Sara Cwynar

GLASS LIFE

1 September - 23 October, 2021
Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11-6 PM

Sara Cwynar’s latest solo exhibition at Foxy Production is a new six channel film, "Glass Life." The work is an immersive, multi-voiced meditation on the relationship between images and the self. On differently sized projection screens, the film travels through advertising, art, fashion, design, philosophy, and politics, while three digitized swimmers on monitors act as witnesses and audience members. Contemplating the limits of nostalgia and memory, "Glass Life" looks back, to the present, and forward, often all at once, as it poetically figures the ways images can both threaten and give pleasure.

The work’s title derives from philosopher and psychologist Shoshana Zuboff’s recent book "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism." Zuboff characterizes our current digital era as one where we live our lives behind glass, where everything we do is surveilled and privacy is almost impossible, and where the only resistance is “the art and science of hiding.”

"Glass Life" is a dynamic configuration of images and video accumulated over the years on the artist's hard drives. From her studio, the artist uses her computer and various studio set ups to make sense of her visual archive—and the world outside. Luscious pictures of food, political figures, screen idols, sportswomen, Instagram models, grand artworks, cartoon characters, emojis, and self-portraits, among many other images, vie for our attention. This montage is overlaid by a broad range of references, including from Euripides, Plato, and Shakespeare; through Albert Camus, John Maynard Keynes, and Virginia Woolf; to Frantz Fanon, Luce Irigaray, Kobena Mercer, and the artist herself.

Perspective, scale, and time feel askew, as the work’s signs and symbols wash over us. Flatness and depth are intertwined as still and moving images converge: photographs swipe by as a conveyer belt of industrial goods moves on with an almost independent spirit. As words and images dazzle, the work’s abundance produces an anxious feeling of visual over-stimulation, tempered by the artist’s drive to synthesize the myriad elements she presents.

Picturing a kind of simulation of subjectivity, Cwynar figures contemporary relations revolving ever more reductively around consumers and producers; yet, at the same time, signifying beauty and freedom, she captures a swimmer floating effortlessly above it all. The artist suggests that, throughout history, cycles of seductive images have been used to ensnare us in an ongoing matrix of desire and consumption; yet, she also intimates that a key to extricating ourselves from these binds is a thirst for inquiry and knowledge.
Sara Cwynar’s films and photography have been described as building on the legacy of the 1980s Pictures Generation. The artist is interested in how design and popular images work on our psyches, in how visual strategies infiltrate our consciousness. She considers how familiar, often sentimental images smooth over unpleasant realities, to cover up “the systems of control embedded within our social, economic, and political lives.”

Sara Cwynar (Vancouver, BC, Canada, 1985) currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She holds an MFA from Yale University, New Haven, CT, and a Bachelor of Design from York University, Toronto, ON, Canada. She studied English Literature at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

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); "Tracy," Oakville Galleries, Oakville, ON, Canada (solo); 33rd 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 new 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.
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Sara Cwynar
Glass Life, 2021
Six channel 2K video with sound
19 min. 02 sec. / dimensions variable
Edition of 3 with 2 AP — 1 of 3
SC_FP4572
We accept all these images as we accept the climate.  
Every search click and like is claimed as an asset, we don’t mind.  
Listen, where were you in all this?

From Walter B. to Kim K.  
No paradise like the past.

Photography, phonography, the cinema, radio, television, video and the Internet have made ever greater quantities of memory potentially accessible.

Will I be nostalgic for this time?  
Comparatively little attention has been devoted to what people forget, and why.  
And why.

In the glass life, everything can be used.  
It is all material.  
We are smooth as glass.  
Frictionless, porous.  
Source-less. Where are you now?

[ audio of protestors ]

The sky is falling, apple’s stock is rising.  
Look up at the sky, look down at the screen in your hands.

And scenes come together like congregations of clouds which gently join and slowly disperse. or hang solemnly still.  
Source: /Source: Virginia Woolf.

Is this how the internet works?  
What is the weather doing?

Question: can an apple fall upwards?

Our brains he realized will go to Baroque lengths, magic tricks even to preserve the integrity of our world view.

Deny, Deny, Deny.  
Even if the truth is obvious, that’s the playbook.

Promiscuity between the seer and the seen.  
The body is a sheet of plain glass.  
To see right through to the mind.
Deny, Deny, Deny.
Words should say exactly what they mean, why do they betray us?
To say that, is to say this.

The bankers, the captains of industry (everyone).
The bankers, the captains of industry, the oil barons.
The tulip bulbs of 17th-century Holland which generated a wild, speculative rush that quickly disappeared, leaving behind nothing but flowers.

Will I be nostalgic for this time?

Berenice Abbot said, “I have tried to be objective…. What I mean by objectivity is not the objectivity of a machine, but of a sensible human being with the mystery of personal selection at the heart of it.”
She kind of invented the bird’s eye view.
Accidental Mother of surveillance technology.
Mother, first other, whatever...

