Sundell, Margaret. “Sara Cwynar.” *4Columns* (November 22, 2024) [ill.] [online]

4Columns

Visual Art 11.22.24

# Sara Cwynar

## *Margaret Sundell*

*Benzes and benzos, images of images: in a two-channel film, the artist explores fantasy, desire, and duplication.*



*Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. Pictured: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 2024.

Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo, *curated by Ebony L. Haynes,*
*52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, New York City,*
*through December 21, 2024*

. . .

I have a little blue pill. I take it when I need to sleep. But first I hold out, until my nights are endless stretches of wakefulness and my days are an unbearable haze. Sara Cwynar likely knows the feeling; she has insomnia, too. “I can’t sleep,” her narrator and alter ego confesses in *Soft Film* (2016), “so I comb Ebay.” That only makes the problem worse: “Course I can’t sleep; there was too much to look at.” Based on the title of her latest work—*Baby Blue Benzo* (2024)—now on view at 52 Walker, with related photographs, Cwynar is familiar with how I escape the demands of consciousness: through benzos (short for benzodiazepines), a class of highly effective, but highly addictive, sedatives.

Projected at a monumental scale in a darkened room, the twenty-two-minute, two-channel *Baby Blue Benzo* opens with a black screen and a man’s voice (that of actor Paul Cooper). The theme of insomnia returns: “It started,” he intones as a blue sky filled with fluffy clouds appears, “because I couldn’t sleep.” Cwynar then picks up the narration: “It was like my body was being dragged behind an endless burning light.” Accompanied by pop songs and the swelling strains of classical music, the two tag-team a voice-over that recurrently invokes sleeplessness while plumbing the nexus of fantasy, identity, and desire in our image-saturated society. The piece combines new video, 16mm film, and photographs with stock footage and selections from Cwynar’s ever-expanding digital archive, which comprises thousands of photos, some personal, the rest culled from print and online sources. Video clips alternate with filmed collages of still pictures. What results is a disjointed parade—wristwatch follows women’s basketball team, follows kitsch figurines.



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

Through the use of animation, Cwynar's film moves forward from left to right (and occasionally hiccups backward). It's as if we were reading, or, maybe better, scrolling through the perpetual image stream we encounter on our screens; or walking on a treadmill; or working on a Fordist assembly line. (The inventor of the Model-T and his methods are discussed in the voice-over.) Perhaps the artist is thinking of the industrial substrate of our digital realm—and of the labor required to inhabit it. Still another association: panning shots, such as the ones Cwynar created for *Baby Blue Benzo* on a soundstage with circular tracks on the floor that support a dollying camera. They capture models in elaborate costumes and a plywood cutout of a sleek automobile, with a bikini-clad woman propped up to look like she's lounging on its hood. Here, we encounter the title's second referent, what the narrator refers to as "a dream car"—the most expensive ever sold at auction—a pale-blue Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR. A linking coincidence: the car was made at the time benzos were first developed, in 1955. Fittingly, the grainy 16mm segments have a retro, mid-century feel.



*Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo,* installation view. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. Pictured: *Baby Blue Benzo,* 2024.

The vehicle pops up throughout the film in varying proximities to reality: as the cutout; as photographic reproductions; as promo images that circulated at the time of its sale; as a life-size replica at the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany, which Cwynar circles, sits in, and strokes. With so many copies, do we actually need the real thing? Certainly not in order to lust after it; indeed, a reproduction might be more effective in inciting our appetite. “Question,” the narrator asks: “Is it just as good to have a picture of the car?” “Looking,” Cwynar observes, “is a little bit like owning.”



*Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. Pictured: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 2024.

*Baby Blue Benzo* features a number of secondary motifs. Some relate more directly to the Mercedes. There is a bright red Ferrari—seen life-size and as a toy—a chromatic counterpoint to the dream car's blue finish. There are figure skaters, clad in race-car drivers' coveralls. Sometimes the connection is fuzzier, such as the streaming traffic on the Manhattan Bridge, surrounded by office blocks that become their own theme. Sometimes the only association between the Mercedes and the secondary image is that both are objects of desire, as is the case with Pamela Anderson. We see her first in her prime and then in Cwynar's photo and video shoot for the *New York Times* last year, for which the still-beautiful '90s sex symbol posed against a dusty-blue paper backdrop wearing a tulle skirt, a white T-shirt, and a sparkling silver bra slung casually around her neck.



*Sara Cwynar: Baby Blue Benzo*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker. Pictured: *Baby Blue Benzo*, 2024.

As the work progresses, we plunge ever deeper into the space of representation. A mass-produced series of plastic coin banks shaped like long-eared rabbits that appears early on in a film clip returns as a single bunny bank in a large photograph unfurled by a model. This transformation of the object—itself both multiple and a reproduction—into yet another picture further attenuates its already simulacral connection to the real. A long sequence drawn from the artist's shoot of Anderson works in a similar way. First, the actress fills the frame, staring out at the viewer with a come-hither gaze, then the picture we've just seen suddenly materializes on a computer screen shot upside down, then we return to the full-frame, right-side-up image. And then the frame stutters; we see video clips of one Pamela after another, as the piece continues its rightward march—each moving or gesturing in a slightly different way. Just when we've gotten our bearings, when we feel some purchase on this repeating Pamela, a still image shows Cwynar writing "PAM" with a red grease pencil over the body of the star. Images, it seems, are just as fungible as commodities. In *Baby Blue Benzo*, they recur seemingly at random, over and over, as in an insomniac's dissociated dérive, or perhaps just like late-capitalist life online.

Cwynar's film conflates the haze of insomnia with the normal state of being awake in contemporary culture, but the piece doesn't dead-end with that proposition. Like her Pictures Generation forebears, Cwynar traffics in allegory, what Walter Benjamin calls "speech in a dead language." For Benjamin, this mortification results from the splitting that occurs with commodification—the object's loss of inherent use value and its emergence as a surface of pure exchange. The allegorist redeems the object not by reuniting its sundered halves but by duplicating its original division and assigning new meaning to its empty shell—in the case of *Baby Blue Benzo*, as a work of art.

