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BR BROOKLYN RAIL



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December/January 2024/25



Portrait of Sara Cwynar, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

SARA CWYNAR with Chloe Stagaman

Sara Cwynar is interested in how photographs travel, assemble, and evolve—through time as much as through a glowing screen. In recent years, her colorful and abundant films, photographs, collages, installations, and performances have looked to our image-driven world to raise questions about systems of power and control, including what they disregard. Her current exhibition, *Baby Blue Benzo*, centers unattainable desire: that drug-like haze of possibility seducing the mind while convincing the body to stay at work. A model walks on an emerald treadmill. A version of the world's most expensive racecar sits in a museum in Germany. A figure skating Cwynar spins dizzily at the center of an ice rink. "Everything is moving forward as planned," states the new film's narrator, yet somehow forward—in the film as much as in life under late-stage capitalism—means moving to stay in place.

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

In October, Cwynar and I spoke over Zoom about desire, her recent photoshoot with Pamela Anderson, the color blue, and *Baby Blue Benzo*'s central protagonist: the dream car. What follows is a version of our conversation that has been edited for length and clarity.

CHLOE STAGAMAN (RAIL): Sara, it's such a pleasure to have the chance to talk to you. My first question is about desire. Ten years ago your book *Kitsch Encyclopedia* was published, and a lot has happened since then. How has your interest in desire evolved?

SARA CWYNAR (S.C.): I think when I made *Kitsch Encyclopedia*, it was about desire, but I didn't realize that yet. I remember making that book and trying to figure out: why do I want to make photography and why do I care about these kinds of images? That's still the question. I think it'll be boring when I can finally answer it. That book was about a sad version of desire: trying to project a better version of the world on top of the one you're actually living in, and how images function to

make things seem more digestible. The central text of the book is Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where he talks about kitsch being this image world that is built on top of the actual one. His famous line is "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch." It's about seeing with other people, with a collective eye, and imagining how everyone else is experiencing something. When I made the film *Rose Gold* in 2017, I brought those ideas back more clearly, and I found Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, which is one of my favorite texts. It's about the same thing, but much deeper and more sad and connected to contemporary life, whereas *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is kind of corny. With Berlant, here was this person saying, in a much more profound way, how desire is connected to these good life fantasies that are no longer in step with the reality of what's possible in our actual lives. *Baby Blue Benzo* is a continuation of that, getting bigger and bigger with the object of desire, and more unattainable.

RAIL: The current exhibition takes the dream car as its object of desire, focusing on the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupé, which became the

most expensive car in the world when it sold at auction in 2022 for 135 million euros. I imagine it was exciting when you seized upon this car as a framing device for the ideas in this new body of work, and I'm curious about when that happened, and how the film and the show coalesced around the Benz?

S.C.: It's funny. I first started working on *Baby Blue Benzo* (all works 2024) before I knew I had the show at 52 Walker. I was doing this residency in downtown LA, and I wanted to make something that used Hollywood artifice and props, and that would show the surface level of how films are made. My photography has always been about that to some degree, but I wanted to think about that in film. And then I found the car and, at first, it was just one object among many. I had this giant armor, and I had an eighteenth-century doll costume. And then slowly, the car emerged like a hero image. I knew that I wanted to have this image of a model in a bikini on the car, where the car looks real and then the camera turns to reveal that it is actually an image of the car. The first image for the new film was a dolly shot, that appears maybe three minutes in, of a woman in a pink bikini on the car, and it guided me through the whole project.

RAIL: The Benz becomes this device to further your explorations of images and value, and sits at an intersection of toxic masculinity, cinematography, and nostalgia. When I think about the Benz's "One Mr. Private Buyer," I think about how the car, at its most valuable, becomes associated with the act of collecting.

S.C.: Yeah, because you wouldn't drive it.

RAIL: Exactly. There's this scene in the film where you are in Stuttgart, Germany at the Mercedes-Benz Museum, modeling in and around the car as if in a music video. What was that like?

S.C.: It was weird. I arrived in the morning before the museum was open, when it was empty. I had hired a female cinematographer, because I was like, "I need a woman because I'm gonna roll around in front of this car and I'm never gonna have met this person before and I don't want to feel judged." [Laughs] She was a documentary filmmaker, so she knew we needed to start doing what we wanted right away, until we were stopped. But then I started rolling around in front of the car and climbing in and out of it, and the museum didn't care. Until this twenty-year-old male security guard showed up and was like, "You can't do that!" He's in the film. He's wearing a suit in the background. But the curator, she said we could. So we kept going. It was perfect.

I happened to be in Europe for a commercial project. At that point, it was hard to justify flying all the way to Germany for three hours of shooting a car. But in the end, it was so key to the film. I think I would have done it eventually, just way later and when I finally realized how important it was. The car is not very fancy inside. It feels like you're in a picnic basket. It's plaid, and it has hard surfaces. It's beautiful but, like so many things, smaller in real life.

RAIL: That feels like a reflection of the time element. Cars used to be so much smaller.

S.C.: That's true, and I guess because it was a racing car... but you can't imagine a human being fitting in it for more than ten minutes now.

RAIL: I thought about speed a lot watching your new film, *Baby Blue Benzo*. The rhythm and the cadence of the film differed from some of your past ones, both in its use of popular music, which had an

Sara Cywnar, Pam, Plastic, 2024. © Sara Cywnar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.



earworm effect, and in the film's narrative seduction, akin to cinema. While it continues your ongoing collaborations with actor Paul Cooper (who does its voiceover) and graphic designer Tracy Ma (who models), how do you think it differs from your earlier films?

S.C. It started out so different. It had all of these slow shots with no rapid editing, and with a very measured voiceover that came from more than four-hundred pages of research. There was an eighty-page script and I recorded forty pages. This is what I always do, but then once Paul reads, I can tell what works and what sounds too corny. I try to keep a few cheesy things, because I think it helps temper the seriousness. I really tried to write this one with a story from beginning to end. Even though it's not a traditional narrative, it does have more of an arc than some of the other films. I also wanted it to have commercial breaks, or sections: now you're in the Pamela Anderson section, or now you're in the figure skating dream section. You so rarely sit down and watch anything for longer than two minutes now, and I wanted it to echo this. Everything is a little chunk of something but never lasts more than a few minutes.

For this film, I made an animation style with Wilson Cameron, who I work with on all of my films. We figured out this effect where the film scrolls sideways and then goes back and forth. I wanted it to feel like this constant forward motion that stutters sometimes and is unsure of itself, and to have some of the chaos of the other films but in a slower structure. I challenged myself to work

on the script before I did anything else, so that I would be able to stand behind every line.

RAIL You use a circular, two-track system in the film, which was set up in your studio and encircles models, at times with two cameras on different tracks, so that there is always a camera and operator visible. I wonder if that structure was an "aha!" moment for you. In earlier films, you often played with mirrors so that your audience could see the camera. But the circular track system in this film renders the camera absurd and alive in a new way. When did you discover that structure?

