style that Cwynar developed with a video editor. The movement structurally suggests the forward progress of certain techno-utopian ideals, though the occasional shift backward hints of its false promises as well. This scroll is interrupted by visible “seams” such as pieces of tape or cinematic glitches, which question the sovereignty of the images presented.

Cwynar uses the make of this luxury vehicle and the color baby blue as starting points for both the film and the exhibition, and she further links the eponymous Benz to benzodiazepines—medications commonly prescribed for conditions such as anxiety and insomnia, a sleep disorder with which the artist herself struggles. Connecting her intense states of wakefulness to the uninterrupted 24/7 thrum of twenty-first-century life, Cwynar conceptually pairs the advent of photography to the development of the Fordist assembly line, which altered how modern subjects were viewed and how they viewed their own productivity. In *Baby Blue Benzo*, the artist relates these ideas to our shared contemporary reality: the omnipresence of social media and the push toward automation and artificial intelligence. Cwynar collected, over a period of two years, relevant video clips and imagery from archival sources and stock databases, and pieced them together along with AI-generated text and visuals.

Cwynar includes recently shot footage of the Manhattan Bridge and the New York City skyline, the continuous construction near her studio, an auto workers' strike in Detroit, “superblooms” in Los Angeles that have resulted from ever-warming temperatures, dolls, and sequences of ice skaters, which recall the artist's own teenage experience taking part in a sport that puts young women on constant display. She also cites the violent histories of car manufacturing, scenes of car chases pulled from the internet, “booth babes,” and other such pin-up models as Pamela Anderson, whose bodies drum up scopophilic desires to consume and be consumed. The authoritative voice of Paul Cooper, an actor with whom Cwynar has worked on previous projects, provides the main narration for the film; it is paired with the artist's own voice, which emphasizes or corrects points that Cooper has made. These scripts are layered and interspersed with jarring moments from car commercials or sound bites of an engine revving, as well as excerpts from classical and popular music tracks that register different emotional cues.

In this deeply researched and personal project, Cwynar presents her insomnia as a kind of dispossessed dream state—one in which the artist, audience, the beauty and potency of images, and the past, present, and future of photography are all implicated.



Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo is curated by Ebony L. Haynes and presented by 52 Walker.

Sara Cwynar was born in 1985 in Vancouver. She received her BA from York University, Toronto, in 2010, and her MFA from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, in 2016.

Cwynar has exhibited across North America and internationally since 2012, when her first solo shows were presented at Printed Matter, New York, and Cooper Cole, Toronto. The artist has since presented solo exhibitions including Everything in the Studio (Destroyed), Foam, Amsterdam (2013); Flat Death, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia (2014); Soft Film, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2017); Image Model Muse, Minneapolis Institute of Art (2018; traveled to Milwaukee Art Museum); Tracy, Oakville Galleries, Canada (2018); Gilded Age, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2019); Gilded Age II, Polygon Gallery, Vancouver (2019); Down at the Arcade, commissioned by Performa, New York (2021); Source, Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Canada (2021); Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2022); and S/S 23, Foam, Amsterdam (2023), among others.

The artist has been featured in a number of significant group exhibitions presented by The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011); Dallas Museum of Art (2014); Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (2016); Fondazione Prada, Milan (2016); Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2017); Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo (2017); Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg (2017); Centre régional d'art contemporain (CRAC) Occitanie, Sète, France (2018); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2019); Arts Club of Chicago (2019); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2021); and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2022), among many others.

Cwynar has been included in international recurring exhibitions such as Greater New York, MoMA PS1, New York (2015); Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, Mannheim, Germany (2017); Bienal de São Paulo (2018); Capture Photography Festival, Vancouver (2022); and Triennial of Photography Hamburg (2022).

Her work is held in institutional collections including the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Bâloise Art Collection, Basel; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Dallas Art Museum; Foam, Amsterdam; Fondazione Prada, Milan; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco and Paris; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Milwaukee Art Museum; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas; Polygon Gallery, Vancouver; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

The artist is represented by Cooper Cole, Toronto, and The Approach, London. She lives and works in New York.



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