*Margaret Sundell is the editor-in-chief of* 4Columns.

Schwendener, Martha. “Galleries.” The New York Times (November 15, 2024): C9 [ill.] [print]

The New York Times



# Galleries

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

## Jes Fan

Through Dec. 20. Andrew Kreps Gallery, 55 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-741-8849, andrewkreps.com.

This is Jes Fan's first solo gallery exhibition in New York, but he is a known quantity. I first encountered the Canadian-born, Hong Kong-raised artist's biomorphic, bio-curious sculptures in a gallery at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 2019, and his wall-penetrating sculptures were in the recent Whitney Biennial. They stay with you, tapping into the uncanny aspects of the human body and the way it overlaps with other organic matter. Few artists are doing this as successfully; one of them, Tishan Hsu, has been creating evocative, body-boundary-warping sculpture since the 1980s.

In the front room at Kreps, a rectangular vat is filled with soy milk, into which is projected a video featuring a "homemade endoscopy" (!) — which means a tiny camera Fan either ingested or stuck somewhere else. (The gallery assistants weren't clear about which orifice served as a point of entry.)

The exhibit continues through some clammy, cream-colored latex curtains, in a space filled with curvy resin wall sculptures that resemble botanical cross-sections, and armatures covered with bio resin (a plant-based thermoplastic) draped with silky sheets of soy skin.

The power of this work rides on its ambiguity. Should I be engrossed or grossed out? That is the nature of organic matter, of course: It can be desirable and alluring or repulsive, and Fan's most compelling pieces vacillate between these two poles.

## Les Levine

Through Jan. 25. Ulrik, 175 Canal Street, Manhattan; 734-757-5201, ulrik.nyc.

If you're worried that the art market is ruining art, head over to Ulrik and watch Les Levine's brilliant video "Analyze Lovers: The Story of Vincent" (1990), about how the art market was ruining art in the 1980s. (Or, for a deeper art history dive, read Giorgio Vasari's laments about successful 16th-century Italian artists living lavish lifestyles.) Turns out it's an eternal concern: the fear that money can eclipse creativity and the magic of art.

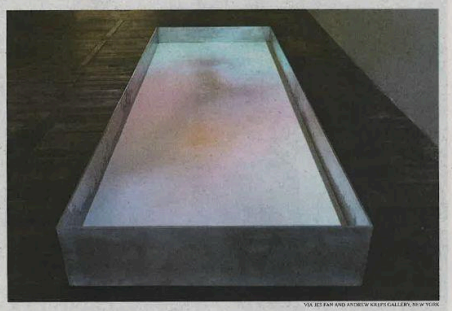
Levine's 45-minute interview-style video soars because of its all-star (for the art world) cast. The critic John Perrault plays a deadpan van Gogh. Julian Schnabel, the painter who made a film about another art market juggernaut — Jean-Michel Basquiat — is here. So are the painter Malcolm Morley, the gallery owners Richard Feigen and Jeffrey Deitch, the art critics Thomas McEvilley and Grace Glueck, an economist and even a Catholic monsignor and Buddhist monks who weigh in on the spiritual aspects of art megastardom and commercialization.

Ultimately, in the often wild art marketplace, a $50 million van Gogh can be both a "crime" (the art critic's opinion) and a convenient place to park a lot of money (the economist's read). What's fascinating here is how van Gogh himself is portrayed: messiah or pauper sponging off his brother Theo or post-Kirk-Douglas-Hollywood-kitsch character (Douglas played him in the 1956 film "Lust for Life"). Levine's video never decides, and the case of the Dutch master remains as generative as his extreme-impasto brushstrokes.

## Sara Cwynar

Through Dec. 21. 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-727-1961, 52walker.com.

Lush, layered and immersive, Sara Cwynar's show "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker is a dazzling journey through photography, showing how the medium creates desire for products — and, ultimately, for more photographs. This isn't the first time Cwynar has grappled with consumer desire; she once made a video about the rose gold iPhone. Here the focus is the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupé, which in 2022 sold at auction for about $143 million, the highest auction price to date for a car.



VIA JES FAN AND ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK



VIA LES LEVINE AND ULRIK, NEW YORK. PHOTO BY STEPHEN FAUGHT



VIA SARA CWYNAR AND 52 WALKER, NEW YORK

Top, Jes Fan's "homemade endoscopy" video, projected onto a vat of soy milk. Above left, a still from Les Levine's "Analyze Lovers: The Story of Vincent" (1990) and, right, an installation view of Sara Cwynar's "Baby Blue Benzo."

In a 21-minute video also titled "Baby Blue Benzo" and a series of related photo works, Cwynar takes us through the moves a photographer makes when creating her images: researching, collating, collaging, streaming, panning, touching, clicking, tracking. She stands both behind the camera and in front of it, intermittently directing and performing.

Pamela Anderson, a modern master of the image — like Marilyn Monroe or Princess Diana — makes an appearance, serving as a kind of doppelgänger for Cwynar, who is also blond and Canadian-born. Anderson and the show as a whole force viewers to consider some of the more vexing questions in contemporary culture: What is the difference between consuming a product and an image? How does photography turn people into products? How is it like a drug (the punning benzodiazepine of the title)?

The end of the video delivers a surprise. It involves a high-camp, retro-style performance by ice skaters in red racecar-driver costumes. Cwynar appears among them, skating with more than average proficiency, gliding into an impressive sit spin. This unexpected demonstration of mastery seems harmless at first until you realize its hidden message: Those who control the production of images have extraordinary skills and resources that they use to entertain and seduce us, both into the universe of technical images and into the economies, politics and ideologies programmed into it.