S.C. It was something that I had wanted to do for a long time and never had. I was making a film for MoMA at the Banff Centre, and they had a big TV studio where they set up circular tracks. I was so excited. At one point, I realized that if you're going around in a circle, but you can't see the other track, it just looks like you're going in a straight line. I got tricked by photography. [Laughs] So that's when I knew it needed to be two tracks so that you could see the tracks from each other and see the cameras. I thought it would be this amazing ouroboros, like the line in my film *Glass Life* (2021), where the snake eats its own tail. It's something everyone talks about on the internet, how everything seems to be eating itself or folding in on itself. And so it was a nice metaphor for the way images work in this time, and how images of women, in particular, get used up and spit back out. I wanted it to be used with this empowering

script, and with these models who don't really seem to care that they are saying Martin Heidegger lines.

RAIL That's a good segue to talking about the shoot with Pamela Anderson that you did for the New York Times in 2022, which is incorporated into the current show. Pam, Plastic, a new photograph, has a plastic layer over Pamela's figure, so that you can just make out the side of her face. Even from afar, it's so obviously Pamela Anderson. It feels like a litmus test of recognition.

S.C. I wanted Pam to feel like she'd just been taken out of storage somewhere. Like someone had decided to pull the image back out, but hadn't quite made it shiny again. When I was photographing her, she was talking to Jessica Bennett of the *Times* about how she had been "rediscovered"—if you can be rediscovered as the most famous person ever. And she didn't want to be reevaluated, or rescued from the public discourse by anyone. So I was thinking about her image being re-presented. She was beginning this campaign where she went out for all of her PR appearances with no makeup on, which I thought was amazing. What ways are left to take power in a public appearance situation if you're Pamela Anderson? That's one way that actually seemed to work.

RAIL Have you shown Pamela the film?

S.C. She hasn't seen it. I know she really liked the photographs for the *Times*.

RAIL The plastic in *Pam, Plastic* also recalls the role of institutions in guarding or conserving objects. Were you thinking about that?

S.C. I was thinking: How did anyone decide the Benz was worth that much money? And how do these things get treated with such value? And I was also thinking a lot about the art world. We're in this moment where the market is oriented towards painters, and paintings are just one part of the art world. So, there are lots of references to how art gets valued in the film, including the line, "a car is a safer bet than a painting," which is from a McKenzie Wark piece about how the internet, or the image of something, creates the value now and not the other way around. That idea felt like a thought experiment when I first encountered Jean Baudrillard, but now it actually feels true. And so the central theme of the film is how photography creates value, and how all these tools that I have at my disposal make things seem more important and precious.

RAIL Another new photograph of yours, *Automaton*, seems related to that. It portrays an automaton with its back to the viewer that's been cut open, so that we can view its insides so precariously held together. There are canvas supports obstructing the image, making a cross in front of it, and it has a spare wood frame.

S.C. It stands out because it's so simple. I found that image in the New York Public Library Picture Collection, which I still visit often. I had it for a long time and I didn't do anything with it. But I kept coming back to it. I tried to see if the Met had one that I could re-photograph. But then, I thought, why do that? The photograph is perfect—how you can see the back of the hand, and part of the surface from the front, and all of the machinery. I had been interested in the automaton and the Turk and their connections to AI—those earlier fantasies of someone doing your bidding without you, the dystopian attempt to outsource yourself, and the trickery of it. One of the earliest stories is about a chess-playing Turk who was, allegedly, beating everyone at chess. There was actually a little man crouched in the box underneath. Everyone probably knew that, but it was about the illusion of an artificial intelligence that wasn't there. I wanted to bring that idea in. I put the photo in the frame, so that you see into the artwork, but you're looking at the back of something that's an illusion. It has the effect of looking over someone's shoulder and trying to see things the way they're seeing them.

RAIL When I think about the internet, I think of never being able to find the back of it. [Laughs] Just beside *Automaton*, there's a photograph that's part of your ongoing series called "Doll Index." *Doll Index, 1865* portrays a doll made out of many different labeled images. In the context of that work, could you talk about your investigative work online, and how it culminates in visual collections like this photograph?

S.C. I wanted the work to be this giant index of dubiously desirable objects. The original doll pictures are from the Met's archive, which is another endless online scroll. I spent days looking for them, although, funnily enough, they're prominently placed and advertised on the Costume Institute website. I found them another way. The Met doesn't have the dolls. They just have images of the dolls that they acquired from the Museum of the City of New York. And they're badly photographed, shadowy, creepy doll photographs. I already love anything with a bad shadow. They go through a history of French fashion from the 1700s until maybe the early 1900s, covering this time period of the "new woman," when women were discovered as a new consumer. When I saw the shadow and the weird depth of



Sara Cwynar, *Doll Index, 1865, 2024*. © Sara Cwynar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

the studio space that the dolls were in, I wanted to make a work using a technique of mine where I re-photograph sections of existing photographs, mixing other images in, so that the resulting image is a flattened, gridded version of the original with new stuff crammed into it. At first, I wanted to get whatever the contemporary version of what was being sold to the "new woman" or "newly-invented consumer," and to look at how problems are invented to sell new things. I was buying a lot of skin rollers and things that you didn't know you needed. And then it expanded to include images from porn, stock images, and things that you can buy on the internet, but that aren't actual objects. The main websites I was looking at were Shein, Amazon, and eBay. The text at the bottom of the image is pulled from the shopping sites—texts that describe scale and color in ways that fail, so that when you get the thing, it doesn't look anything like it was described. I was thinking about what the thing would look like once I've photographed it once, then again, then again, and how far these things get from their optimistic descriptions.

RAIL Calling out from those descriptions is "baby." Baby as doll. Baby as "new woman." Baby as you. Baby as us. [Laughs]

S.C. As general infantilized woman buyer. [Laughs]

RAIL The film uses "baby" in its title, but also as this referential tactic with the audience that's playful and sinister at the same time. How were you thinking about this word?

