

**Sara Cwynar: *Flat Death***  
**Foxy Production**  
**New York**  
**April 4 – May 3, 2014**  
**by Rose Bouthillier**

As an agent of reality formation, photography remains powerful and mysterious. Shifts in image modes and systems influence how we think and remember, but always in subtle, inextricable ways. Sara Cwynar's work taps into these forces in a very playful way, revealing in the unique potential of photography to level out space and time.

In her exhibition *Flat Death* at Foxy Production in New York, the artist presented selections from an ongoing eponymous series. The title, drawn from Roland's Barthes description of the nullifying effects of the image in *Camera Lucida*, stresses two of the work's central concerns: the tension between a three-dimensional object and its two-dimensional picture, and *within* this tension, something of the inevitable being-no-longer. Cwynar's aesthetic is decidedly vintage, drawn from outdated manuals and archives, and rich with Kodachrome saturation. Many of the works involve a back-and-forth between reproductions, add-ons, and re-photography, resulting in complex images. The eye is easily drawn into vexing, witty details, only to be pushed out to brightly pulsing overall compositions.

Cwynar's work is part of a current dialogue in contemporary photo-based practices, a turn towards physically grounded, studio-based making full of experimentation and contradictions, and a resulting intimacy. Lucas Blalock's still lives and Andrea Longacre-White's layered iPad scans both come to mind; though these artists are not film-oriented, as Cwynar is, they share concerns rooted in object/image friction, and a similarly playful use of "reveals" that point towards their images' construction. The *handmade* aspects of these works involve a dexterity entirely separate from the mechanical/pictorial tenets of photography.

Wrapping around a corner of the gallery, 16 of Cwynar's works ran in an unbroken line. Reminiscent of a film strip or contact sheet, this sequencing added to the jostling energy of the prints. Some images are generated by moving printed pictures while they are being scanned, resulting in staticky, chromatic "melts." The most successful of these take photography itself as a subject, such as a product shot in *Lens (Darkroom Manuals)* (2014), and an exposure clock in *Time Is Up (Darkroom Manuals)* (2013), the latter an arresting vanitas. Most of the other photographs in the show are made with a large format film camera, including *Cut (From Picturing The Times Of Your Life)* (2013). Washed in the red hue of a darkroom safe light, an easel props up an image of a pair of hands with scissors, slicing into lush red fabric. This sharp action seems to speak to the vulnerability of images; due to their referential nature, to rip, tear and cut (to this we could add throw out, delete) always feels somewhat violent.

*Toucan In Nature (Post-It Notes)* (2013) shows a bird perched among unnaturally bright and stiff foliage, which are in fact fluorescent green page markers in

Sara Cwynar, *Cut (from Picturing the Times of your Life)*, 2013, chromogenic print mounted on Plexiglas, 76 cm x 61 cm  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, COOPER COLE, TORONTO, AND FOXY PRODUCTION, NEW YORK





1 The Crypt of Civilization, considered to be the first comprehensive time capsule, is an airtight chamber located at Oglethorpe University in Brookhaven, Georgia, and is scheduled to be opened in the year 8113. A sampling of its myriad contents includes: a set of coloured crayons, two ashtrays, assorted costume jewelry, artificial finger nails, seven "What-Not" ornaments, one package containing six miniature panties, and a bubble pipe.

2 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). Reprinted in Sara Cwynar, *Kitsch Encyclopedia* (New York: Blonde Art Books, 2014), 130.

palm-like formations. Irreverently placed pieces of masking tape reveal something of the work's making: the image of the toucan was printed out on tiled sheets of paper, which were reassembled, taped together, and decorated with the Post-its. The composition is then photographed head-on by an  $4 \times 5$  film camera, "flattening" the layers. A similar strategy is used in *Gold – NYT April 22, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)* (2013), in which shiny stickers embellish a group of watches, mimicking chain links and seeming to build up, brick-like, the architecture of the display. The same tiled-and-taped method is used here, but it is far subtler, as the adhesive strips blend into the tonality of the photographed image.

These techniques are used with multiplied complexity in *Display Stand, No. 64 CONSH. 8 1/4" W. 24" D. 16 1/2"* and *Display Stand No. 66 WIRE H. 20 1/2" W. 24" D. 11 3/4"* (both 2014), which start from catalogue images of product racks. Here, objects are placed on top of the printed image and photographed; then, these reproductions are layered over a tiled version of the original, and the whole thing is photographed again. If this attempt at describing Cwynar's method comes off as confusing, such is the logic of the images themselves—the order of events can be traced, but never confidently deduced. From across the room the *Display Stand* works appear as coherent, if clunky, wholes; up close, they fall apart into myriad surprising sections. Items such as plastic forks, gel-cap pills, balloons, pencils, party picks, and paperclips, along with other image-clippings, nestle up against the products (breath mints, gum) that the display stands proffer, camouflaging into the busy composition.

Separated out as larger prints, *Contemporary Floral Arrangement 4 (A Compact Mas)* and 5 (both 2014) depict objects at life-size, giving them more presence. These works start with examples of flower arrangements

drawn from an image reference library, which are then scanned, blown up, printed, and laid out on the floor. Hundreds of objects are organized on top in a bursting, organic fashion that, while mostly eclipsing the flowers below, mimics their colourful, poised assembly. Photographed with an  $8 \times 10$  film camera, these images have an even greater degree of fine detail. In their proliferation of everyday items (TV remotes, iPods, tokens, matchboxes), these works act like highly aestheticized time capsules—botanical Crypts of Civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Two simpler, black-and-white images take up the subject of inventory and cataloguing more directly. In *Vases (Encyclopedia Pictures)* (2014), cutout illustrations appear to be flash-photographed as they are tossed in the air, only to fall in an ahistorical jumble. In *Our Natural World (Books 1)* (2013) and *Man And Space (Books 2)* (2013), volumes of knowledge are flattened onto pegboards and photographed. In their accumulative thrust, these works grasp at a cosmic immensity and the endless reduction of instances to types, time to history, and experiences to documents.

Cwynar's recently published artist's book, *Kitsch Encyclopedia*, compiles much of her source imagery while also amalgamating several texts that inform her thinking: Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983), and Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957). As Kundera writes, "kitsch is first a means of dealing with existentialist questions about the point of living, about the existence of God, about randomness and death—a means of dealing with the unbearable lightness of being."<sup>2</sup> After spending time in *Flat Death*, a palpable sense of ennui lingers. All of this slightness, reiterated and tacked together: so much and so empty.

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Sara Cwynar, *Gold - NYT April 22, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)*, 2013, chromogenic print mounted on Plexiglas, 76 cm x 102 cm  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, COOPER COLE, TORONTO, AND FOX Y PRODUCTION, NEW YORK