## On View

### Richard Serra
Every Which Way
Through December 14
537 West 20th Street, New York

### Francis Alÿs
The Gibraltar Projects
Through December 14
519 and 525 West 19th Street, New York

### Noah Davis
Ancient Reign
Through January 25
34 East 69th Street, New York

### William Eggleston
The Last Dyes
Opening November 16
606 N Western Avenue, Los Angeles

### Walter Price
Pearl Lines
Opening November 16
616 N Western Avenue, Los Angeles

### David Zwirner

Schwendener, Martha. “What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in November.” *The New York Times* (November 14, 2024) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

# What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in November

**By Martha Schwendener and Will Heinrich**

Published Nov. 7, 2024 Updated Nov. 14, 2024, 3:08 p.m. ET

*This week in Newly Reviewed, Martha Schwendener covers Jes Fan’s unsettling biomorphic sculptures, Les Levine’s van Gogh and Sara Cwynar’s Mercedes-Benz immersion.*

TRIBECA

## Sara Cwynar

Through Dec. 21. 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-727-1961, 52walker.com.



Installation view of Sara Cwynar’s show “Baby Blue Benzo.” via Sara Cwynar and 52 Walker, New York

Lush, layered and immersive, Sara Cwynar's show "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker is a dazzling journey through photography, showing how the medium creates desire for products — and, ultimately, for more photographs. This isn't the first time Cwynar has grappled with consumer desire; she once made a video about the rose gold iPhone. Here the focus is the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupé, which in 2022 sold at auction for about $143 million, the highest auction price to date for a car.

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Halperin, Julia. “Why This Artist Has 400 Pieces of Plastic Tableware.” *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* (November 13, 2024) [ill.] [online]

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

MY OBSESSION

# Why This Artist Has 400 Pieces of Plastic Tableware

## Sara Cwynar has amassed a collection of melamine objects that have also appeared in her video work.



Sara Cwynar, photographed in her Brooklyn studio with her collection of 1950s-era melamine cups and plates. Photograph by Jennifer Livingston. Set design by Leilin Lopez-Toledo

**By Julia Halperin**

Nov. 13, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

In My Obsession, one creative person reveals their most prized collection.

Sara Cwynar, 39, has a deep reverence for the kinds of objects usually found in a grandmother's basement. Best known for making collagelike videos and photographs that capture the sensory overload of the internet age, the artist, perhaps counterintuitively, has spent six years building a collection of dated-looking cups and gravy boats in shades of mustard, pink and turquoise. Her cluttered studio in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood is never without a crate of plastic midcentury American tableware. Made from melamine, a mass-produced plastic, these objects were marketed to housewives in the '50s for their indestructibility (which Cwynar has found not to be one of their characteristics: A pile of them shatters on the ground in her 2017 video "Rose Gold").

For the Canadian-born artist, whose latest show, "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker in New York (through Dec. 21), includes a video installation and photographs that investigate American car culture, the tableware epitomizes the optimism of the mid-20th century, as well as our timeless drive to consume. "They contain so much meaning," says Cwynar. "Hope, or a lack of place to put your hope."

**The collection:** "American midcentury plastic tableware."

**Number of pieces in the collection:** "About 400."

**First purchase:** "I saw one in a thrift store in 2012. I immediately went back to my studio and bought 100 on eBay. I loved the gross, fake colors. No other material could hold color in that way."

**Most expensive:** "In my I-need-more phase, I probably paid $20."

**Least expensive:** "$2 or $3."

**Weirdest:** “The ones that say ‘Allied Chemical’ [a now-defunct company in the aerospace, chemical, oil and gas industries] on the bottom. Nobody would let that be printed on something you’re supposed to drink from now. There’s something kind of nice about it saying what it is. Also [sometimes] I’ll notice a cigarette smell on them. What kind of hard plastic keeps the smell of things?”

**Most precious:** “A mottled army green cup that I saw in 2018. I’ve used it in some photographs. It’s not [the shape] of a camping cup, so it’s just a very confusing object.”

**One that got away:** “You don’t have too many people trying to outbid you on plastic cups. [Sometimes] I’d be trying to get the price down [on a large set] and I would lose it, or the [seller, who was sick of negotiating] would be like, ‘I’m not talking to you anymore.’”

**Other collections:** “Bunches of marble grapes. I stopped [buying them] because they’re pretty expensive — like $75. Do you really need more than 20? I don’t find it fun to collect things that are considered fancy or even good design. It’s more interesting when it’s a maligned object.”

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

Set assistant: Joseph McCagherty

"Sara Cwynar 'Baby Blue Benzo' at 52 Walker, New York." *Mousse Magazine* (October 31, 2024) [ill.] [online]

MOUSSE

# Sara Cwynar "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker, New York

31.10.2024 READING TIME 5′



Sara Cwynar "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy: artist and 52 Walker, New York

*This show was selected as part of New York Oomph—a curated roundup of the best contemporary art exhibitions and events held by galleries, museums, and institutions in town during ADAA: The Art Show, New York, October 2024.*

"Baby Blue Benzo" 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.

Curated by
Ebony L. Haynes

at 52 Walker, New York
until December 21, 2024

"New York Oomph 2024." *Mousse Magazine* (October 31, 2024) [ill.] [online]

MOUSSE

# New York Oomph 2024

31.10.2024 READING TIME 11′




New York Oomph is a curated roundup of the best contemporary art exhibitions and events held by galleries, museums, and institutions in town during ADAA: The Art Show, New York, October 2024.

**Sara Cwynar "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker, New York**
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.
*from October 4 until December 21, 2024*

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

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN | NOVEMBER 2024

# Sara Cwynar: *Baby Blue Benzo*

By Jason Drill



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

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

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.

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.