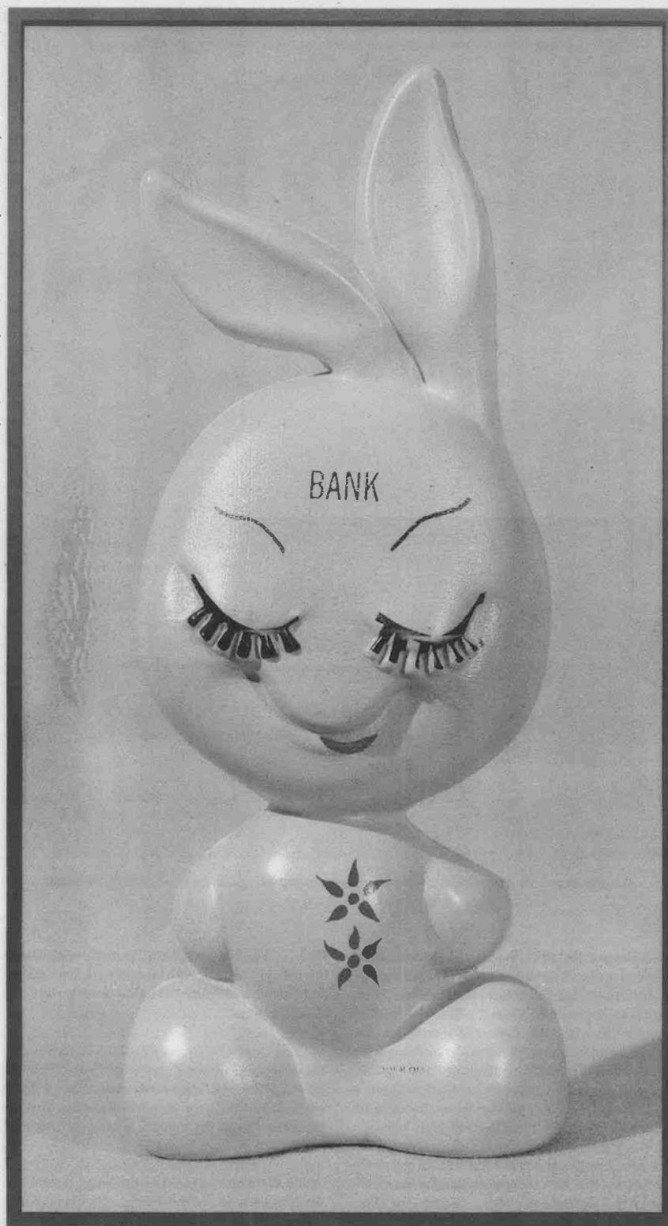
S.C. I wanted to keep saying that word in different ways to break up some of the seriousness, but also to get at how infantilizing advertising is. The way Pam was treated, the masculine world of the car, even the experience I had in the museum, all seems to come back to this word.

I think about how condescending "baby" is, but then also how there can be something pedantic or condescending about the film saying: consumerism is bad. I'm trying to avoid that. I have to get close to it in order to say anything. In my dreams, I would make a film that shows you these themes and doesn't tell you anything. But I haven't figured out how to do that yet.

RAIL How did you make the music choices in this film?

S.C. So I used music in *Glass Life* (2021) and a little bit in *Red Film* (2018). *Rose Gold* and *Soft Film* (2016) didn't have music, and you could make this rhythm out of the words. It's satisfying to play word and image against each other. But I wanted this one to

Sara Cwynar, *Green Bunny Bank*, 2024. © Sara Cwynar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.



be emotionally manipulative, and to reflect how music makes things seem important. In film and advertising, it's so easy to throw in the right track. I'm a former teenage figure skater, and figure skaters are trying to find the most emo, catchy song. It's pure corny showmanship. They're trying to manipulate the audience and the judges as best as they possibly can. So a lot of the pieces I've used in my work are classic figure skating songs, because I love the way that figure skating uses music. At least a few figure skaters skate to "Liebesträume" every year. And then I wanted to use Charli XCX's song "Porsche" for the music video break section. This was

before "brat summer." She owns one of my photos, and we're loose acquaintances, so I asked her if I could use it. I tried to use the songs in obvious and very satisfying ways. I remade the first four minutes a month and a half before the film was finished. I couldn't figure out how to get the beginning catchy enough. So I hired a music supervisor, and her whole job was to find me the most catchy song ever that I could also get the rights to. She sent me so many songs, and "Cold Café" by an eighties Australian pop singer named Karen Marks, was perfect. Have you ever heard of Karen Marks? I had never heard of her.

RAIL I had not, but I wondered immediately about the song as soon as I heard it. It is extremely catchy, and it has this very techno, slow but determined rhythm.

S.C. It's the demo version, which is a little weirder sounding than the recorded version.

RAIL The music and script play a role not just in the seduction of the film, but in the experience of the new exhibition as an installation. There's this really thick blue shag carpeting on the gallery floor, and the walls are coated with gridded images that you've taped together in the style of your films and photographs. There are a lot of different ways that you hang the works. Some of them are up with magnets. Some of them are in frames, and some of the frames have text on them. Can you talk about the process of putting it all together?

S.C. Making installations is something that I had wanted to do for a long time. And then, during COVID lockdown, I told myself that I had to do the things that I'd been wanting to do. I made *Glass Life*, which was a six-channel installation. When this opportunity came up, I felt finally, here was a space that would meet the crazy ambitions that I have for a project. I'd never made a new installation for a space as big as 52 Walker. And so I thought a lot about how the install would go, and I knew that I needed to get the film under control so that I could have time. I found that the video was so intense that it needed its own private space. So, I had the idea to build a video room in the middle of the gallery, and I wanted it to feel sculptural. I really like the way the plain drywall looks, and how it speaks to something always being made and never quite reaching its finished point. This is similar to how the film is about making a film and trying to make a film as good as your last film.

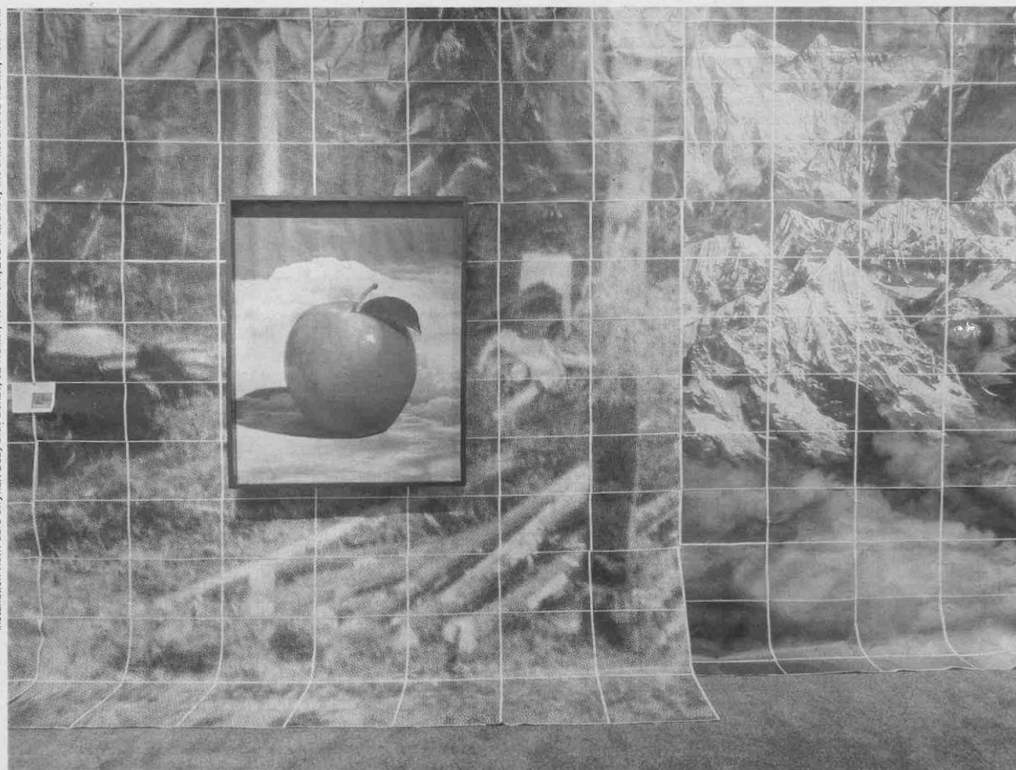
I wanted the video room to have more casual photos on it. That's why those are pinned with magnets, and some have their edges and include the metallic paper and printing marks. I wanted carpet from the very beginning, and for it to have this slightly nostalgic feeling, like you're no longer in a familiar space and you're already one step towards being in the dream world of the film. The wallpapers are the most important images from the film. I selected images that you could feel like you're stepping into. Some of them are at a scale that they could be in the real world, but you'd never be able to be so close to them. And the wallpapers are broken up by grids. They're made out of office prints so that they have this plasticky feel, which was important to me. At some point, we thought we were going to need to print them on regular printer paper, but I was like, "No, it needs to be this shitty office paper!" I also wanted it to feel like you're in these hallways, and you can't get far enough away to take a good Instagram photo. I didn't quite achieve that. I would have had to make it even more claustrophobic.

