

Profile of an Alter Ego

Artist Shana Moulton's other self,
'Cynthia,' seeks enlightenment
through song, shopping and exercise

David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust; Beyonce's Sasha Fierce; Joan Jonas' Organic Honey; Lucy Schwob's Claude Cahun ... Throughout history, alter egos have allowed artists to explore hidden facets of identity.

Performing the misadventures of her semi-autobiographical alter ego, artist Shana Moulton has drawn attention in the field of new media studies. Over two decades, Moulton, a professor of time-based arts at UC Santa Barbara, has used physical comedy to interpret her artistic creation, “Cynthia,” a wide-eyed ingénue.

In Moulton's performance, video and sculpture series, "Whispering Pines" — named after the trailer park in Central California where Moulton grew up — Cynthia often sports a housecoat or spandex and seeks enlightenment through exercise and shopping.

Most recently, Moulton presented an extension of “Whispering Pines” — “Meta/Physical Therapy” — at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. (While the work was on view, from Feb. 17 to April 21, 2024, the museum's overall attendance was close to half a million people.)

“The whole video and performance project revolves around my alter ego,” says Moulton, who came up with Cynthia in graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University. At the time, she was creating a series of dresses that had medical devices embedded in the fabric — a walker, a neck brace and a hemorrhoid pillow, for example, gotten from her grandparents and friends. She realized someone needed to wear the pieces and decided to do it herself as a character. “I wondered what kind of person would need to wear these dresses,” Moulton says. “She would be someone in a heightened state of pain or anxiety or maybe hypochondria.”

In many ways, Cynthia is very much Moulton, she says: “There’s not a lot of distance between her and I besides a wig and a lot more makeup.” Initially, she thought of Cynthia as a combination of herself, her mother and her grandmother, and the attitudes they have in common toward aesthetics and shopping. Cynthia is the name she always wanted as a child, she says, and she likes how it sounds like “synesthesia,” the blending of senses, such as seeing music or smelling colors.

representing forms of adaptation. “Bombarded with choices, confused by technology and motivated by advertising, Cynthia exists in a state of perpetual searching — for physical wellness, knowledge and purpose,” notes Erica Papernik-Shimizu, associate curator of media and performance at the MoMA.



“Shana Moulton: Meta/Physical Therapy,” The Museum of Modern Art, 2024

Moulton loves physical therapy and home exercise tools, she admits, because they remind her of abstract art and biomorphic modernist work. Her art studio is “a sort of physical therapy lab.” To get one shot for the MoMA, for instance, she rigged a camera from 10 feet up and shot straight down, containing the whole rug (and a wide shot of Cynthia doing floor exercises with tools). Decorative spiritual objects, gadgets and toys take on special importance in Cynthia’s quest for transcendence, such as an '80s arctic penguin race toy in “Meta/Physical Therapy.” Comparing the penguin’s journey to her experience with physical therapy for her hip and mobility, she says, “It’s like an endless loop and you feel like you’re getting somewhere, and then you’re back at the beginning.”

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"It's similar to that constant search for the ultimate form of spirituality," she says. "I've always looked for various forms of alternative or non-Western spirituality, and I've never really locked into something or fully embraced anything. It's almost like the search for the ultimate skincare. Nothing has fully worked. There's an equalizing of those yearnings and that search."

Papernik-Shimizu notes: "Moulton's study of the material culture around care and healing, combined with her use of magical realism and humor, points to just how surreal being in a body — in all of its pleasure, pain and chaos — can feel. Using Cynthia as a prism, she reveals how our lives as consumers are shaped by our deepest needs and desires — and the often absurd lengths we'll go for them."

Cynthia is not alone in trying to buy contentment, says journalist Sarah Hromack. "Buying things is how people achieve, how we satiate ourselves, how we educate ourselves and how we feel safe in our understandings of anything: age, menopause, disease, race, class and gender," for example, says Hromack, who reviewed Moulton's series for the New York-based online forum Hyperallergic.com, under the headline: "The Horrors of Being a Middle Age Woman in a Capitalist Society: Shana Moulton's female protagonist in 'Meta/Physical Therapy' is charmingly overwhelmed by the small mundanities of contemporary life."

For Moulton, it's also a reflection of her own failing body, existential dread, agoraphobia, hypochondria and late capitalism. "For me, the most powerful way to deal with that is through humor," she says, "because, yes, I am criticizing late-stage capitalism, but I'm also acknowledging my role in it and poking fun at myself. I hope that that helps people relate to and see that within themselves."

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The other self

But the biggest loop for Cynthia is the tie she has with Moulton herself.

self-defined figure, can be a conduit for exploring their identity. But most performers “draw huge lines between themselves and their alter egos,” Hromack says. “For her, maybe that line doesn’t exist, and I think that’s one of the reasons people relate to her work.”

