

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sara Cwynar’s peripatetic studies began in English literature at the University of British Columbia, before she finally landed in the graphic design program at York University in Toronto. She has an MFA in photography from the Yale University School of Art. For a good part of her early career, Cwynar continued to work as a commercial designer in tandem with her art practice—she served a three-year stint as a graphic designer at the New York Times Magazine.

Selected exhibitions include: *Source*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon, SK, Canada (solo) (2021); *Collection 1970s–Present: Search Engines*, MoMA, New York, NY (2020–2021); *Sara Cwynar*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT (solo)(2019); *Image Model Muse*, Milwaukee Museum of Art, WI, and Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN (solo) (2018–2019); 33<sup>rd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (both 2018); *Soft Film*, MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany (solo); *Subjektiv*, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (both 2017); and *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, Queens, NY (2015–2016).

In 2021, Sara Cwynar will present a newly commissioned work at Performa, New York. In 2019, MoMA New York commissioned Cwynar to make a series of films that stream on the museum’s website and social media platforms.

Cwynar’s works are in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim Museum, New York; MoMA, New York; MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; SFMOMA, San Francisco; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Dallas Museum of Art; Milwaukee Art Museum; Fondazione Prada, Milan; Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco; Zabłudowicz Collection, London; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; and FOAM Photography Museum, Amsterdam.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Soft Film*, 2016, 16 mm film to video transfer with sound, duration: 7 minutes.



Courtesy of The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto; and Foxy Production, New York. © Sara Cwynar

ARTIST TALK

Wednesday, October 20, 2021 at 6 p.m.

Exclusively online at thecontemporarydayton.org

CURATOR’S TOUR

Once a month on Saturdays at 2 p.m.

August 14, September 11, and October 9, 2021  
in The Co’s galleries. *Always free.*

Courtesy of The Approach, London; Cooper Cole, Toronto;  
and Foxy Production, New York. © Sara Cwynar

PRODUCTION PARTNER: Mitosis

GALLERY HOURS

Mon–Tue	Closed
Wed–Sat	11 a.m.–6 p.m.
Sun	11 a.m.–4 p.m.

The Contemporary Dayton receives operating support from Culture Works, Montgomery County Arts & Cultural District, Ohio Arts Council, the Virginia W. Kettering Foundation, and Members.



GALLERY GUIDE

Ultimately interested in how design and popular images infiltrate our consciousness, Sara Cwynar explores how familiar, sentimental images are used to smooth over unpleasant realities; to cover up “*the systems of control embedded within our social, economic, and political lives.*”

Her key works are essay-style films, incorporating performance and text; sculptural constructions that are photographed, printed, tiled, and re-photographed; images taken from darkroom manuals that are deconstructed using a scanner; and stock photographs that are collaged by hand and then re-photographed. Her process is, in a sense, circular. She begins and finishes with a photograph after a journey of intervention and manipulation that disrupts the smooth surface and perspective of the original.

One of the first works that Cwynar produced, *Kitsch Encyclopedia* (2013)—essentially also a work of design—was a book of collected writings of Milan Kundera, Jean Baudrillard, and Roland Barthes as well as the artist’s own thoughts on the titular subject. Illustrated with re-photographed images including wildlife, religious iconography, and the Grand Canyon, it explores the relationship of kitsch to images. Like Kundera, who declared it an integral part of the human condition, Cwynar sees kitsch as something unavoidable, even necessary; something we need in order “*to continue forward in the world.*” Cwynar comes by her enthusiasm honestly. Along with her twin sister, Toronto-based curator Kari Cwynar, she spent her childhood as a competitive figure skater circling the rink in sequined costumes designed by their mother.

Since then, Cwynar’s process has been elliptical in both senses of the word: deliberately obscure as well as circular. Her personal archive, which is always growing, comprises photographs on which she exerts any number of alterations and interventions and physical objects that she organizes and photographs in her studio. She spends hours in the dustiest parts of libraries, in basements where obsolete reference books are stacked, and on eBay where her searches take on an obsessive dimension.

Projected on video, *Soft Film* combines elements of her composite photography and her publications within the traditions of the experimental essay film and performance video. In the film, the artist collects, arranges, and archives her eBay purchases of dated objects according to a logic based upon color, material, vintage, and use. In contrast to her

SARA CWYNAR: *Soft Film*

THE JACK W. AND SALLY D. EICHELBERGER  
FOUNDATION VIDEO GALLERY

August 6–October 24, 2021

photographic work, the artist is the central protagonist of her film. We see her working in her studio, both arranging objects and breaking them down. She also performs simple actions to the camera, moving behind a potted plant, grasping a jewelry box—that recalls the early video art of Vito Acconci (American (1940–2017) and John Baldessari (American 1931–2020). Like them, she implicates herself in the taping process as both subject and object of the camera. The film’s voice-over combines Cwynar’s own writing with quotes from anthropology and image theory. The artist has written:

*“The text and video grapple with questions of how discarded contemporary objects circulate in economies other than the ones they were intended for, how I find them, and what they mean to me. I want to think about the effect of thrown away objects and use them to open up to other questions about the lives of images over time, about cycles of capitalism, and about feminism. 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 what other systems of power are all these things caught up in?”*

A central motif of the film is the out-moded velveteen jewelry box. Now traded on eBay as a collectible object, its original role was as packaging that signaled glamour, fashionability, and high value. The film links the softness of the box’s velveteen texture to the concept of “soft misogyny,” or more commonly, “soft sexism” which refers to subtle forms of discrimination. There are sections of the film that move laterally, at least at first, into apparently unrelated areas but circle back to its major themes. In one part, Cwynar analyses a series of abandoned photographs from the 1970s of businesspeople in South Korea meeting an African official. The artist is interested in the different ways the subjects are positioned within the photographs and in particular the fleeting image of one single woman. The film brings together different strands of the artist’s practice of archiving objects and images. She builds a multi-layered thesis that looks not just to the history of design and production, but also to how the political realm we inhabit dates, fades, and changes. She considers the notion of a postfeminist landscape, and how it can make both the sexism and counter-sexism of earlier decades appear dated, even kitsch. Yet the kernel of truth that Cwynar points to is that progress and reaction are still very powerful forces; they may just be upholstered now in “softer” material.



THE CONTEMPORARY DAYTON

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