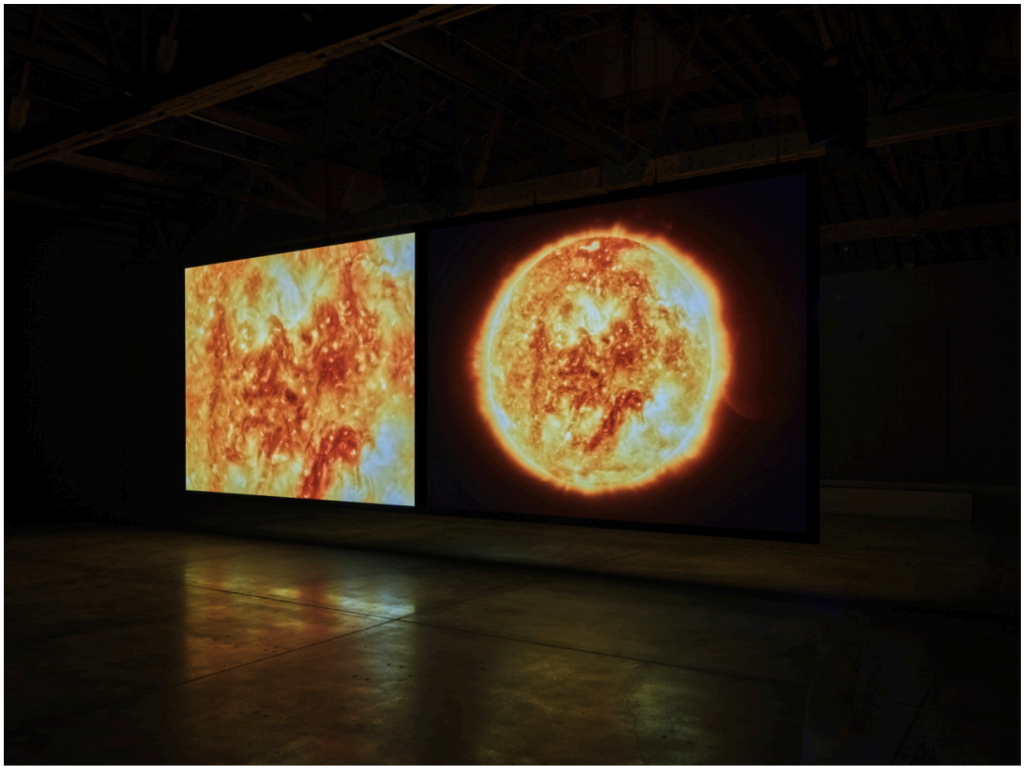
*Welcome to* Close Looks*: a semi-regular column from our critics. This series of long-form reviews dives into buzzy and under-the-radar shows alike, revealing the trends, ideas, and controversies that shape what's happening—and what's to come—in the art world. For this installment, two striking moving-image 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 (Cwyar'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.

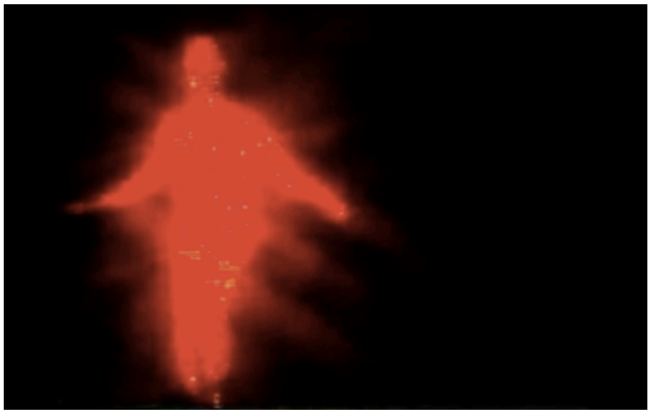
Though neither film is long, both demand endurance. Cwyar delivers pretty and sexy things to the point of monotony, but once under *Baby Blue Benzo*'s spell, you forget it's an option to turn away. McQueen, of course, threatens to burn your eyes, dares you to leave from the first moment. The transfixing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

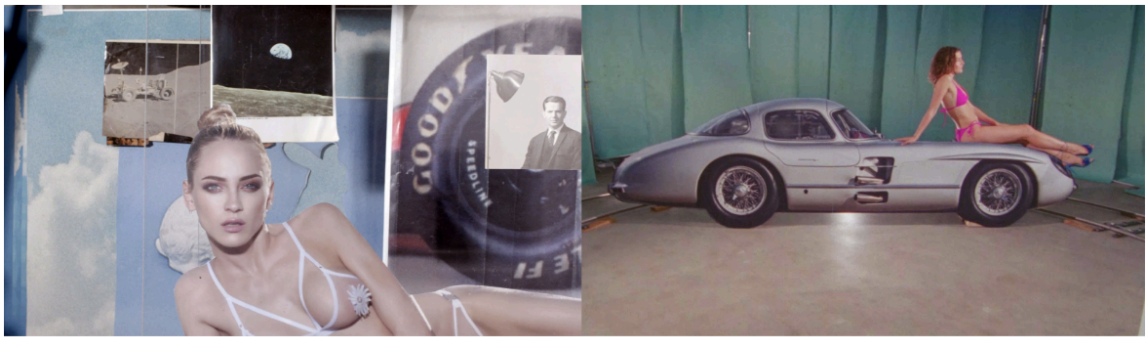


(Header image) Jack Goldstein's The Jump, 1978. Photo courtesy of the gallery and artist.

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 Cywnar. Photo courtesy of the gallery and artist.

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

FT FINANCIAL TIMES

HTSI Photography + Add to myFT

# 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

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**

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“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 ultimetly 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 Desaive / *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*.