RAIL You definitely have the feeling that you can't get a photograph of one work without photographing another.

S.C. That's good. I like that. I didn't realize how hard, but also satisfying, it would be to make sure every sightline works. I ended up making almost twice as many wallpapers as I used, which is a lot of labor to not use. But only some of them worked, and they had to look good when you're seeing them in the same view.

RAIL They all carry, in one way or another, a reference to the color blue. You talked about your past project *Rose Gold*, in which color became this interesting political frame to reflect on the language of advertising. In *Baby Blue Benzo*, blue is so expansive.

Installation view: Sara Ouyman, Baby Blue Benz, 52 Walker, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York.



It's a sky. It's a dream state. It can be calming. It can also be sad. So many interesting texts, including Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, come to mind when I reflect on this color. How were you thinking about color this time?

S.C. I did all of this research about color after I made *Rose Gold*, and found that no one has written anything about color that's not boring and pseudoscience, with the exception of the color blue. I think Maggie Nelson refers to it a lot, but there's the William H. Gass book that's so good. And *Bluets* I love. I was thinking about blue as this neutral, benign color that most people don't find offensive, and how it can get to this yellowy blue that's suddenly ugly. Or it can be carpet blue that suddenly looks out of date. Or the blue of the sky and how it can look so beautiful or so not, depending on how it's re-imaged. I'm sitting here right now looking at a very synthetic picture of a sky, and it's next to a picture of the Statue of Liberty with scaffolding around it that also has a beautiful sky behind it.

RAIL Liberty in progress.

S.C. Yes, an easy metaphor. That's another picture that I wanted to do something with, and then felt like nothing could be done to it. It's perfect. Oh, and the baby blue Benz is not actually blue. Or, it's a subjective opinion whether it's blue or silver. I worked with a couple of researchers at the very beginning of the project. One of the things they both said was "we don't want to upset you, but this car is not actually blue." [Laughs] And I told them I know, it's okay. I think it's blue. I thought it was blue at first.

RAIL The silver of the car in most lights does look blue.

S.C. It looks blue, yeah. In slightly yellow lighting, in daylight, and in cool, slick lighting, it looks blue.

RAIL You had the opportunity to make two bags for Dior in 2022 and recently you collaborated with Hermès, working as a fashion performance director for an event for them in Shanghai. Do your commercial projects feed back into your art projects?

S.C. I don't do as much commercial work as people think I do. Because my work references the commercial world so much it might seem like I do a lot, but I'm particular about what I'll do. Usually, I'll take on a project if it involves something that I want to figure out for my own work. You mentioned the collaboration with Hermès, and that was amazing. A lot of the people who work there were in the art world before and understand how artists work, and they let me figure out an animation technique that I was able to use in my own work. That project is how I paid to make this film. A major brand gives you so much support. I had a crew of thirty people on that shoot. Everything I could have ever dreamed of trying out I was able to try.

RAIL The new film fuses the histories of our commercial and visual worlds. The beginning of the film references "the dream car, a good image" in one breath, so that they're inextricable from one another. At one point, the film crescendos, and you think it's over. As a narrator exclaims "She's smiling at you," and roses are falling from the screen's sky, it feels like the narrative has reached its apex or we've won a contest. Then, suddenly, it whirls back into

potentialities and what-ifs. In its final lines, it transforms from "You're a horse running in a Muybridge photo," to "If I were a rider, I would ride all the way in a Ford. I would ride all the way in a Benz." The film starts where it ends, iterating in an endless loop. What did interweaving the histories of photography and mass production generate for you?

S.C. I read this piece by Allan Sekula called "The Traffic in Photographs" that I had never read. In it, he talks about money and photography both being these made-up forms that remove us from the world and abstract our relationships to each other, and how they've always existed in lockstep. It got me thinking more specifically about factory production being conceived and developed alongside photographic technologies. He talks about that too, and about how we could never create so much demand for something without photography being there to sell it. I wanted to think about how that relates specifically to cars and to an extremely intensified version of desire that contemporary photographs create more so than earlier photography technologies. There's a lot in Sekula's writing about systems of control—prison photographs or eugenics-oriented photographs—being developed alongside industrialization, and how there's not that big of a step from those uses of photography to the way photographs are currently used to control, with more subtle methods. Those were central themes in the work, but then it took on its own life.

Chloe Stagaman is a Brooklyn-based curator and Director of Programs at the Brooklyn Rail.

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ART | DEC/JAN 2024–25

SARA CWYNAR with Chloe Stagaman

Sara Cwynar is interested in how photographs travel, assemble, and evolve—through time as much as through a glowing screen. In recent years, her colorful and abundant films, photographs, collages, installations, and performances have looked to our image-driven world to raise questions about systems of power and control, including what they disregard. Her current exhibition, *Baby Blue Benzo*, centers unattainable desire: that drug-like haze of possibility seducing the mind while convincing the body to stay at work. A model walks on an emerald treadmill. A version of the world’s most expensive racecar sits in a museum in Germany. A figure skating Cwynar spins dizzily at the center of an ice rink. “Everything is moving forward as planned,” states the new film’s narrator, yet somehow forward—in the film as much as in life under late-stage capitalism—means moving to stay in place.

In October, Cwynar and I spoke over Zoom about desire, her recent photoshoot with Pamela Anderson, the color blue, and *Baby Blue Benzo*’s central protagonist: the dream car. What follows is a version of our conversation that has been edited for length and clarity.



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

Chloe Stagaman (Rail): Sara, it's such a pleasure to have the chance to talk to you. My first question is about desire. Ten years ago your book *Kitsch Encyclopedia* was published, and a lot has happened since then. How has your interest in desire evolved?