Between the here-and-now of lived experience, and the ideal is a distance which creates and maintains desire.
And we know that in love, the reach exceeds the grasp.

This photograph says “I am happy.”
This one says “I am free.”

We appear to be both obsessive documenters of our experience, yet largely indifferent to, or overwhelmed by the archives we create.

There was a before time, and there will be an after time.

We return nowhere. We become other than ourselves.

I want my shelf life to be longer.
Life points beyond itself.
OR does it?

He says the word image is in bad repute because we have thoughtlessly believed that a drawing was a tracing, a copy, a second thing.

Distorted dream symbol
“Dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”

The first modernity suppressed the growth and expression of self in favor of collective solutions, but by the second modernity, the self is all we have.
“Too many people had come to feel excluded from the future.”

“You can have any color car you want so long as it’s black.”
Source – Henry Ford.
Year: 1909.

The alienation is real, as a surfeit of weak ties suffocates stronger bonds, yet stronger bonds seem available only through the online tools that have diminished them.

The will to remain alive which drives all humans forward, how constant surveillance robs us of the will.
The life-sustaining inwardness, born in sanctuary, that finally distinguishes us from the machines.”

“As recalcitrant users we will not be obstacles.”

[ music begins ]

In the usual order of things lives run their course like rivers.
Sometimes they jump their beds.

“She has sanded her personality down to the bare essentials, she laughs at what is funny, she cries at what is sad.”

Under the gaze algorithmically constituted, collective Other… a ubiquitous face looking down upon us, whose smile we desire dearly.
Do I?

No more room for the “I” of social media.
The “I” of performed identity in the name of profit.
The “I” of instrumentalized sentiment and performative justice.

The archiving makes the self seem richer and more substantial even as it becomes more tenuous.
Everything is significant or irrelevant, depending on which view suits our needs.

Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy.
“For in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying ‘I.’”
I perform my fabricated joy.

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.”
YES!

We have to watch ourselves become ourselves in order to be ourselves, over and over again.
We have to watch ourselves become ourselves in order to be ourselves, over and over again.

[ indistinct conversation in the background ]

[ music ends ]

What about a desire to keep oneself off the books?
We may now be in multiple places at once,
Here in my body,
But there in speech or vision.

Time, in the 14th century as it emerged - a symptom of a new Puritan discipline and bourgeois exactitude.
It was a new gilded age.
A concentration.
A concentration of economic power not seen since the 1920's.
And it would remain so,
The distance between life and death in USA

All of us in the teeth of Google.
Closer.
Shorter.
All of us in the teeth of Google.

New mutant forms of capitalism.
Social media’s court of public opinion.
Secret surplus capture (Ok, I guess who cares).
Extensive personal information that users did not or would not provide.
It was lawless, there was a void so,
It was filled with money.

They long ago photographed every street and house on the planet without asking anyone’s permission.
Frictionless.
Poreless skin.
But they could zoom in on the pores if they wanted to.
The days passed like waves.

So it is with the experience of the self in the age of its digital reproducibility.
When I encounter reproductions of the self, my own or that of others;
They do not elicit the moral recognition that attends the embodied self in the here and now.

Keynes says, knowing the past doesn’t give you any purchase on the future.
Father of neoliberalism.

[ music begins ]

Don’t say neoliberalism, it sounds annoying.
Don’t say neoliberalism, it sounds annoying.

A nation based on freedom is just another place to go shopping.
Hume thought that the pursuit of “modest” luxuries like porcelain cups, or a fashionable dress made people more demanding and creative.

Needs are in reality the fruits of production,
But every pleasure is a trap.
Someone Says, “If you can have women competing against each other, it’s great television.”

Weightless digital terms.
Baroque and perverse privacy policies.
Every casual search, like, and click was claimed as an asset, we don’t mind.

Without knowing; without having time to know.

The miniature gives us a sense of control as if we can hold something in our hands,
(In the glass life) have a grasp of all of it.

In the glass life.
How do you know what size you are?
In the glass life.
Or how much space to take?
Online there is always distance.
But it is not in our power to take such a distanced view.

We continually project the body into the world in order that its image might return to us: onto the other, the mirror, the animal and the machine, and onto the artistic image.
What?
Sundered.
Where the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another.
I seemed to believe I had no identity.
I seemed to believe I had no identity, let alone a soul, outside of the perception others had formed of me.
Swallowing us as nature or history swallows us.

It is capricious, the digital other.
Askesis; a withdrawal from the world in order to see.
(But we are not withdrawing.)
We are everywhere.
Everywhere this.
“I, I, I.”
We are just the means to other ends.

[ music intensifies ]

Decision rights vanish before one even knows there was a decision to make.
Accumulation by dispossession.
Not a wave but the tide itself.
“Dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”
Echo chamber/auto affection.
It’s gonna recommend you what you want (a loop).
Fascism promises you a part in something bigger than yourself too.

Fascism promises you a part in something bigger than yourself too

[ music ends ]

[ background noise of chatter in a museum ]

Our machines are disturbingly lively, (PLATO)
And we ourselves, frighteningly inert.