“Cynthia was born out of a conundrum of who would wear the sculptures Shana had made with medical gadgets sewn into the fabric,” says Alexandra Terry, curator of contemporary art at the New Mexico Museum of Art, who organized the exhibition “Shana Moulton: The Invisible Seventh Is the Mystic Column” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara in 2021. “In the first place, there was a separation and instead of having someone else wear the sculpture, Shana wore it herself.” Terry’s current research is in the early women’s art movement, in which the use of a woman’s body for herself is ultimately revolutionary.

In an early video, Cynthia is wearing a form-fitted dress with a hemorrhoid pillow sewn into the tush as she shops at a food mart. “She has pain in her neck and she’s having this dialogue about the objects, the can of beans and whatever she’s pulling off the shelf,” Terry says of her first time seeing “Whispering Pines” at a screening in Switzerland in 2009. “But what made me laugh is that not only was she satirizing this way of perceiving the world, she was honoring it. It’s an alter ego where she can be critical of elements of herself while also loving them.”

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“Shana Moulton: The Invisible Seventh Is the Mystic Column,” Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 2021. Photos by Alex Blair

The sounds of Cynthia

The surreal landscape and language of Cynthia’s innerworld is often accentuated by the songs and sound of composer Nick Hallett, who has been collaborating with Moulton since “Whispering Pines 10” (first performed in 2010, and later adapted into an internet soap opera with a Creative Capital grant and premiered by the New Museum in 2018).

“I started off as a Cynthia superfan,” says Hallett. “I basically delivered Shana a full musical score with lyrics that was like fanfiction to ‘Whispering Pines 1–9,’ and she and I turned that into an opera.”

Sonically, their collaboration has evolved over time, becoming more hybrid and borrowing more from pop culture. Hallett, who wrote the score for and performed in “Meta/Physical Therapy,” relied on bowed metallic instruments typical of new

“Pop Song” in “Whispering Pines 10,” which is just nonsense syllables; and a six-minute song with only six words, “So She Shows Life Flows Slowly,” combined and recombined, which was performed at the MoMA.

The music, Hallett says, “brings things together that sound irreconcilable.” It’s a sense of dissonance between hearing something beautiful and seeing something funny at the same time. Hallett’s music goes for the higher partials of the sonic spectrum that delve into the realm of sound healing.

For the live performance, Moulton and Hallett worked with two vocalists and two percussionists playing a vibraphone. “It is a full experience with musicians,” Moulton says, “and then me performing, interacting with the main projection, but also with several props, including the personal steam tent sauna on my mobility scooter.”

Developments in new media and technology have allowed live performances to be more hybrid, untapping the creative potential for projected images and live bodies to interact. Moulton, who uses video mapping with sculptural video installations, acknowledged the benefit of being able to utilize the space and have the institutional support of the MoMA. “Yet it’s also something I’ve done in a very DIY fashion for years,” she says. “As long as I have access to a projector and a computer, I can create a set within a video and then interact with that set live.” This aspect of her practice has allowed Moulton to scale from DIY artist-run situations to performances at international museums.



Shana Moulton in her studio | PHOTO BY MATT PERKO

Finding new inspiration

Since Moulton joined the art faculty, UCSB's many manicured lawns and hardscapes have inspired new aspects of "Whispering Pines." For her most recent video, Moulton shot scenes of Cynthia riding around the campus, which reminds her of Giorgio de Chirico's "Mysterious Baths Fountain" in Milan.

Storke Tower inspired an earlier work, her multiscreen sculpture "Pink Tower," a piece about the ivory tower or the trope of the princess trapped in the tower. "I was Cynthia," Moulton says, "but in that case, I was trapped in this ivory tower as either an academic or a princess or a madwoman in the attic, working with neural networks and spinning a wheel that was meant to reflect Duchamp's bicycle wheel, but was also a spindle. And I pricked my finger on it and then I had a sort of blood sugar moment."

princess trapped in the tower. “That felt very connected to Cynthia and my own personal agoraphobia,” she says.

An alternative theory

Are Shana and Cynthia the same person? Is Cynthia who you don't see when you're talking to Shana by herself? Hallett offers an alternate read on what those “Whispering Pines” videos are. “Think about the practice of an artist in the creative act,” he says. “An artist, alone in her studio, has tools and has work to make. The practice of actually making the work is when Cynthia inhabits Shana.

“Her tools are these things that she buys on the internet. These things are objects that she collects, that save her from the mundane, that give her feelings of satisfaction. Just as any artist who's working in sculpture has objects and tools and materials to realize their visions. Cynthia is Shana in her studio simply making her work.”