Sara Cwynar: I think when I made *Kitsch Encyclopedia*, it was about desire, but I didn't realize that yet. I remember making that book and trying to figure out: why do I want to make photography and why do I care about these kinds of images? That's still the question. I think it'll be boring when I can finally answer it. That book was about a sad version of desire: trying to project a better version of the world on top of the one you're actually living in, and how images function to make things seem more digestible. The central text of the book is Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where he talks about kitsch being this image world that is built on top of the actual one. His famous line is "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch." It's about seeing with other people, with a collective eye, and imagining how everyone else is experiencing something. When I made the film *Rose Gold* in 2017, I brought those ideas back more clearly, and I found Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, which is one of my favorite texts. It's about the same thing, but much deeper and more sad and connected to contemporary life, whereas *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is kind of corny. With Berlant, here was this person saying, in a much more profound way, how desire is connected to these good life fantasies that are no longer in step with the reality of what's possible in our actual lives. *Baby Blue Benzo* is a continuation of that, getting bigger and bigger with the object of desire, and more unattainable.

Rail: The current exhibition takes the dream car as its object of desire, focusing on the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR Uhlenhaut Coupé, which became the most expensive car in the world when it sold at auction in 2022 for 135 million euros. I imagine it was exciting when you seized upon this car as a framing device for the ideas in this new body of work, and I'm curious about when that happened, and how the film and the show coalesced around the Benz?

Cwynar: It's funny. I first started working on *Baby Blue Benzo* (all works 2024) before I knew I had the show at 52 Walker. I was doing this residency in downtown LA, and I wanted to make something that used Hollywood artifice and props, and that would show the surface level of how films are made. My photography has always been about that to some degree, but I wanted to think about that in film. And then I found the car and, at first, it was just one object among many. I had this giant armor, and I had an eighteenth-century doll costume. And then slowly, the car emerged like a hero image. I knew that I wanted to have this image of a model in a bikini on the car, where the car looks real and then the camera turns to reveal that it is actually an image of the car. The first image for the new film was a dolly shot, that appears maybe three minutes in, of a woman in a pink bikini on the car, and it guided me through the whole project.

Rail: The Benz becomes this device to further your explorations of images and value, and sits at an intersection of toxic masculinity, cinematography, and nostalgia. When I think about the Benz's "One Mr. Private Buyer," I think about how the car, at its most valuable, becomes associated with the act of collecting.

Cwynar: Yeah, because you wouldn't drive it.

Rail: Exactly. There's this scene in the film where you are in Stuttgart, Germany at the Mercedes-Benz Museum, modeling in and around the car as if in a music video. What was that like?

Cwynar: It was weird. I arrived in the morning before the museum was open, when it was empty. I had hired a female cinematographer, because I was like, "I need a woman because I'm gonna roll around in front of this car and I'm never gonna have met this person before and I don't want to feel judged." [Laughs] She was a documentary filmmaker, so she knew we needed to start doing what we wanted right away, until we were stopped. But then I started rolling around in front of the car and climbing in and out of it, and the museum didn't care. Until this twenty-year-old male security guard showed up and was like, "You can't do that!" He's in the film. He's wearing a suit in the background. But the curator, she said we could. So we kept going. It was perfect.

I happened to be in Europe for a commercial project. At that point, it was hard to justify flying all the way to Germany for three hours of shooting a car. But in the end, it was so key to the film. I think I would have done it eventually, just way later and when I finally realized how important it was. The car is not very fancy inside. It feels like you're in a picnic basket. It's plaid, and it has hard surfaces. It's beautiful but, like so many things, smaller in real life.

Rail: That feels like a reflection of the time element. Cars used to be so much smaller.

Cwynar: That's true, and I guess because it was a racing car... but you can't imagine a human being fitting in it for more than ten minutes now.

Rail: I thought about speed a lot watching your new film, *Baby Blue Benzo*. The rhythm and the cadence of the film differed from some of your past ones, both in its use of popular music, which had an earworm effect, and in the film's narrative seduction, akin to cinema. While it continues your ongoing collaborations with actor Paul Cooper (who does its voiceover) and graphic designer Tracy Ma (who models), how do you think it differs from your earlier films?

Cwynar: It started out so different. It had all of these slow shots with no rapid editing, and with a very measured voiceover that came from more than four-hundred pages of research. There was an eighty-page script and I recorded forty pages. This is what I always do, but then once Paul reads, I can tell what works and what sounds too corny. I try to keep a few cheesy things, because I think it helps temper the seriousness. I really tried to write this one with a story from beginning to end. Even though it's not a traditional narrative, it does have more of an arc than some of the other films. I also wanted it to have commercial breaks, or sections: now you're in the Pamela Anderson section, or now you're in the figure skating dream section. You so rarely sit down and watch anything for longer than two minutes now, and I wanted it to echo this. Everything is a little chunk of something but never lasts more than a few minutes.

For this film, I made an animation style with Wilson Cameron, who I work with on all of my films. We figured out this effect where the film scrolls sideways and then goes back and forth. I wanted it to feel like this constant forward motion that stutters sometimes and is unsure of itself, and to have some of the chaos of the other films but in a slower structure. I challenged myself to work on the script before I did anything else, so that I would be able to stand behind every line.

Rail: You use a circular, two-track system in the film, which was set up in your studio and encircles models, at times with two cameras on different tracks, so that there is always a camera and operator visible. I wonder if that structure was an "aha!" moment for you. In earlier films, you often played with mirrors so that your audience could see the camera. But the circular track system in this film renders the camera absurd and alive in a new way. When did you discover that structure?

Cwynar: It was something that I had wanted to do for a long time and never had. I was making a film for MoMA at the Banff Centre, and they had a big TV studio where they set up circular tracks. I was so excited. At one point, I realized that if you're going around in a circle, but you can't see the other track, it just looks like you're going in a straight line. I got tricked by photography. *[Laughs]* So that's when I knew it needed to be two tracks so that you could see the tracks from each other and see the cameras. I thought it would be this amazing ouroboros, like the line in my film *Glass Life* (2021), where the snake eats its own tail. It's something everyone talks about on the internet, how everything seems to be eating itself or folding in on itself. And so it was a nice metaphor for the way images work in this time, and how images of women, in particular, get used up and spit back out. I wanted it to be used with this empowering script, and with these models who don't really seem to care that they are saying Martin Heidegger lines.

Rail: That's a good segue to talking about the shoot with Pamela Anderson that you did for the *New York Times* in 2022, which is incorporated into the current show. *Pam, Plastic*, a new photograph, has a plastic layer over Pamela's figure, so that you can just make out the side of her face. Even from afar, it's so obviously Pamela Anderson. It feels like a litmus test of recognition.



Sara Cywnar, *Pam, Plastic*, 2024. © Sara Cywnar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

Cwynar: I wanted Pam to feel like she'd just been taken out of storage somewhere. Like someone had decided to pull the image back out, but hadn't quite made it shiny again. When I was photographing her, she was talking to Jessica Bennett of the *Times* about how she had been "rediscovered"—if you can be rediscovered as the most famous person ever. And she didn't want to be reevaluated, or rescued from the public discourse by anyone. So I was thinking about her image being re-presented. She was beginning this campaign where she went out for all of her PR appearances with no makeup on, which I thought was amazing. What ways are left to take power in a public appearance situation if you're Pamela Anderson? That's one way that actually seemed to work.

Rail: Have you shown Pamela the film?

Cwynar: She hasn't seen it. I know she really liked the photographs for the *Times*.

