

THE WILTON BULLETIN

Sara Cwynar explores power of imagery at the Aldrich in 'Gilded Age'

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Photo: Jason Mandella / Contributed Photo

The walls are talking at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield.

The artworks in the exhibition, “Sara Cwynar: Gilded Age,” are in conversation with each other, examining color, stereotypes and beauty standards harvested from an oversaturation of messages we are bombarded with today. Images of Nefertiti, architectural landmarks, overly bright nail polish bottles and cosmetic samples are repeated and rearranged among various works, in collage-like layered creations that blend photography, installation and bookmaking with historical reference points and themes.

This is the Canadian-born artist’s first East Coast solo exhibition and it is on view through Nov. 10. Cwynar has a background in graphic design and her artistic practice is clearly informed by conceptual art. In “Gilded Age,” she looks at what beauty means, what makes for a “pretty picture” and the power of images in the real and digital worlds.

Curated in conjunction with the artist, the exhibition features a sampling of Cwynar’s color photographs from 2014 to 2019 (including new work); “Kitsch Encyclopedia,” 2014, her first artist book; “Cover Girl,” 2018, a 16mm film on video with sound making its East Coast debut); and “72 Pictures of Modern Paintings,” 2016, a site-specific wallpaper being shown for the first time in the United States.

Combing through a wealth of imagery that runs the gamut from art history to advertising, Cwynar astutely ferrets out the important from the trivial to explore several themes. Color is a prominent theme explored and one that weaves itself throughout her works to open up important dialogues.

“I was thinking about many different ways color is used to create desire or to trick people,” said Cwynar. “For example, I am thinking about which colors film can reproduce and how things that seem totally natural and technical, like what red film can reproduce or how the color of a sky looks or a skin tone, are decided on by technicians with biases.”

“I was also thinking about how certain colors take us back to certain times, and how color can contain meaning and emotion. I also have spent a lot of time researching the way color is used to sell things, especially examples like melamine plastic cups from the ’50s or the rose gold iPhone from 2016 where color was used to sell us something we already owned as if it was something new.”

Bias among image makers, particularly in advertising, is another key theme Cwynar explores, revealing hidden intents and biases in vintage advertising images that she upends. Taking on popular photographic clichés, including the portrait, still life and product images, Cwynar asks important questions about deep-seated stereotypes.

“I really hope viewers come away thinking about the power of images, and the way that even our most benign seeming photographs — for example, an architectural picture in an encyclopedia, or an advertisement of a smiling woman, or a picture of a watch, contain many layers of politics and intention,” she says. “These types of images shape the way we see ourselves and our (Western) culture in ways that we may not be able to recognize all the time. And as they proliferate more and more it becomes even harder to see.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog — the artist’s first — and the cover image is a bright pink rose, which evinces Cwynar’s mastery of consciously layers upon layers of messages in her work. The rose here is a vibrant pink hue and the rose is a quintessential symbol of beauty but roses fade just as beauty fades.

“The roses are some of the only straight or unaltered pictures in the show, and yet somehow they look fake. I was thinking about roses as this sort of unimpeachable symbol of beauty, something most people in Western culture would agree on, but making them in these garish bright almost synthetic colors so it’s not entirely clear if they are beautiful or real at all,” she said. “And also having all these advertising images in the show that sort of started as the height of style but then fell out of favor (the way most advertisements do), I wanted to connect this to something that has a much briefer life span, that is really only beautiful for a few days or for the moment I photograph it, then is gone.”

“This show thinks a lot about the cycles of value of things we consider beautiful and how some images stand the test of time (like an image of a Greek ruin, for example), and others, like a lipstick ad, have a very brief life span before we no longer want to look at them. And ultimately, particularly in ‘Cover Girl,’ I am trying to parse an idea that the way we cycle through and discard objects and images has bearing on the way we treat others and ourselves too — particularly when it comes to female standards of beauty.”

The Aldrich is at 258 Main Street. For more information, visit aldrichart.org or call 203-438-4519.