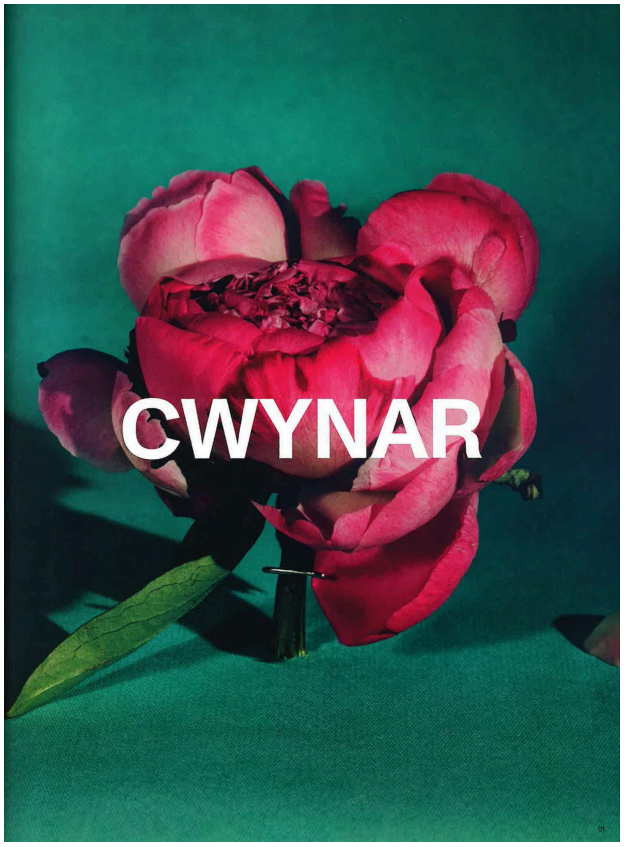
Jackson, Elijah. “Fantasies of Value: Sara Cwynar.” *Flash Art* (Fall 2024): 66-81 [ill.] [print]

# Flash Art

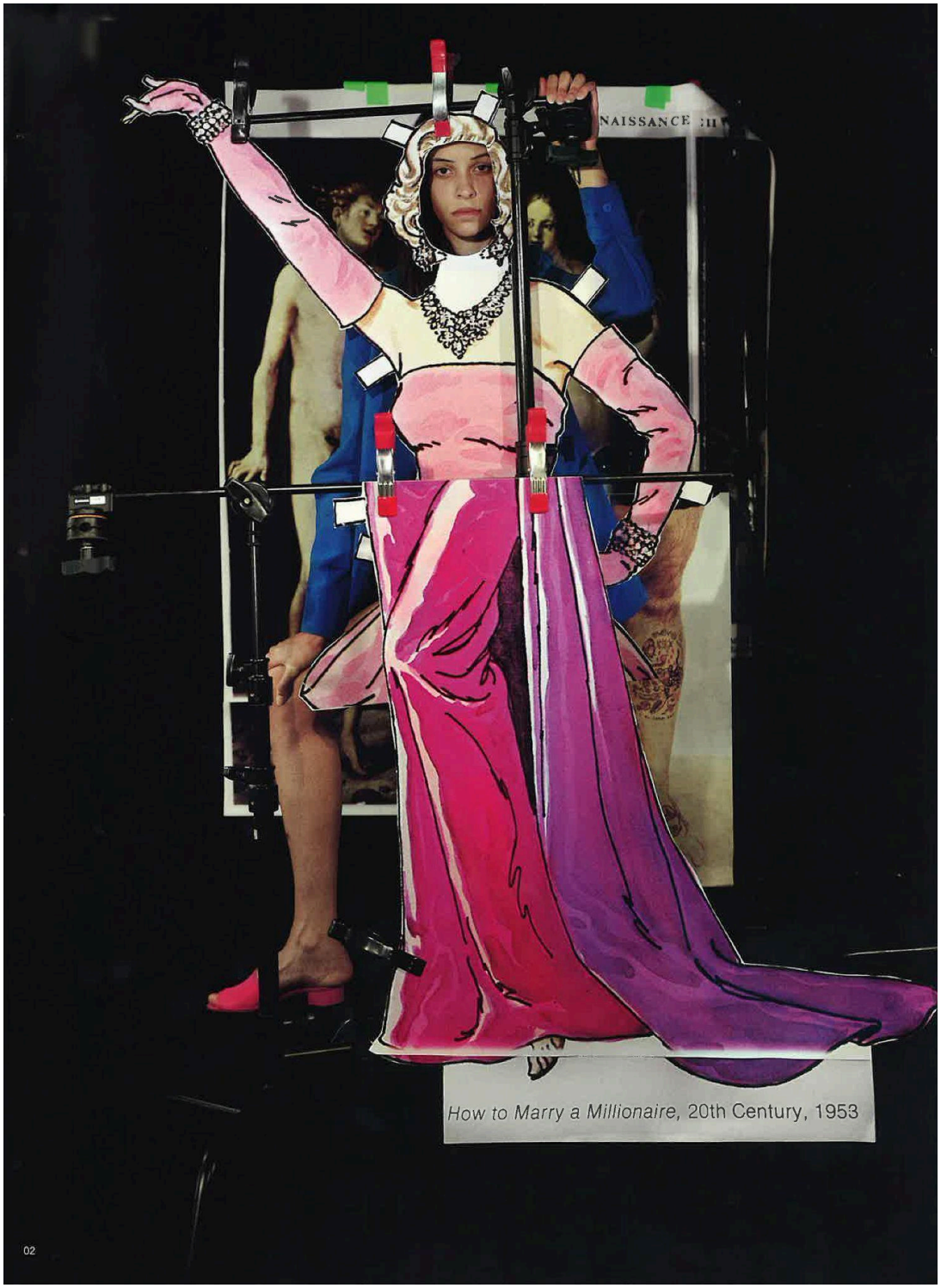


# Fantasies of Value

## SARA CWYNAR



WORDS BY
ELIJAH JACKSON




*How to Marry a Millionaire*, 20th Century, 1953

Sara Cwynar by Elijah Jackson

Like most disasters, it's said the day was cloudless. It's June 11, 1955, at 6:25 p.m. at the 24 Hours of Le Mans sports car race, and in one minute, a slew of then-state-of-the-art race cars will vault over a small earthen barrier separating the track from the gathered spectators. Physics dictates the subsequent spectacle. Built of an alloy composed heavily of magnesium (highly flammable, apparently), the Mercedes-Benz entry into the race, the 300 SLR, bursts afire, egged on by diesel and other combustibles. Eighty-three die, and 120 are injured in the then-deadliest auto accident in history. For three decades following, Mercedes terminated their racing program, with the two remaining 300 SLRs preserved as relics of the triumph of technology over life, as ever.

