

*Exhibition Guide*

**Sara Cwynar:  
Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue**

February 5–May 29, 2022



***Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue*** is the first exhibition in Los Angeles of work by Sara Cwynar (b. 1985, Vancouver, BC), a Canadian artist based in New York. Cwynar is known for photographs and films that illustrate how design, advertising, and popular images operate on our psyches and how visual strategies of media and advertising infiltrate our consciousness. This presentation focuses on the artist's recent video works, comprising the trilogy *Soft Film* (2016), *Rose Gold* (2017), and *Red Film* (2018) and the artist's new multichannel installation, *Glass Life* (2021).

Cwynar uses photographic and digital images to contend with how power dynamics are embedded in everyday images, and how their power and influence shifts over time. Her work highlights how the once familiar becomes unrecognizable and how the fetishized object loses its luster with each new encounter. Over the past few years, Cwynar has expanded her practice to include essay-style films that incorporate performance and text; sculptural constructions that she photographs, prints, tiles, and re-photographs; and images from various sources, including stock photographs, that she deconstructs using a scanner and collages by hand and then re-photographs. These works present new and inventive ways of viewing the world through the lens of advertising and consumerism, while also revealing the inherent artifice of photography and moving images and the difficulty of forming selfhood in an age of overwhelming content.

*Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/ Sky Blue/* is organized by Jamillah James, Senior Curator, with Caroline Ellen Liou, Curatorial Assistant.

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*Soft Film*, 2016

16mm film transferred to video

TRT: 8 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto

“*Soft Film* (2016) begins with a seemingly random object—a velveteen jewelry box—and expands on it, mapping how a single thing can be drastically reconsidered, depending on the power relations that structure its resting context. The film grapples with questions of how discarded objects circulate in economies other than the ones for which they were intended. I think about the affect of thrown-away items, and I use them to consider the lives of images over time, as well as cycles of capitalism and of social movements. At the heart of the project is a set of questions: Why would anyone care about a discarded thing? Why should you care, and why do I? And in what other systems of power are all these things caught up?

A central motif of *Soft Film* is the outdated jewelry box. Now sold on eBay as a collectible object, its original role was as packaging that signaled glamour, fashion, and high value. The film links the softness of the box’s velvet texture to the concept of ‘soft misogyny’—or more commonly, ‘soft sexism’—which refers to the subtle forms of discrimination leveled against women, most often in the workplace. I wanted to consider how the way we value objects could be used to think about the way we value other humans. The film also picks apart the way ‘value’ can change dramatically based on circumstance, and more specifically, how something can mean so much to one person and absolutely nothing to someone else.

*Soft Film* follows a meandering track through a conversation about misogyny, power, and image culture. I use the velveteen jewelry box as a starting place, but I relate other objects to soft misogyny too. I wanted to find a beautiful or an engaging way to talk about these concerns that felt personal to me. That meant trying to take on a contemporary sensibility of both endless consumer choices and a constantly shifting array of things to choose from and look at. It also meant using a set of colors and techniques of an outmoded heyday of advertising.

The many different strands of how I work—archiving and layering objects and images—come together in this work. The film builds a multilayered way of looking—not just at the history of design and production, but also at how the political realm we inhabit dates, fades, and changes. I consider the notion of a postfeminist landscape, and how it can make both the sexism and countersexism of earlier decades appear dated, even kitschy. Yet the kernel of truth is that progress and reaction, and also discrimination, are still very powerful forces; they may just be upholstered now in softer material.”

—Sara Cwynar, excerpt from the publication *Glass Life* (Aperture, 2021)

*Rose Gold*, 2017

16mm film transferred to video

TRT: 8 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto

“When the rose gold Apple iPhone came out in 2015, I felt I had to make something about the object. It contained so much I was interested in. I was thinking about how you can fall for something even though you recognize all its mechanisms of seduction. But as Lauren Berlant points out, it can feel good to want things—it can be generative, it can help push you out into the world and stay engaged with it—and often, we invent those things for ourselves. (For example, by desiring a thing we already have as if it’s new, just because it has a different color.) We want something, even though we can see through the ways it’s being sold to us.

Berlant’s book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), which I read just as the phone was coming on the market, was very influential for this particular film. In it, she defines ‘cruel optimism’ as the way that something you desire can hold you back—how working and desiring under capitalism can feel good but also holds us down, keeps us locked in cycles of buying and working, and promotes lifestyles that are simply not attainable for many. My film tries to get at the complex feelings of participating in something even though you know it might be bad.

