

THEGUIDE.ART



● SARA CWYNAR

Photography Maya Fuhr

By Rachel Small

I was checking over the transcript of my interview with Sara Cwynar to ensure that the text accurately reflected the conversation we'd had at her Brooklyn studio the week prior. It's a critical step in the journalistic process, and one that I've completed at least a thousand times. But a moment of impatience—and fooling myself into thinking that multitasking would be feasible with another, unrelated audio stream playing simultaneously—led me to open Clubhouse. Upon joining a productivity-themed room, I heard a disembodied voice stressing the importance of embracing boredom when seeking inspiration.

I closed the app, chastened but not deterred, and posted a photo on Instagram. The recording spanned 48 minutes. I finished the task roughly three hours later.

Cwynar's six-channel video *Glass Life* (2021), which premiered at Foxy Production in a solo show of the same name in early September, seeks to capture the frenetic energy of indulging in everything—and yet, never any one thing—from moment to moment. The narration incorporates disparate quotations scraped from various "internet think-pieces"; the visual component situates a vast array of photographs and video footage, sourced mainly from Cwynar's archives, into a "continuous scroll"-style montage. From within a staggering cascade of images that steadily roll in and out of frame, a number of motifs emerge: apples, self-portraiture, exposed intestines, pop cultural icons—especially Marilyn Monroe and Kim Kardashian—as well as a digitally rendered swimmer character, who can be seen gliding about amid the action while also giving form to a trio of Greek chorus-like onlookers that linger on separate screens for the film's nearly 20 minute duration.

"History gets arranged according to something linear, but that just means pretty much everything gets left out of the plot—I love that idea. I think it's very freeing," Cwynar mused at one point in our interview. "It's hard not to jump from one thing to another constantly. In some ways, I try to just embrace that way of being...But it's also a really hard brain space," she added. "The video tries to replicate how everything is happening simultaneously. Maybe you paid attention to one version, but something else was going on behind your back."

This sensation may be as close as one can come to capturing, let alone understanding, the zeitgeist of this strange, fragmented era, when the sheer enormity of our media-scape drowns out our ability as individuals to seize onto something, anything, that feels permanent.

RACHEL SMALL: Could you take me through the conceptualization of *Glass Life*?

SARA CWYNAR: I had been thinking about making a project for a long time that uses my own archive, which I always work from. But along the way of making other videos and photo shows, I had collected so much footage that never made it into anything. And like everyone, I am screen-shotting something every 10 seconds and taking pictures of 70,000 things.

Then, when COVID-19 happened, I was like, "Okay, this is the time to go back and make something out of all this stuff." Essentially, I wanted to make a film from my computer that also embodied the feeling of living through the screen—but also very much broke into the real world. So it has digital footage and stuff that could only exist right now—but it also has a very analog and lovingly shot video of a donkey on 16 millimeter...

SMALL: I liked the donkey, he's very cute.

CWYNAR: I shot all these things myself, and I've been gathering and collecting them over the years. Actually, I shouldn't say "all"; there are certain things that are obviously YouTube videos, like the clip of Margaret Thatcher, or the vintage '50s music video. But anything that looks like it's real footage, I shot. Then, I was trying to find a form for all of it. Then also to think about how I could recreate the hum that we live in, which is always being punctuated by really violent or beautiful things that are in a totally different register. Then it goes back into the same feeling again—this feeling of being on one straight line and then suddenly going extremely up, or extremely down, and then returning to it.

For a long time, I had also wanted to make a film that had a base structure, and then it zooms into certain pieces of footage or images from my archive, and those get played out for longer. So, it does keep this rapid pace that I feel is true to this time and to a lot of my work, but things have an opportunity to slow down and play out.

SMALL: Could you talk about the influence of the book that inspired it, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* [2019] by Shoshana Zuboff?

CWYNAR: One of the things I read during COVID was that book. It's long, around 700 pages. The term "glass life" comes in at the very end. I thought, "Oh, my God," this term is so perfect to describe the fragility of our lives and the fleeting nature of the things that seem important, like the way you can feel like you're doing the right thing—then that's immediately broken, and it suddenly feels wrong.

Then also just the metaphor of glass, and of seeing through things, felt very true to this time—like the idea that we can always be seen or looked at, and it's kind of impossible to hide. And, even if it was possible, we would choose not to because being seen feels like an imperative. I wanted to take those really scary ideas about the erosion of privacy and the end of space where we can just be ourselves, separate from any eyes or feedback loops. But I also was thinking about the pleasure in it, like the way that we also need to be witnessed and the way that we kind of react to thinking we're going to be seen by making things beautiful in unique individual ways, or by arranging things to be shown to other people.

SMALL: I've been thinking a lot lately about how it's not even people necessarily making the choice to see whatever it is that you put out there—and you're not choosing who sees it, either; there's literally this mysterious force behind the scenes—the algorithms—that determine what we see through the glass, and, in that way, also determine our day-to-day experiences.

CWYNAR: The idea that we might not even know what we like or want anymore, I think about that all the time. The film is pretty negative, but it also has a redemptive arc. Like this swimmer—partly, I think the swimmer is really scary and sad. But I also think it's a freeing moment.

SMALL: I'm curious about the swimmer character.

CWYNAR: She's from TurboSquid.com, which is a repository of pre-designed 3D animated characters. A lot of artists use them. I saw the character from an Ed Atkins film on there, for example.

