Sara Cwynar, Glass Life @Foxy Production

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / September 17, 2021

**JTF (just the facts):** A single video installation, on view in the darkened main gallery space with red shades. The work is a six channel, 2K video with sound, 19 minutes 2 seconds, made in 2021. The work is available in an edition of 3+2AP. (Video stills below.)

A monograph of Cwynar’s previous video work was recently published by Aperture (here). Hardcover, 200 pages, with 175 color reproductions. (Cover shot below.)

Comments/Context: As a metaphor for our contemporary digital existence, the idea of a “glass life” is richly resonant and darkly appropriate. In just two simple words, glass life captures many of the subtle undercurrents of how we define and construct ourselves these days, from the visibility and transparency of nearly everything we do to the ways our identities are relentlessly performed, documented, seen, and archived.

But finding ways to faithfully capture the frenetic, and often alienating, complexity of this new world, and to unpack its layers of experience, has proven to be a stiff artistic challenge, particularly for photographers, who are inherently limited to still frames. It’s simply very difficult to boil the essence of so much intellectual and experiential cacophony down into standalone images.

But the edges between photography and video are increasingly ill-defined, and that instability is opening up opportunities for aesthetic experimentation and risk taking. In our everyday digital flow, photographs and video clips are ever more interchangeable and interconnected, and linked into ever morphing loops and streams, and as the old boundaries between digital mediums continue to dissolve, new artistic modes of expression will be needed to help re-calibrate our evolving sense of self.

Sara Cwynar’s knockout video installation Glass Life artistically re-imagines the ways that an active mind processes our swirling brew of digital culture. It thoughtfully blends photographs, video clips, animations, and other visual ephemera into a restlessly busy stream of consciousness, and then uses physical movement, personal interaction, and voice over in various forms to replicate (and analyze) the multivalent switching between inputs, influences, and thoughts that now dominates our plugged-in, always-on human existence.
In many ways, Glass Life brings together a number of aesthetic innovations that Cwynar has been developing over the past decade or so. Her early works investigated the possibilities of archival imagery of varying kinds, reassembling, rescanning, and reusing the photographs in different ways, in an effort to disrupt or reinterpret the imagery and its underlying pictorial assumptions. In the years following (as seen in her 2017 gallery show, here), Cwynar kept iterating on those original ideas, adding in the lightning strike innovation of an interrupting clear Plexi sheet, which allowed her to physically layer images on top of each other in unexpected ways. She also dipped her toe into the pool of video, extending some of her existing aesthetic frameworks, adding more motion, and playing still images and video off each other. Her 2019 museum solo at the Aldrich (reviewed here) summarized many of these threads, and new videos on view there once again introduced alternate methods and techniques for moving photographs around and intermingling them with video. With each step in her artistic journey, she’s discovered more ways to manipulate and rearrange imagery in different forms, building up to the brimming toolbox she shows off in Glass Life.

The video installation is a six channel projection, shown on a large main screen, two smaller side screens flanking the central one, and three mini screens set behind against the back wall. The flow of the video largely originates on the main screen, with the two side screens providing alternate views, supporting details, or further tunneling into certain topics. The three back screens provide the animated avatar face of a woman in a blue swimming suit and swim cap, who periodically talks in synch with the surrounding voice over; she also appears as a swimming presence in the midst of the flow of imagery (both as a physical cutout and as an animation), almost like a guide.

One way to consider what Cwynar is doing in Glass Life is to see the entire production as a performance of thinking. With some exceptions, the main flow of “action” takes place against an indeterminate gray grid, where images in various forms are laid out at differing depths, sizes, and spatial positions, like a three-dimensional collage. For the most part, we move downward in a scroll slightly too fast to entirely process, but other side to side motion, back and forth rewinding, and conveyor belt progressions also take place, as do “clicking” on a still photograph to turn it into a video that then plays, pulling us “downward” and “expanding” (using the side screens) into its own area of attention. Cwynar also physically intervenes with her hand or arm now and again, touching, holding, moving, pinning up, or otherwise reorienting the imagery. To say that the overall feel is dizzying is perhaps an oversimplification; it feels fast, jumpy, squirrely, and intensely stimulated, but there is a logic that can be followed (even when the tangents start to feel pretty random) that slowly aggregates and coalesces into something approximating thinking in this distracted digital age.

The conceptual through line is an amalgam of all kinds of references and influences – photographic, intellectual, philosophical, political, cultural, and personal, with the frame constantly shifting via juxtapositions, connections, and repositionings. Ideas link to memories, which wander to reproductions (of reproductions), which are then gathered into congregations and networked nodes, all of the reshuffling and remixing accompanied by snippets of spoken texts that offer interpretations, descriptions, reflections, and analyses of related, but more abstract, concepts.

If this work had been silent, it would have been all fleeting recognition and overloaded task switching; but with the voice over, that semi-controlled frenzy becomes intellectualized, like a brain interpreting its inputs in real time. Cwynar draws from an impressive list of sources, from Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson to Plato, Camus, Lacan, and Shakespeare (and beyond, as a long list at the end of the video attests), the overlapped voices competing, repeating, and almost conversing, as though actively wrestling inside our own heads. What emerges are snippets of derived (or applied) insight that seem to inform the flow of imagery swirling around the gallery:

• “In the glass life, everything can be used.”
• “We appear to be both obsessive documenters of our experience, yet largely indifferent to, or overwhelmed by the archives we create.”
• “We have to watch ourselves become ourselves in order to be ourselves, over and over again.”
• “Everything is significant or irrelevant, depending on which view suits our needs.”
• “You feel like everyone is watching you, but they are just watching themselves.”
• “A nation built on freedom is just another place to go shopping.”
• “Beauty brings copies of itself into being.”
These and many other decontextualized quotes, allusions, and remembered bons mots pile up atop the imagery, deepening the matrixed loop that we find ourselves trapped inside. And the words sweep past at such a rate that we can hardly process them all, many lucidly pointed texts flitting in and out of conscious thought before vanishing into the crowd rushing by.

The sophisticated interaction between image and text in Cwynar’s Glass Life is what gives it its thought-provoking 21st century punch. It successfully simulates the layered complexity of our over-saturated, over-stimulated attention span, where time feels malleable, anxiety creeps in as we constantly survey ourselves, and our efforts to make sense of all the symbols, signals, and information get increasingly manic and frustrated. Its wide ranging, searching pace is unsettlingly familiar, rooting us in the unrelenting contemporary pastime of watching ourselves watching ourselves.