Flash forward to May 20, 2022, at the Stuttgart Mercedes-Benz Museum: an anonymous collector purchases one of the two 1955 300 SLRs for 135 million euros — unsurprisingly, this is the largest sum ever spent on an automobile. Another record. How is such value produced? This car itself acquired its worth when unable to fulfill the use case for which it was made; its prestige is born from its position as evidence of the grand waste of manufacturing, as potential energy squandered before conversion to kinetic. Disasters create value. Value creates fantasy. At an auction, value is unknown at the outset, with anticipated potential to be realized at the hammer strike. It's at this moment that money, at an ungodly scale, is vaporized. Blanchot's eternal dictum: "The disaster takes care of everything."[1]

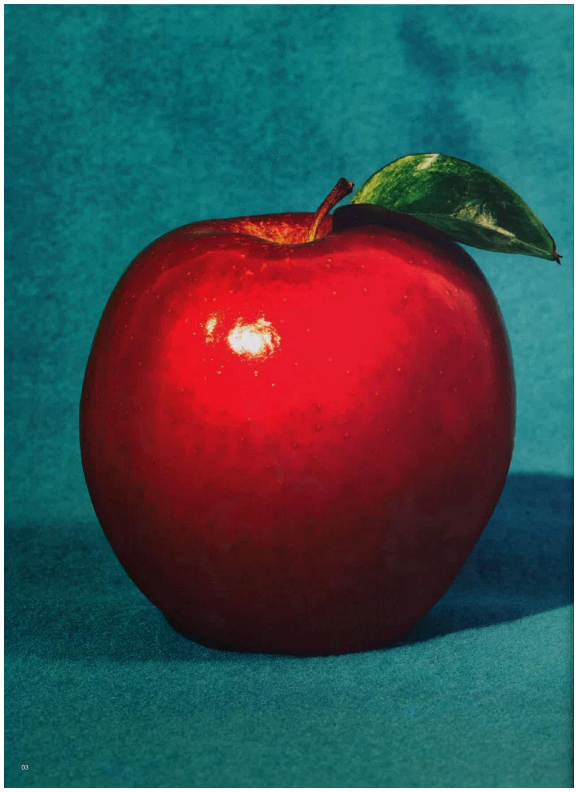
I spoke with Sara Cwynar, coincidentally, a few days before the eighty-ninth anniversary of the so-called Le Mans Disaster. "It's always important for me to find things in the real world and then be led by them. I need to follow my obsessions," she says, referring to the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, which has guided recent inquiries. Previously, such objects of fascination have included the rose gold iPhone (2017's film *Rose Gold*), bric-a-brac sourced from eBay trawls (among others, 2016's *Soft Film*), makeup with the brand name Cezanne, cosmetic production facilities, computerized figures endlessly swimming, printouts of celebrities du jour, her friends, statues, catalogue snippets, and endless concatenations of photos in a camera roll. Cwynar's preoccupations and vocabulary of the image maneuver between discipline, place, and degree of physicality, unsettling any concept of "real" — 3D renderings mingle amid in-the-flesh actors, images of digital avatars are printed out onto paper and cut out with scissors (not lassoed in Photoshop). Bathed in studio lighting, they all appear to have similar levels of construction. At such junctures, increasingly untenable divisions erode — between analog and digital, replica and original, and other oft-repeated dichotomies.

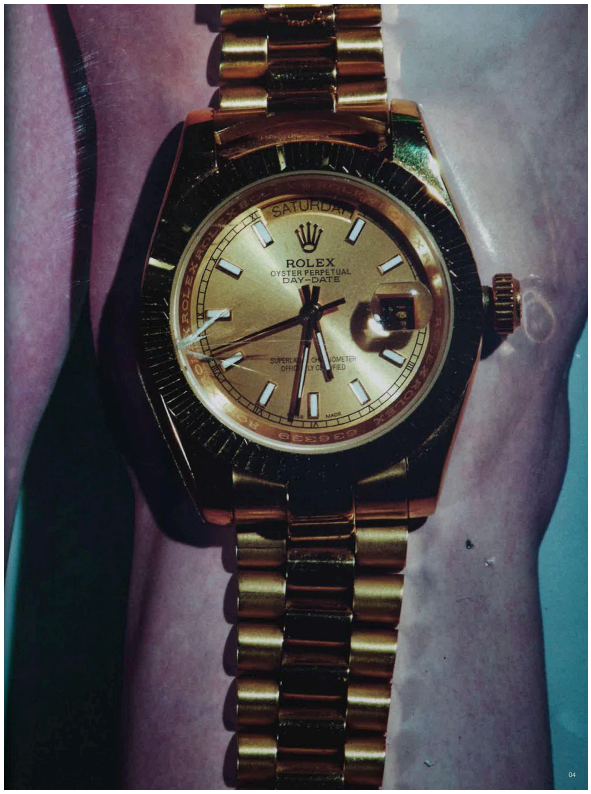
Such maneuvers are on full display in Cwynar's exhibition "Baby Blue Benzo," opening at 52 Walker, New York, in October. A two-channel film and installation, *Baby Blue Benzo* (2024) locates the 300 SLR as a fulcrum to explore how objects accumulate fiscal and social value. Across her work, Cwynar probes valuation systems, questioning the role that images play in producing and representing our desires. "In a way, 'Baby Blue Benzo' is an archive of fantasies: of all the fantasies which go into making a car so valuable." Fantasies present osmotically, irrespective of gaze. Cwynar's work seeks to deracinate these media fabrications (social and otherwise), remove them from their contexts, and denature them.