Rail: The plastic in *Pam*, *Plastic* also recalls the role of institutions in guarding or conserving objects. Were you thinking about that?

Cwynar: I was thinking: How did anyone decide the Benz was worth that much money? And how do these things get treated with such value? And I was also thinking a lot about the art world. We're in this moment where the market is oriented towards painters, and paintings are just one part of the art world. So, there are lots of references to how art gets valued in the film, including the line, "a car is a safer bet than a painting," which is from a McKenzie Wark piece about how the internet, or the image of something, creates the value now and not the other way around. That idea felt like a thought experiment when I first encountered Jean Baudrillard, but now it actually feels true. And so the central theme of the film is how photography creates value, and how all these tools that I have at my disposal make things seem more important and precious.

Rail: Another new photograph of yours, *Automaton*, seems related to that. It portrays an automaton with its back to the viewer that's been cut open, so that we can view its insides so precariously held together. There are canvas supports obstructing the image, making a cross in front of it, and it has a spare wood frame.



Sara Cwynar, *Automaton*, 2024. © Sara Cywnar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

Cwynar: It stands out because it's so simple. I found that image in the New York Public Library Picture Collection, which I still visit often. I had it for a long time and I didn't do anything with it. But I kept coming back to it. I tried to see if the Met had one that I could re-photograph. But then, I thought, why do that? The photograph is perfect—how you can see the back of the hand, and part of the surface from the front, and all of the machinery. I had been interested in the automaton and the Turk and their connections to AI—those earlier fantasies of someone doing your bidding without you, the dystopian attempt to outsource yourself, and the trickery of it. One of the earliest stories is about a chess-playing Turk who was, allegedly, beating everyone at chess. There was actually a little man crouched in the box underneath. Everyone probably knew that, but it was about the illusion of an artificial intelligence that wasn't there. I wanted to bring that idea in. I put the photo in the frame, so that you see into the artwork, but you're looking at the back of something that's an illusion. It has the effect of looking over someone's shoulder and trying to see things the way they're seeing them.

Rail: When I think about the internet, I think of never being able to find the back of it. [Laughs] Just beside *Automaton*, there's a photograph that's part of your ongoing series called "Doll Index." *Doll Index, 1865* portrays a doll made out of many different labeled images. In the context of that work, could you talk about your investigative work online, and how it culminates in visual collections like this photograph?



Sara Cywnar, *Doll Index*, 1865, 2024. © Sara Cywnar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

Cwynar: I wanted the work to be this giant index of dubiously desirable objects. The original doll pictures are from the Met's archive, which is another endless online scroll. I spent days looking for them, although, funnily enough, they're prominently placed and advertised on the Costume Institute website. I found them another way. The Met doesn't have the dolls. They just have images of the dolls that they acquired from the Museum of the City of New York. And they're badly photographed, shadowy, creepy doll photographs. I already love anything with a bad shadow. They go through a history of French fashion from the 1700s until maybe the early 1900s, covering this time period of the "new woman," when women were discovered as a new consumer. When I saw the shadow and the weird depth of the studio space that the dolls were in, I wanted to make a work using a technique of mine where I re-photograph sections of existing photographs, mixing other images in, so that the resulting image is a flattened, gridded version of the original with new stuff crammed into it. At first, I wanted to get whatever the contemporary version of what was being sold to the "new woman" or "newly-invented consumer," and to look at how problems are invented to sell new things. I was buying a lot of skin rollers and things that you didn't know you needed. And then it expanded to include images from porn, stock images, and things that you can buy on the internet, but that aren't actual objects. The main websites I was looking at were Shein, Amazon, and eBay. The text at the bottom of the image is pulled from the shopping sites—texts that describe scale and color in ways that fail, so that when you get the thing, it doesn't look anything like it was described. I was thinking about what the thing would look like once I've photographed it once, then again, then again, and how far these things get from their optimistic descriptions.

Rail: Calling out from those descriptions is "baby." Baby as doll. Baby as "new woman." Baby as you. Baby as us. [*Laughs*]

Cwynar: As general infantilized woman buyer. [*Laughs*]

Rail: The film uses "baby" in its title, but also as this referential tactic with the audience that's playful and sinister at the same time. How were you thinking about this word?

Cwynar: I wanted to keep saying that word in different ways to break up some of the seriousness, but also to get at how infantilizing advertising is. The way Pam was treated, the masculine world of the car, even the experience I had in the museum, all seems to come back to this word.

I think about how condescending "baby" is, but then also how there can be something pedantic or condescending about the film saying: consumerism is bad. I'm trying to avoid that. I have to get close to it in order to say anything. In my dreams, I would make a film that shows you these themes and doesn't tell you anything. But I haven't figured out how to do that yet.

Rail: How did you make the music choices in this film?



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

Cwynar: So I used music in *Glass Life* (2021) and a little bit in *Red Film* (2018). *Rose Gold* and *Soft Film* (2016) didn't have music, and you could make this rhythm out of the words. It's satisfying to play word and image against each other. But I wanted this one to be emotionally manipulative, and to reflect how music makes things seem important. In film and advertising, it's so easy to throw in the right track. I'm a former teenage figure skater, and figure skaters are trying to find the most emo, catchy song. It's pure corny showmanship. They're trying to manipulate the audience and the judges as best as they possibly can. So a lot of the pieces I've used in my work are classic figure skating songs, because I love the way that figure skating uses music. At least a few figure skaters skate to "Liebesträume" every year. And then I wanted to use Charli XCX's song "Porsche" for the music video break section. This was before "brat summer." She owns one of my photos, and we're loose acquaintances, so I asked her if I could use it. I tried to use the songs in obvious and very satisfying ways. I remade the first four minutes a month and a half before the film was finished. I couldn't figure out how to get the beginning catchy enough. So I hired a music supervisor, and her whole job was to find me the most catchy song ever that I could also get the rights to. She sent me so many songs, and "Cold Café" by an eighties Australian pop singer named Karen Marks, was perfect. Have you ever heard of Karen Marks? I had never heard of her.

Rail: I had not, but I wondered immediately about the song as soon as I heard it. It is extremely catchy, and it has this very techno, slow but determined rhythm.

Cwynar: It's the demo version, which is a little weirder sounding than the recorded version.

Rail: The music and script play a role not just in the seduction of the film, but in the experience of the new exhibition as an installation. There's this really thick blue shag carpeting on the gallery floor, and the walls are coated with gridded images that you've taped together in the style of your films and photographs. There are a lot of different ways that you hang the works. Some of them are up with magnets. Some of them are in frames, and some of the frames have text on them. Can you talk about the process of putting it all together?



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

Cwynar: Making installations is something that I had wanted to do for a long time. And then, during COVID lockdown, I told myself that I had to do the things that I'd been wanting to do. I made *Glass Life*, which was a six-channel installation. When this opportunity came up, I felt finally, here was a space that would meet the crazy ambitions that I have for a project. I'd never made a new installation for a space as big as 52 Walker. And so I thought a lot about how the install would go, and I knew that I needed to get the film under control so that I could have time. I found that the video was so intense that it needed its own private space. So, I had the idea to build a video room in the middle of the gallery, and I wanted it to feel sculptural. I really like the way the plain drywall looks, and how it speaks to something always being made and never quite reaching its finished point. This is similar to how the film is about making a film and trying to make a film as good as your last film.