*Rose Gold* (2017) is also a meditation on color, and the emotional impact of color, situating the rose gold iPhone in connection to other objects and images in which color was used as a selling point. Feminism, technology, power, and capitalism—all of these are examined through the lens of color. I look at melamine kitchenware, introduced in the 1940s and produced in bright colors with names like chartreuse, goldenrod, and blue rose. Although intended to be indestructible and colorfast, with time these objects broke, stained, and faded, moving from idealized, loved objects to forgotten kitsch—a fate the rose gold iPhone would no doubt share. I wanted to connect this new, shiny, colorful object with those old ones. I also include my own footage of the Hoover Dam, an earlier site of American progress and power, the likes of which have been replaced by Silicon Valley, the most recent and ultimate home of American innovation—and home of the iPhone.

How does color captivate and manipulate us? Why do we react differently to color over time? How does color contain history? (For example, why does mustard yellow take us back to the 1970s?) What politics can we find in the way color is used and presented? The film’s voice-over uses theory from writers and philosophers like Berlant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Toni Morrison; text from the Encyclopedia Britannica; and copy from the Apple website; as well as personal observations to address these and other questions.”

—Sara Cwynar, excerpt from the publication *Glass Life* (Aperture, 2021)

*Red Film*, 2018

16mm film transferred to video

TRT: 8 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto

“*Red Film* (2018) completes an informal trilogy, alongside *Soft Film* (2016) and *Rose Gold* (2017). This third sequence continues the critique of capitalism’s persuasive, constant pressure to conform and consume. What are the effects of this torrent on the self? How does the use of “high art” to sell aspirational merchandise change our sense of value? Images of Cézanne jewelry boxes and the Cézanne makeup brand, red commodities, lipstick, and red Comme des Garçons clothing play a central part in the film, which combines footage of a makeup factory, dances, and a famous Peter Paul Rubens artwork depicting bodies enmeshed, plus a host of other commodities, such as a Pucci shoe and an outmoded bright-red convertible from the 1980s. The film is about Impressionism, the self, the color red, the accountability of reproducible materials, and the way the canon of Western art history influences how we establish value, among other things.

I use looping music and repetition to convey a feeling of tension and release, of buying and selling and wanting. The piece avoids making any conclusions but rather tries to recreate how it feels to be a human in relationship to intensified twenty-first-century capitalism. I want the film to convey a sense of circling, of being stuck in something, of poking at something that maybe isn’t there. The particular feeling I had in mind was one of trying to speak, but everything you say is something someone told you. It’s being born into a world where so many things are prescribed—how you should look, what you should say, how something as intangible as the color red is going to be reproduced. All the codes and orders are not your own, but you know them intimately, because you are part of them as a subject under capitalism. I feel often that I am operating in cycles that feel predetermined—buying and selling, improving, speaking, not speaking. Ideas and theories can become as easily reproducible as commodities—and theory can easily become kitsch. Things get standardized and reproduced again and again, becoming harder to grasp. Language can be reproduced like items in a factory.

One section of the film takes on the style of the Instagram captions often written by young women—captions which can be very personal and incisive but also very overwritten, narcissistic. I am thinking about new ways we absorb information and express ourselves in the age of social media and image saturation, and how it can feel like a trap rather than a freedom. I narrate other parts of the film, speaking in a man’s voice while hanging upside down. I wanted to have the inside of my body pressing on the outside. I address the notions of truth and appearance—about our cultural insistence on connecting beauty with truth—and the question of whether you can know anything about inside character by looking at the outside.”

—Sara Cwynar, excerpt from the publication *Glass Life* (Aperture, 2021)

*Glass Life*, 2021

Six channel 2K video with sound

TRT: 19:02 min.

Courtesy of the artist and Foxy Production, New York; The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto

“I recently read Shoshana Zuboff’s amazing book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* [2019]. Toward the very end, she introduces this term, ‘glass life,’ 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. She says: ‘The greatest danger is that we come to feel at home in glass life or in the prospect of hiding from it. Both alternatives rob us of the life-sustaining inwardness, born in sanctuary, that finally distinguishes us from the machines. This is the well from which we draw the capacities to promise and to love, without which both the private bonds of intimacy and the public bonds of society wither and die. If we do not alter this course now, we leave a monumental work for the generations that follow us.’

I found the term ‘glass life’ to be so moving and such an apt description of much of what my films and this book are about: the fragility of life and of our attachments to the things that keep us going in this time, the way we are always on display, how our private space has become open to public view and filled with a constant flow of news and images; how everything is monetized by technology; how everything is pictured, seen, documented, and saved. It really does feel like we live in a glass life. I think, looking back, her book will be a clarion call of sorts; she is describing something that we need to try to turn around before our lives are forever altered, before we can’t go back.”

—Sara Cwynar, excerpt from the publication *Glass Life* (Aperture, 2021)