The film's major players include a life-size model of the SLR (a print mounted on plywood), the remaining SLR (the one not sold in the auction!), models in bikinis à la car commercials, marble statues, models in Victorian gowns, a cutout of Pamela Anderson, and Pamela Anderson herself. Throughout the film, the cameras are conspicuously present — one 16mm and one digital — on a circular track surrounding the car, filming both the subjects of the film and themselves. The 300 SLR, mounted on plywood, attains a lenticular quality when orbited by the cameras. When viewed from the front, under the lights and subject to the transfiguration of filmic lighting, it appears to be a fully three-dimensional object in physical form — the car itself, there for you, waiting to be viewed, shockingly real. Just as quickly as it is endowed with a sense of thingness, the totality of the image is revealed as the camera swivels; artifice is made apparent even a couple of degrees away from dead straight. The illusion falters. Advertising is an act of persuasion, and it's only convincing because you know, in the back of your mind, that you're being tricked.

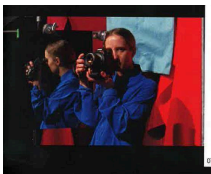


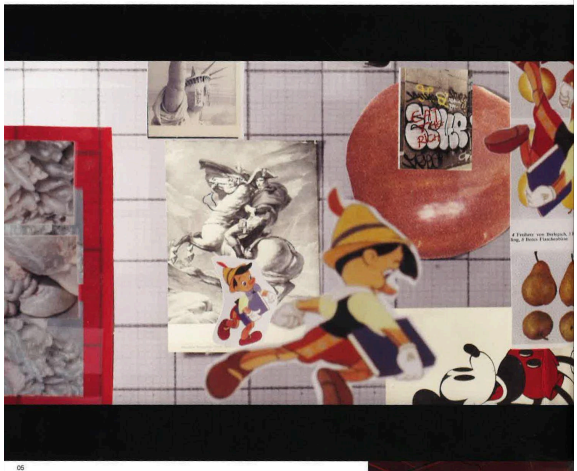
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Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).



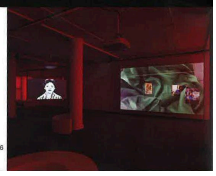

SATURDAY
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DAY-DATE














Concealing coloration: the roe fawn's coat, mottled like its surroundings, provides protection from predators

Before an MFA at Yale in 2016 jumpstarted her art career, Cwynar worked in graphic design, a background evident by her recognition of the pathos of reactionary appeals toward a yearning for the past — nostalgia. "When I was first coming up in design, things were very nostalgic. Is it a reflection of current times that we always want to go back to earlier modes of making images?" Cwynar's images, be they still photographs or those set in motion in a film, assuage a present; they confound the aesthetics of a singular time. They are analog, richly grained and sensuous, yet digitally sharp, manipulated; organic, yet posed; contemporary, yet reminiscent of a Sears catalogue, a production still in Technicolor selling you a product that no longer exists — a typology which recalls, vaguely, a past, but without specifically referential temporal markers, toward more of an affective image-language of something bygone. Graphic design, as advertising, seeks to present past fantasies as desires of the future and, as such, naturally reifies a backward gaze.

Cwynar's images are rarely at rest. "The scroll is essential," she says of the ever-present movement in her films. Akin to the visual experience of navigating a contemporary cityscape or an app, rarely is Cwynar's viewer treated to the reprieve of a stilled image. As our contemporary visual field has become overgrown, so too are Cwynar's aesthetics bustling: "I'll spend a full week on ten seconds."

Take 2021's sprawling six-channel video installation *Glass Life*. The title of the work is taken from Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2018); Zuboff uses the eponymous term, in Cwynar's words, "to describe the pervasiveness of data-driven technology, which operates under the cover of effortless connection and convenience, while quietly eroding privacy, social bonds, self-determination, and individual will."[2] The film is an anxious combination of digital and analog in which images, some digital renderings, and some literal cutouts flow ceaselessly from the bottom to the top of the screen, superimposed over a grid. Multiple planes move at once — sometimes the camera, sometimes the images, and sometimes the background; Cwynar employs multiple layered glass panes in a practice similar to mid-century animators. Such images include Pinocchio, self-portraits, wristwatch advertisements, intestines, an emoji of a pig, Margaret Thatcher, paperclips, perfume bottles, and the World Trade Center. Occasionally, the scroll is replaced by a shift to full-screen video: the interior of a museum, an airport tarmac. Any individual locale is frangible; the associative logic of the film has a quick metabolism, privileging jumps.



Paralleling the constant scroll, a constant narration presides, voiced by Cwynar and Paul Cooper, who is a consistent presence in Cwynar's films (Cwynar: "He's got that laconic, authoritative man voice"). The recited text is a mix of Cwynar's writing and sourced texts, organized, in broad strokes, around the processes of self-formation and capital's impinging upon such formation via media apparatuses. From *Glass Life*: "We have to watch ourselves become ourselves in order to be ourselves, over and over again."[3] The voiceover track in *Baby Blue Benzo*, also voiced by Cooper, draws from a similar breadth, plucking from sales literature for the Benz, Allan Sekula, Charles Baudelaire, Saidiya Hartman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and original text written by Cwynar.

*Glass Life* also forms the basis of Cwynar's 2025 show at the ICA Boston. The exhibition has several reference points, chiefly among them German art and cultural historian Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) — a sprawling sequence of sixty-one panels in which Warburg brought together hundreds of images to express imagistic continuities across era and origin, in opposition to an understanding of the art-historical canon as a linear timeline of continual Western progress. The ICA show begins at the end of *Glass Life* with an alphabetical list of terms related to the film's research and production. The list begins: "Ambassadors, animals, Apple, Balenciaga, Bayer, beauty, Bellmer, Berenice" and so on, through the *abécédaire* of Cwynar's actual research interests, as well as terms that began to show up in social media ads as a result of Cwynar's online habits during the film's production. It's as much an index of thought as it is a reflection of how thought is bent by algorithmic insistence. The installation, sprawling across the entire

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Sara Cwynar and Rose Bouthillier, *Sara Cwynar: Glass Life* (New York: Aperture, 2021).