So, I didn't design her, she came pre-designed, which I think is more interesting. For one thing, it's like, "What are these for? And who would ever use this? What kind of fantasies are they projecting onto this person, or image?" But I also like that she looks strong. She also has these dark circles under her eyes, I guess because she must've just come out of the pool. But I like how tired she looks. I felt like I could relate to her. I wanted to make a kind of chorus of these characters, who are both watching and responding.

SMALL: One of my favorite moments is when you see her shadow, just gliding, or half flying and half swimming, over these images. Also, on my way over to your studio, I figured out that the apple motif that appears throughout the film is like the brand, Apple.

CWYNAR: It slips in and out of which apple.

SMALL: How did you arrive at using the apple as a motif?

CWYNAR: I wanted it to have this sense of everything shifting around and moving. But sometimes there's something that is unimpeachably real or recognizable. A lot of artists or a lot of theorists would talk about the body. Susan Stewart, for example, would talk about the body as something that shoots you into knowing what the scale is. But I feel like that's not even true anymore. She talks about seeing giant bodies on billboards and how confusing that is. But now we also see so many tiny bodies through our screens.

I figured, "Well, the apple does the same thing, but in a slightly weirder way." I have all these pictures of apples in my archive. I also have long been fascinated—I think any contemporary person has—with Apple as a brand and with their kind of neo-modernist branding.

SMALL: What are the other major motifs in the film?

CWYNAR: I don't know if this counts as a motif: the constant sliding movement—that is both a camera pan and conveyor belt and an Instagram scroll—and how that movement is familiar.

SMALL: In terms of logistical and technical aspects, what was your starting point, as you began to go through your archives?

CWYNAR: I started with the grid set. Two years ago, I made this video for MoMA for their Instagram. I had wanted to make it this continuous scroll over this archive of stuff. So, I started with that image. I wanted to expand on it and to have it have a larger scale, so you could get into all these tiny images and have the feeling of everything opening into something else. I really obsessively organized each set, because it had to be shot in one take. And so it was 10 different sets that I kept rebuilding. Originally, it was organized into chapters, according to each set, which had scenes that were like, 'beauty' and 'truth' and 'illness.' Those disappeared along the way.

SMALL: I was thinking about how beauty has, especially these days, a very tenuous relationship with truth. Were you thinking about that at all?

CWYNAR: The last film I made, Red Film [2018], was more specifically about our insistence of connecting truth with beauty and how far that leads us astray. Those are always themes that my work touches on: the biases of technology, the norms of white femininity, and the reproduction of specific versions of beauty and then how we reproduce ourselves according to those norms. Then, also, how we still insist that truth and beauty are connected somehow, but how shifting those ideals are and how hard it is to hold on to anything.

SMALL: Also the weirdness, I feel like, that truth can be subjective based on the information that you have. And logic can be subjective. I feel like those are anchors of how we navigate the world that we can't experience with our five senses. It's pretty terrifying.

CWYNAR: There's the line, "All of our institutions are coming apart at the seams." It's the idea that things that used to seem certain, we now know, for better and worse, are just one random way that they could have been.

SMALL: Right? The truth is subjective! I was curious, also, about the self-portraiture you spliced throughout?

CWYNAR: I think it would be like a kind of object lesson, or just a bunch of nice looking stuff, if I wasn't in it. I think there's an important personal strain that grounds a lot of the more theoretical aspects. I'm always trying to find a balance between taking on this voice of authority, a theoretical, slightly pretentious tone, and then cutting back into the personal and

about how far you can get with the kind of lightly confessional tone before you have to stop. I think that's the feeling of the internet too. But I feel like it's important in making it all more digestible when there's a personal, self-portrait element.

SMALL: In that way, maybe, you're the truth? Your experience is the objective experience.

CWYNAR: I think that's kind of true.

SMALL: The narration features these fascinating quotes. I think my favorite one was this: "And so he says, 'We vacillate between anxious self-branding and the self-negating practice of seeking some higher authenticity: we have to watch ourselves become ourselves in order to be ourselves, over and over again.'" How did that enter the script?

CWYNAR: I should say, some of the lines are either taken directly or reworked from various think pieces—probably about 10 important ones. I wanted it to also be like, "What would your opinions be if they were like a collage of internet think-pieces?"

SMALL: Yes. [laughs]

CWYNAR: That one is from n+1. It's this amazing article by Rob Horning about Forever 21 and what the internet does to ourselves. It's from 10 years ago, so it's really ahead of its time.

SMALL: Any final thoughts?

CWYNAR: It's funny, I started with the set, but also with the swimmer being a very central character. I think she holds the key to the middle when she swims down it. That's the crux of the piece. But the talking heads [of the swimmers] were the center of the video for a long time. Then at some point, I was like, "I'm not sure this feels like my work anymore." But maybe that's okay to go down for a while, that particular trajectory, and then scale it back. I feel like the film was 17 different films before it became what it is.

SMALL: I think that reflects the anti-linearity of the world. Which I guess is the truth? Nothing is linear.

CWYNAR: And choice. There used to be a part in the film about choice and how choice haunts people of our age group—and how crushing it is to have to choose between so many things at once. Making an art show is basically an endless series of choices that you have to decide on and move on to get to the next one. I think that felt really tough this time, just in making any decisions and making so many at once. I feel like that feeling is in the film, too—in the idea that you don't even know which screen to look at. So then maybe you pick them all!