

## MODERN PAINTERS

The consummate Vancouver native, Sara Cwynar meets me at the New Haven, Connecticut, train station in a Toyota hatchback with both a roof rack *and* a bike occupying the backseat. It's easy to imagine that the work space of this quiet and capable artist would be minimal and orderly—with not a pencil out of place—a notion I am disabused of in short order. On first glance, Cwynar's densely cluttered studio looks like the place where aging kitsch goes to retire. Every surface, including the scarred concrete floor, is covered with a motley assortment of objects: mannequin parts, pink melamine teacups, bouquets of silk flowers, an overturned vase, power tools, pegboards, velvet drapes, and shower poufs. The walls are similarly crowded, bearing images of a rose blooming five feet high, a drugstore's chewing-gum display, a manicured hand reaching for a telephone. The room feels like an archive of images and objects whose origins lie somewhere in the faded commercial past.

Much of Cwynar's work, including the photographs on view through March 7 in MoMA PS1's "Greater New York" survey, reflects the artist's affection for design techniques and methodology. "Graphic design gives you a generous system for fitting things into their place," she offers. Typography appears often, as does a tendency to collect and categorize; source images are borrowed and tweaked. *Display Stand, No. 64 Cons H. 8 1/4" W. 24" D. 16 1/2"*, 2014, is based on a found photograph of a chewing-gum display from the artist's archive. The original image, along with its bold, sans serif caption, has been rephotographed, printed, and reassembled using a tiling method familiar to graphic designers; look close and you'll see the subtle seams where the tiled prints are misaligned, resulting in an image that seems at once fractured and complete.

Cwynar's peripatetic studies began in English literature at the University of British Columbia, before she dropped out "a whole bunch of times," finally landing in the graphic design program at York University in Toronto. She fell in love with the field but longed for a more conceptual approach than her classes offered. Now, just a few months from graduating with an MFA in photography from the Yale University School of Art, her winding path through academia seems, in retrospect, to have a certain logic. (Cwynar continues to work as a commercial designer in tandem with her art practice—she served a three-year stint as a graphic designer at the *New York Times Magazine*—and this is occasionally uneasy territory: "It's funny how, if you make art critiquing certain corporate structures, those corporations will often call you up and ask you to work for them. Sometimes it's hard to say no.")

Cwynar's first art piece was essentially also a work of design: *Kitsch Encyclopedia*, a book that collects the writings of Milan Kundera, Jean Baudrillard, and Roland Barthes, as well as the artist's own thoughts on the titular subject. Illustrated with rephotographed images of wildlife, religious iconography, and the Grand Canyon, among other things, it explores the relationship of kitsch to images. Like Kundera, who declared it an integral part of the human condition, Cwynar sees kitsch as something unavoidable, even necessary—something we need in order "to continue forward in the world." (She comes by her enthusiasm honestly. Along with her twin sister—Toronto-based curator Kari Cwynar—she spent her childhood as a competitive figure skater, circling the rink in sequined costumes designed by their mother.

“Yes!” she declares, smiling. “Figure skating is just pure kitsch. It’s like sentimentality as a sport.”) Kundera’s work provided a springboard for Cwynar’s early explorations, culminating in that book-length volume. “I was struck by how much *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* dovetails with ’80s image theory, with Baudrillard and Barthes: an image culture that has replaced real-world experience, where we see everything through idealized images,” she says. “I thought, ‘here’s something in theory and literature that feels like it can be visual and exciting.’”

Since then, Cwynar’s process has been elliptical in both senses of the word: deliberately obscure as well as circular. Her personal archive, which is always growing, comprises photographs, on which she exerts any number of alterations and interventions, and physical objects that she organizes and photographs in her studio. She spends hours in the dustiest parts of libraries, in basements where obsolete reference books are stacked, and on eBay, where her searches take on an obsessive dimension. She’ll start with a found image, often a commercial photograph from what she refers to as the “era of high modernist idealism.” For a recent piece, titled *432 Photographs of Nefertiti*, Cwynar began with a photograph from an encyclopedia discovered at the Columbia University library: a bust of the Egyptian queen, shown in profile before a powder-blue backdrop. (Cwynar was drawn to the image because it was one of the few depictions of a woman in the volume.) She then scanned the photo and began making hundreds of laser prints. Because the file size was too large, the printer tended to malfunction, resulting in incomplete images of varying sizes and crops, 432 in all. She remade Nefertiti’s portrait on the floor of her studio, reassembling the famous face as a tiled collage and photographing it from above with a large-format camera. Cwynar then scanned the resulting negative, edited it digitally, and reprinted the image, which resembles a computer screen on which hundreds of windows are opened, proliferating ad nauseam.

A more deadpan approach to the archive can be found in the “encyclopedia Grids” series, in which similar but distinct photographs of a single subject are organized in a grid. *Encyclopedia Grid (Bardot)*, 2014, shows 24 publicity shots of the eponymous actress resting on a yellow background. There’s a ruler running along the base of the composition, lending the arrangement the look of a scientific specimen or an eBay auction image. A single, tapered finger intrudes into many of the inset Bardot photos, suggesting that they have themselves been rephotographed or altered in advance; it’s unclear whether the finger is concealing, pointing to, or simply announcing the presence of the artist. The appropriated photos of Bardot once had a straightforward commercial purpose, but in this new context their meaning seems diffuse and maddeningly elusive.

Many of the commercial photographs that Cwynar collects suggest the good life, an ideal to be chased. “That’s what’s really conveyed through this kind of imagery,” she says, acknowledging the influence of cultural theorist Lauren Berlant on her approach to the subject. “That was much more clear in this era of high modernist idealism—what you’re supposed to want.” Cwynar’s recent work in video, a new medium for her, is far more explicit in this regard. In *Rose Gold*, 2015, the narrator covets the rose-gold iPhone, then immediately wonders, “What is a good life, when something you desire is actually an obstacle?” We watch as skin is pressed and swiped with prodding fingers in search of a touch screen, a collection of disparate plastic objects are organized in a grid, and empty rooms momentarily fill with shocking pink light.

At the moment, Cwynar is preparing for a group exhibition at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, curated by Thomas Demand and opening March 10. She has been collecting lousy photographs of popular modernist paintings, including a set of Francis Bacon prints, which she plans to translate into wallpaper. She hopes to hang actual Bacon paintings on top of the wallpaper, effectively marrying the lo-fi reproductions to the originals. In a way, it’s the ultimate postmodern party trick, presenting both the authentic original and the degraded

copy, then demanding that we privilege the latter. Or perhaps the effect would be gentler than that: We might look at the copy and be touched by its familiarity, like running into an old friend whose face we've seen hundreds of times before. Cwynar's affection for her archive may be easy to overlook, but her love of these images is central to her practice. "Part of the reason my work is so obsessive and has so much labor visible in it is because it's easy to tip into insincerity or cynicism when you're talking about kitsch or using really obvious popular commercial imagery," she stresses. "There have to be certain cues that make it clear how much I love this stuff. And I genuinely just love it so much."