3
Rob Horning, N+1.

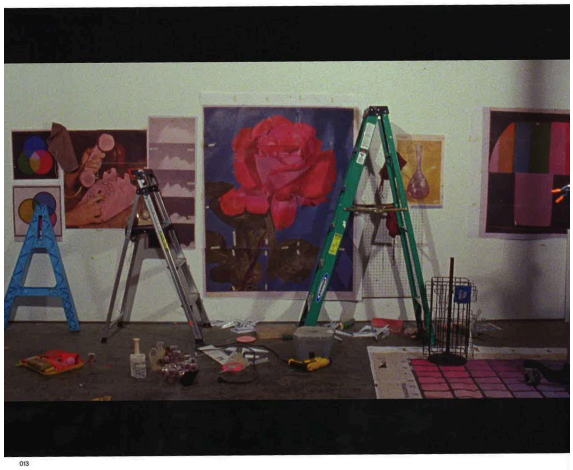


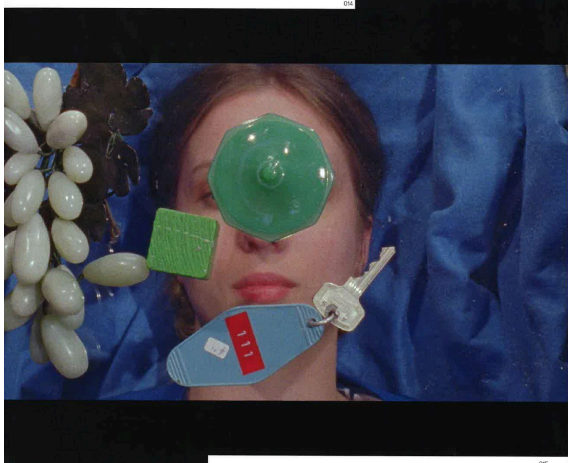


Fantasies of Value

Sara Cwynar by Elijah Jackson










Ambassadors
Crying
peach
perspective
threat
tongue
touch
transparency
vase
war
Women
017

gallery space, will amass image, video, and text material relating to each term, a mass aggregation of signal and noise, of the relevant and the insignificant, all the products and byproducts of thought. In producing oversaturation, Cwynar seeks to investigate what occurs when information is gathered; what hidden meanings emerge from this proliferation? Writing on the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman approaches Warburg's larger project as one invested in "a knowledge-movement of images, a knowledge in extensions, in associative relationships, in ever-renewed montages, and no longer knowledge in straight lines, in a confined corpus, in stabilized typologies."[4] So too does Cwynar approach the image as eternally subject to motion and, when in motion, capable of fracturing "stabilized typologies" which tie objects to a "confined corpus" and preserve repressive norms.

In the *Arcades Project* (1982), Walter Benjamin writes that "history decays into images, not into stories." On the evening of November 30, 1936, the Crystal Palace, a sprawling glass and wrought iron structure erected in London to house the first World's Fair, was destroyed in a blaze. The Crystal Palace inspired numerous copies, including the New York Crystal Palace, the Glaspalast in Munich, the Crystal Palace in Montreal, the Garden Palace in Sydney, and the Paleis voor Volksvlijt in Amsterdam. All, too, were destroyed in fires. To copy an object is to reproduce its fate, to assure the replication of a future: not to revivify its present state, but to assure a congruent end. As W. G. Sebald writes in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995): "On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation." Even before it was built or conceived of, the 1955 300 SLR was doomed. Likewise Cwynar's 300 SLR, as a print mounted on wood, shares its fate, rebuilt and destroyed, as each rotation of the camera reveals its falsity, built in service (and assurance) of an end. What is expressed through such reproduction? What is reproduced? Where do the images go when they themselves decay?



01 *Guts*, 2020. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto. 02 *Marilyn*, 2020. Archival pigment prints, 2020. Courtesy of the artist; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and The Approach, London. 03 *Apple for Scale (after Steve Jobs)*, 2022. Edition 2 of 3 + 2 AP. Archival pigment print. 76.2 x 61 x 3.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto. 04 *Rolex Oyster Perpetual Day-Date (fake) from perfectrolex.io*, 2022. Edition of 3 + 2 AP. Archival pigment print. 76.2 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto. 05, 07, 08 *Glass Life*, 2021. Video stills. 19' 02". Six-channel 2K video with sound. Foxy Production, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York. 06 *Glass Life*, 2021. Exhibition view at Foxy Production, New York, USA. Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York. 09 *Fawn (Protection from Predators)*, 2020. Edition 1 of 3 + 2 AP. Archival pigment print. 118.1 x 88.9 x 3.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto. 010, 011, 012 *Baby Blue Benz*, 2024. Video stills. 16mm film and digital video. Courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York. 013, 014, 015, 016 *Rose Gold*, 2017. Video stills. 8'. 16mm film on video. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto. 017 *Ambassadors, Apple, Animals II*, 2022. Collage on archival pigment print mounted to sintra. 168.9 x 113.5 x 6.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.

4
Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

**Sara Cwynar** (1985, Vancouver) lives and works in New York. Cwynar is interested in the way images accumulate, endure, and change in value over time. Her conceptual photographs involve constant archiving and re-presentation of collected visual materials, layering diverse imagery with reference to art theory. Her works intricately recall advertisements, retail catalogues, and old art history textbooks. Recent solo exhibitions include: Foam, Amsterdam; Cooper Cole, Toronto; ICA Los Angeles; Foxy Production, New York; The Contemporary Dayton; Remai Modern, Saskatoon; The Approach, London; Blitz, Valletta; and Minneapolis Institute of Art. Her work has been included in group shows at LACMA, Los Angeles; 8th Triennale der Photographie Hamburg; Guggenheim Museum, New York; International Festival of Photography, Melbourne; Arts Club of Chicago; and La Galerie, Centre d'art Contemporain de Noisy-le-Sec. Cwynar's solo exhibition "Baby Blue Benzo" at 52 Walker, New York, will be on view from October 4 until December 21, 2024.

**Elijah Jackson** is a writer based in New York. Recent writing has been featured or is forthcoming in *Fence*, *Second Factory*, *fieldnotes*, and other publications. He is the poetry editor of the *Washington Square Review*.

"'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 Cywnar. 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.