

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Color Palette of Materialism, from Rose Gold iPhones to Millennial Pink Shopping Bags

In her latest exhibition, Sara Cwynar probes our complicated relationship with image-saturated advertising.

Megan N. Liberty | May 1, 2017



Sara Cwynar, "Tracy (Grid 1)" (2017), pigment print mounted on Dibond, 30 x 38 in. (76.2 x 96.52 cm.,) edition of 3 with 2 AP (all images courtesy Foxy Production)

Long interested in the intersection of media, technology, and image culture, Sara Cwynar, artist and author of *Kitsch Encyclopedia: A Survey of Universal Knowledge*, continues to probe our complicated relationship with image-saturated advertising and materialism in her latest film project and accompanying series of photographs, *Rose Gold*.

In the fall of 2015, Apple released the iPhone 6S, which was offered in a new color option: Rose Gold. This was one of many recent indicators of a shift in gendered color norms and cultural tastes, and a broader change in the ways we think about color, branding, and gender. Cwynar's film questions how much choice is involved in the popularity of Rose Gold and how much we are being commercially manipulated — and to what end.



Still from Sara Cwynar, *Rose Gold* (2017), 16mm film on video with sound, 8 min.



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“They invented this color, Rose Gold, and I’m mesmerized,” says a male voice at the beginning of Cwynar’s film. The eight-minute short draws from a diverse range of sources, including the writings of Lauren Berlant, Toni Morrison, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Apple’s website, and the Encyclopedia Britannica. It is visually and materially dense, with quickly flashing images, film clips, and overlapping and interwoven voiceovers by a male and female speaker. The style of fast-moving visuals, self-referential images of images, and overlaid voice narration brings to mind Camille Henrot’s *Grosse Fatigue*. Both adopt the form of an educational documentary, similar to the tone of *Encyclopedia of Kitsch*, with scripts that attempt to explain and instruct. The visual motifs in *Rose Gold* are exhaustive — many more than I could catch, even after multiple viewings. Several do recur: sets of ceramic mugs and plates in pastel blue and pink, vintage and retro pink telephones, pink Acne Studio shopping bags, and color charts. iPhones appear floating against solid backdrops as in Apple billboards, sometimes spinning on an axis or lying flat with shattered screens. Staggered throughout are shots of Cwynar in her studio staging and filming oversized printed images of objects, particularly a large rose. She also appears at other moments in the film, at one point sitting against a soft pink background in a matching colored T-shirt and speaking on an old (beige) phone.



Still from Sara Cwynar, *Rose Gold* (2017), 16mm film on video with sound, 8 min.

The Cut recently ran the piece [“Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away,”](#) which features a timeline of the explosion of a specific pink hue. It includes the release of Acne Studio’s pink shopping bags in 2007, Drake’s “Hotline Bling” album cover in July 2015, and, of course, the Rose Gold iPhone. This is the cultural background Cwynar taps into, through familiar visual references and brief but expletive-laden audio selections, exposing our complacency in the face of the construction of material desire. The opening line of the film continues, “I totally fell for [Rose Gold], it’s almost embarrassing enough to blush.” We know we’ve been sold, but if the sell is good enough, we’re happy to buy into it.

The film has two main strands. One is an exploration of color through semiotics, advertising, and branding, into which the previous discussion of Millennial Pink fits. “I hear that the gold iPhone was for the Chinese market, where gold still really means something,” the male voice says. What do colors *mean*, if anything at all? What is the concept behind *red*, or a manufactured color like Rose Gold? “Rose Gold doesn’t need to be anything at all, just an idea,” the audio goes on, “something to look forward to.” Cwynar’s film asks what it means to covet an idea made manifest in a color.



Still from Sara Cwynar, *Rose Gold* (2017), 16mm film on video with sound, 8 min.



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“Rose Gold is flattering to most skin tones,” the female voice narrates as images of various skin tones flash across the screen in circular make-up samples. It reminded me of artist Beatrice Glow’s investigation into Pantone’s racialized color-naming system. Pink has long had gendered associations, but what are its racial implications? “My skin fades, but Rose Gold doesn’t change,” the voiceover says. Perhaps Rose Gold is the eternal glow of youth — but only for the fair-skinned.

The other thread in the film is our relationship with new technology. “You forget when you learned to use your inside voice,” says the male voice, who is quickly interrupted by the female voice asking, “When did you learn to swipe?” Just as we once learned the social etiquette of vocal volume, we’ve now learned another kind of etiquette: the swipe, type, and message. The thirst for newness, for advancement, becomes linked to materialism: new technology equals progress. Rose Gold is only an idea, and we cannot buy an idea, but we *can* buy its material manifestation in the form of cutting-edge technology. “The future was pure potential,” the narration claims. With new forms of digital touch and means of communicating, who knows what’s next? The voiceover adds, “I don’t really have to talk anymore, I delegate my speech to my fingertips.”

“What is the right way to talk about something? Do people understand more if you communicate with things bought and sold?” the male voice asks. The question of communicating through things is especially thought-provoking when coupled with Cwynar’s semiotic concerns about naming and excess. If the naming of colors is unstable and commercially motivated, what’s to say that our other means of naming and communicating are any better?



Sara Cwynar, “Avon Presidential Bust (Washington, Gold)” (2017), c-print mounted on Dibond, 30 x 24 in., edition of 3 with 2 AP

Accompanying the film, *Rose Gold* includes a series of aluminum-mounted photographs in which specific objects figure heavily — things like the artist’s friend Tracy, flowers, and a series of commemorative Avon bottles shaped like presidential busts. Perhaps because the film is so intellectually and visually stimulating, the photographs, by contrast, seem stagnant and less interesting. It’s noteworthy that some of the visual motifs from the film, such as highlighted book pages, color charts, and circular frames, appear collaged into the studio portraits of Tracy. Avon bottles and several other things also appear in both the short and still images, adding a bit more continuity to the show. And it’s clear that these photographs are also meant to interrogate our relationship to advertising culture, objects, and obsolescence. But the studio portraits are not manipulated as interestingly as the film, which successfully synthesizes the educational documentary and TV commercial.



Sara Cwynar, “Tracy (Gold Circle)” (2017), dye sublimation print on aluminum, 30 x 38 in., edition of 3 with 2 AP

Neither the film nor the photographs come to clear conclusions, other than implicating us all in our materialist desires. The overall tone of the exhibition is cautionary about the newfound popularity of this object and color, which is just one out of myriad trends that seem to spread so rapidly these days and fade just as quickly. The massive popularity of Rose Gold and Millennial Pink could suggest a shift in gendered thinking, perhaps even a feminist reclamation, but I am led to think otherwise. Just as Cwynar appears in the film talking on a nearly obsolete landline telephone, this too shall pass, and we will be left with an emptiness that can only be filled by the next new trend that’s been branded to make us believe we’ve made a choice.

“Several male artists I know have told me I am having a moment,” the female voice

says in the film, “as if the moment will pass soon. Rose Gold is having a moment too.” Commercial trends extend to artists and artworks, to social movements and political causes. But where does the wildfire of a trend stop, and what’s left after it burns out? Is there any lasting power? The final line of the film lets this question hang: “Is the Rose Gold iPhone a totem?” the male voice muses. “Maybe you won’t even remember it at all.”



Still from Sara Cwynar, *Rose Gold* (2017), 16mm film on video with sound, 8 min.