I wanted the video room to have more casual photos on it. That's why those are pinned with magnets, and some have their edges and include the metallic paper and printing marks. I wanted carpet from the very beginning, and for it to have this slightly nostalgic feeling, like you're no longer in a familiar space and you're already one step towards being in the dream world of the film. The wallpapers are the most important images from the film. I selected images that you could feel like you're stepping into. Some of them are at a scale that they could be in the real world, but you'd never be able to be so close to them. And the wallpapers are broken up by grids. They're made out of office prints so that they have this plasticky feel, which was important to me. At some point, we thought we were going to need to print them on regular printer paper, but I was like, "No, it needs to be this shitty office paper!" I also wanted it to feel like you're in these hallways, and you can't get far enough away to take a good Instagram photo. I didn't quite achieve that. I would have had to make it even more claustrophobic.



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

Rail: You definitely have the feeling that you can't get a photograph of one work without photographing another.

Cwynar: That's good. I like that. I didn't realize how hard, but also satisfying, it would be to make sure every sightline works. I ended up making almost twice as many wallpapers as I used, which is a lot of labor to not use. But only some of them worked, and they had to look good when you're seeing them in the same view.

Rail: They all carry, in one way or another, a reference to the color blue. You talked about your past project *Rose Gold*, in which color became this interesting political frame to reflect on the language of advertising. In *Baby Blue Benzo*, blue is so expansive. It's a sky. It's a dream state. It can be calming. It can also be sad. So many interesting texts, including Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, come to mind when I reflect on this color. How were you thinking about color this time?

Cwynar: I did all of this research about color after I made *Rose Gold*, and found that no one has written anything about color that's not boring and pseudoscience, with the exception of the color blue. I think Maggie Nelson refers to it a lot, but there's the William H. Gass book that's so good. And *Bluets* I love. I was thinking about blue as this neutral, benign color that most people don't find offensive, and how it can get to this yellowy blue that's suddenly ugly. Or it can be carpet blue that suddenly looks out of date. Or the blue of the sky and how it can look so beautiful or so not, depending on how it's re-imaged. I'm sitting here right now looking at a very synthetic picture of a sky, and it's next to a picture of the Statue of Liberty with scaffolding around it that also has a beautiful sky behind it.

Rail: Liberty in progress.



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

Cwynar: Yes, an easy metaphor. That's another picture that I wanted to do something with, and then felt like nothing could be done to it. It's perfect. Oh, and the baby blue Benz is not actually blue. Or, it's a subjective opinion whether it's blue or silver. I worked with a couple of researchers at the very beginning of the project. One of the things they both said was "we don't want to upset you, but this car is not actually blue." [*Laughs*] And I told them I know, it's okay. I think it's blue. I thought it was blue at first.

Rail: The silver of the car in most lights does look blue.

Cwynar: It looks blue, yeah. In slightly yellow lighting, in daylight, and in cool, slick lighting, it looks blue.

Rail: You had the opportunity to make two bags for Dior in 2022 and recently you collaborated with Hermès, working as a fashion performance director for an event for them in Shanghai. Do your commercial projects feed back into your art projects?

Cwynar: I don't do as much commercial work as people think I do. Because my work references the commercial world so much it might seem like I do a lot, but I'm particular about what I'll do. Usually, I'll take on a project if it involves something that I want to figure out for my own work. You mentioned the collaboration with Hermès, and that was amazing. A lot of the people who work there were in the art world before and understand how artists work, and they let me figure out an animation technique that I was able to use in my own work. That project is how I paid to make this film. A major brand gives you so much support. I had a crew of thirty people on that shoot. Everything I could have ever dreamed of trying out I was able to try.



Sara Cywnar, *Ferrari Parts I*, 2024. © Sara Cywnar. Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker.

Rail: The new film fuses the histories of our commercial and visual worlds. The beginning of the film references “the dream car, a good image” in one breath, so that they’re inextricable from one another. At one point, the film crescendos, and you think it’s over. As a narrator exclaims “She’s smiling at you,” and roses are falling from the screen’s sky, it feels like the narrative has reached its apex or we’ve won a contest. Then, suddenly, it whirls back into potentialities and what-ifs. In its final lines, it transforms from “You’re a horse running in a Muybridge photo,” to “If I were a rider, I would ride all the way in a Ford. I would ride all the way in a Benz.” The film starts where it ends, iterating in an endless loop. What did interweaving the histories of photography and mass production generate for you?

Cwynar: I read this piece by Allan Sekula called “The Traffic in Photographs” that I had never read. In it, he talks about money and photography both being these made-up forms that remove us from the world and abstract our relationships to each other, and how they’ve always existed in lockstep. It got me thinking more specifically about factory production being conceived and developed alongside photographic technologies. He talks about that too, and about how we could never create so much demand for something without photography being there to sell it. I wanted to think about how that relates specifically to cars and to an extremely intensified version of desire that contemporary photographs create more so than earlier photography technologies. There’s a lot in Sekula’s writing about systems of control—prison photographs or eugenics-oriented photographs—being developed alongside industrialization, and how there’s not that big of a step from those uses of photography to the way photographs are currently used to control, with more subtle methods. Those were central themes in the work, but then it took on its own life.

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 Cwynar.

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 dolly 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—itsself 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.

The New York Times

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

52W

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**

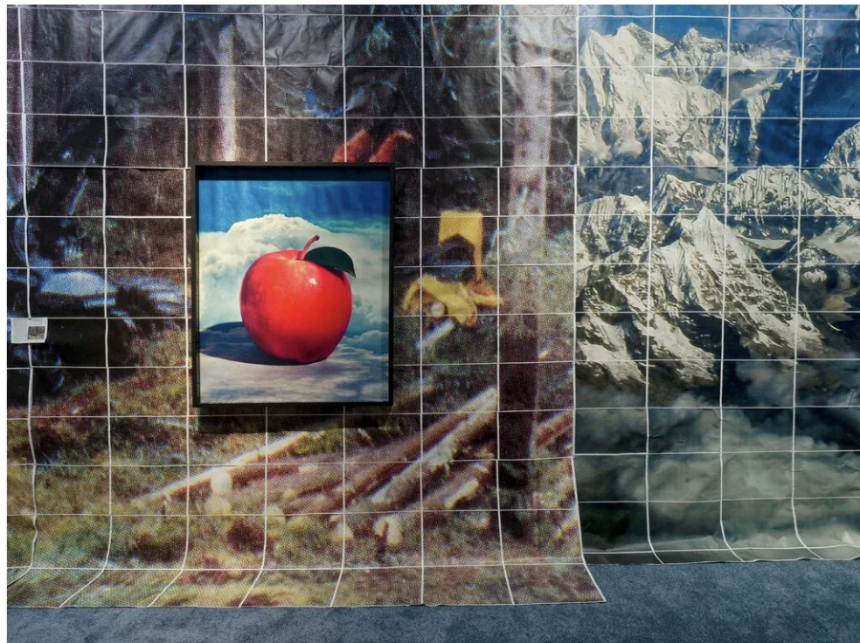
Published Nov. 7, 2024 Updated Nov. 14, 2024, 3:08 p.m. ET

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.

