

# THE NEW YORKER

PHOTO BOOTH

## AN ARTIST'S MEDITATION ON COLOR REVEALS A SECRET HISTORY OF FILM



By Andrea K. Scott April 30, 2017



*Tracy (Pantyhose)*, 2017

SARA CWCYNAR, COURTESY FOXY PRODUCTION

Why does harvest gold connote “sad old appliance” but rose gold say “sexy new iPhone”? That’s one question posed in the centerpiece of Sara Cwynar’s captivating new show at Foxy Production, a seven-minute film collage, with voice-over, whose subjects include, but aren’t limited to: consumerism, obsolescence, sexism, melamine dinnerware, brightly plumed parrots, and, for reasons that I’ve yet to grok, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The tone of Cwynar’s movie mimics mid-twentieth-century educational films—if they had been peppered with quotes from Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty—but none of the footage is found. Cwynar shot it herself, on 16-mm. stock, not digital video—a crucial detail, given that one of her central subjects is film itself. (The exceptions to the rule are the scenes in which Cwynar appears onscreen, a pretty blond woman identifiable by her telltale earrings, a tiny gold “S” and “C,” which were shot by somebody else.) Cwynar belongs to the same lineage of camera-minded conceptualists as Tacita Dean, who filmed the production of Kodak’s last rolls of 16-mm. film on obsolete stock, and Christopher Williams, whose beautiful, if recondite, pictures make hay of commercial photo-studio conventions.



But from the mid-nineteen-fifties to the early seventies, Kodak supplied commercial photographers who bought its film with so-called Shirley cards, images of women—always Caucasian—that were printed on card stock and used as the standard for lighting in studios. (Apocrypha has it that the first woman whose image was used on the cards was a Kodak employee named Shirley.) The protocol was eventually updated to include black, Latina, and Asian models—but not for the same reasons that made Crayola retire its “flesh” crayon. Rather, it was complaints from furniture manufacturers, frustrated that blond and dark woods were indistinguishable in advertisements, as well as from the candy industry, irate that milk- and dark-chocolate bars looked just the same. (For a deep dive into the subject, consult the Colour Balance Project of the Canadian scholar Lorna Roth.) In her portraits of Tracy, Cwynar performs a sly bit of color correction herself.



*Flower, 2017*

SARA CWYNAR, COURTESY FOXY PRODUCTION

*Sara Cwynar's exhibition "Rose Gold" is on view at Foxy Production through May 14th.*



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