“You can have free speech but you can’t yell fire in a crowded theatre.”

[ audio excerpt from Margaret Thatcher’s Iron Lady speech continues in the background ]

We are aphorism cannons, we speak in snippets.
Never trust the teller, trust the tale.
Source: DH Lawrence.

We say things like, “I guess, who cares.”
But we care very much.
I don’t even think of you.
I don’t even think of you.

I say that to say this.
I think of you,
All the time.

But how can I say “I love you” differently?
They have left us only absences, defects, negatives to name ourselves.
The sense of scale is all off.

And to follow her voice was like following a voice that speaks too quickly to be taken down by a pencil. And the voice was my own voice, Saying without prompting undeniable everlasting contradictory things.

Source: Virginia Woolf.

The voice WAS the narrative, it WAS the story.

I go to a website called, “Harness Your Voice.”
Lacan said, “The voice is left when the signifying is done.”
Source: “The voice is left when the signifying is done.”

Someone says, “Ronald Reagan used to tear up every time he saw the flag.”

And Beatrice yells,
“O God that I were a man, I would eat his heart in the marketplace and my tongue will tell the tale of my anger, or my heart will break concealing it.”

Source: Shakespeare.
Source: Shakespeare.

Source: Lacan.
That’s Shakespeare.
PLATO.

I sit and see myself talking.
You feel like everyone is watching you, but they are just watching themselves.

The distribution of the sensible, or the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetic-political regime.

What you can SAY.
But I say that, to say this.
I think of you all the time.
We come up with elaborate ways to say one thing while speaking another.
The voice IS the narrative, it IS the story.
The voice IS the narrative, it IS the story.
The world of power changed.

The powerful is lowered toward the trivial.
The trivial is raised up to power.
Crowd pleasing risk averse.
Beveled edges, pink, some sort of return to childhood.
Soothing pinks.

Chalk.
Looks good on the phone
Flusser describes a shape that escapes some cycle of capitalism - an intestine during digestion, which can’t be bought, only contemplated.
Year: 1985.

What is the role of beauty in all this?
The green earth, the sea, the sky.
The deepest diver.
Augustine described it as “a plank amid the waves of the sea.”
Year: 400 AD.

Beauty brings copies of itself into being.
The will to make “more and more” so that there will eventually be “enough.”
Beauty is sometimes disparaged on the grounds that it causes a contagion of imitation.
The great works of art.
The reproductions of the great works of art.
Who will watch the watchers?
Who will watch the watchers?

I saw the same clouds in every picture.
The ideal woman has always been generic.
My identity became a source of profit, with no way out.
I sat and watched myself speak.
Trying to start connecting back to the beginning.
She tossed her head like a snake.
Why did the tongue out emoji suddenly seem to encapsulate the current time? Everybody wastes years, it’s okay. The lips were all too red, they were glowing and glowing, and I couldn’t figure out where I’d seen that color. They were digital Mickey Mouse.

Remember the apple is red, the sky is blue. Dream about control, and about losing control. Loop. Too much a body, and too disembodied (loop).

All of our institutions are coming apart at the seams. It dropped so low, In my regard, I heard it hit the ground. And go to pieces, On the stones, At the bottom of my mind. Source: Emily Dickinson.

As Recalcitrant users we will not be obstacles.

It starts with a hard look in the mirror. But don’t fall for the myth of individual responsibility. WE KNOW who keeps the score.

To have so little confidence in your own reality. You are marinading yourself in the conventional wisdom. You are creating a cacophony in which it is impossible to hear your own voice.

[ music ends ]

She says they believe they are acting of their own volition, but are actually running a series of scripts and loops.

The locus of power is carefully hidden.

THIS IS A JOKE. Posturing at happiness, pretending at joy, laughing at nothing. THIS IS A JOKE.
Fascism promises you a part in something bigger than yourself.

And so not always needing to be saying “I… I… I…”
Since the order of the world is shaped by death shouldn’t we fight?
YES.
But your victories will never be lasting.
Source: the Plague.

Source: the Plague.

That is what we learn in a time of pestilence.
Economic successes rooted in profound moral failures.

He says, “We didn’t lose anyone that we could have saved.”

We’re talking about grieving a living loss — one that keeps going and going, that does not have a point.
A loop.
Do you have a vague sense of suffering?
We can help you wrap language around that.

What might have been and what has been,
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory,
Down the passage which we did not take,
Towards the door we never opened.
Into the rose-garden,
My words echo,
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose?
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves,
I do not know.
Other echoes,
Inhabit the garden.
Shall we follow?

“Go”, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
“Go, go, go,” said the bird.
Human kind cannot bear very much reality.
Language ran dry a long time ago.

And anyone listening would already agree.
A loop.
He says, “I wish we could have our old life back.
We had the greatest economy that we’ve ever had, and we didn’t have death.”

It is not in our power to take such a distanced view.