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 that are programmed into it.

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

T 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 Lellin 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 malignant 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 techn-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]



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.

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

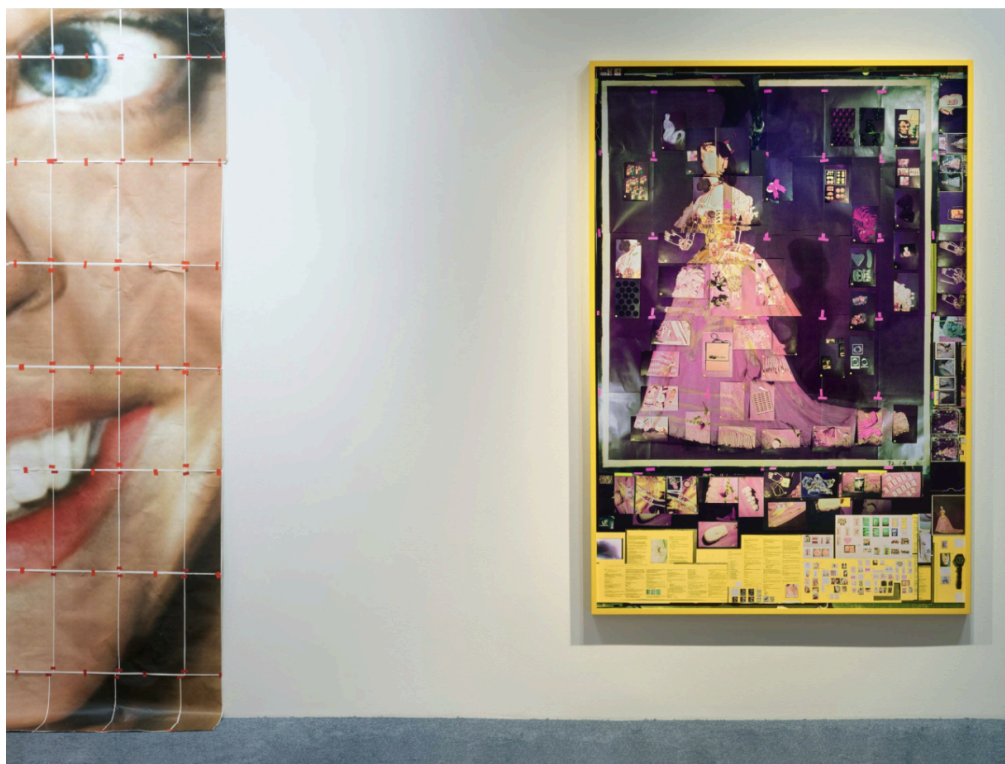
Can't Look or Can't Look Away? Our Critic on Mesmerizing Video Installations by Steve McQueen and Sara Cwynar

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.

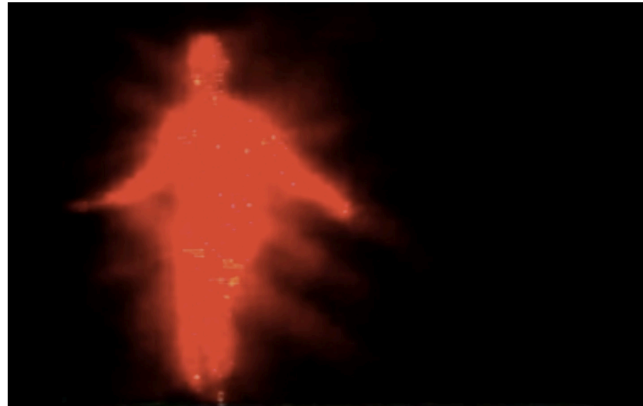
Though neither film is long, both demand endurance. Cwynar delivers pretty and sexy things to the point of monotony, but once under *Baby Blue Benzo*'s spell, you forget it's an option to turn away. McQueen, of course, threatens to burn your eyes, dares you to leave from the first moment. The transfixing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

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 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*.

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

Flash Art

Flash Art De-Object

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SARA Cwynar
words by Elijah Jackson

LOU CANTOR
EVA FÁBREGAS
SYLVIE HAYES-WALLACE
ELIZABETH JAEGER
STANISLAVA KOVALČÍKOVÁ
MIRE LEE
SANDRA MUJINGA
JACK O'BRIEN
FRIDA ORUPABO
RIRKPI TIRAVANIJA
MARIANO ENOFONTOS
AND

+ FANTASIES OF VALUE: ALAA TARABZOUNI AND FAHAD BIN NAIF ON VERY PUBLIC, RIYADH
+ CHINESE DISPATCH A NEW (ART) WORLD
+ FOCUS ON PARIS

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Fantasies
of Value

SARA

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.

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





Sara Cwynar by Elijah Jackson

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.

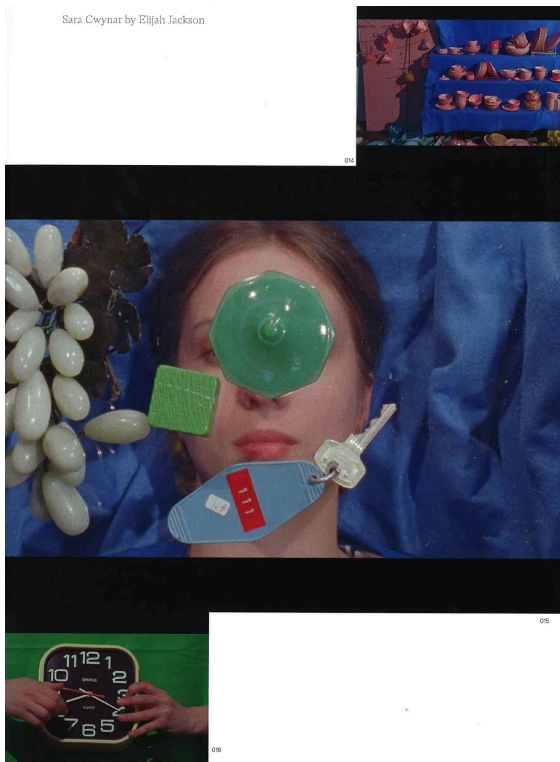
Paralleling the constant scroll, a constant narration presides, voiced by Cwynar and Paul Cooper, who is a consistent presence in Cwynar’s films (Cwynar: “He’s got that laconic, authoritative man voice”). The recited text is a mix of Cwynar’s writing and sourced texts, organized, in broad strokes, around 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

² Sara Cwynar and Rose Bouthillier, *Sara Cwynar: Glass Life* (New York: Aperture, 2021).

³ Rob Horning, N+1.

David Zwirner





Sara Cwynar by Elijah Jackson

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 print, 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 perfectrolexio*, 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.

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?

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 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.