

SHANA MOULTON

JOURNEYS OUT OF THE BODY

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA



PADDY JOHNSON IN CONVERSATION WITH SHANA MOULTON

Health professionals say that staying healthy is more than just a state of mind. It's the monitoring of diet, sleep, and emotional well-being. It's a lifestyle, and for the hypochondriacs among us, a driving force behind anxiety and obsessive behavior.

Enter Shana Moulton, a video artist who has made it her life's work to examine the health and beauty marketplace through the character "Cynthia." Inspired by Moulton's own health obsessions, Cynthia struggles with her physical presence in the world. Her feet disappear, her back becomes malleable clay, her entire body gets sucked into an otherworldly vortex. The world of healthy living is pretty strange.

But Cynthia is also able to enjoy her life, often through dancing, or even the massaging of her feet. I sat down with Shana Moulton to get a better sense of who she is and why her work looks the way it does. We discuss feminism, hemorrhoid pillows, and the power of yogurt.

Cynthia seems ill-at-ease with the world and often looks as though she is in need of rescue. In early videos she wears what appears to be a lifesaver hemmed into her dress. Who is Cynthia and is she really as unhappy as she looks?

Cynthia is me when I'm alone, feeling anxious, alienated, or filled with existential dread about how I can prevent aging and illness—or how I can escape this reality through some kind of wormhole in my home decor. But she is also me when I have a creative or mystical revelation. She definitely has moments of bliss.

How did you come up with the character?

Initially, she was a way to activate dresses I'd been embedding with medical devices: the lifesaver is a hemorrhoid pillow. There are several variations on the neck-brace and walker dresses, not to mention a blood-pressure-tester dress. During my first attempt at making a video featuring the hemorrhoid-pillow dress I had a friend act as Cynthia. It didn't work. I'm not good at directing but I enjoy acting, so I decided to act out the dress scenarios myself. For this first video in 2002, I was imagining the kind of person who would need to wear these types of dresses, and decided it needed to be someone with either real or imagined physical problems.

It wasn't until 2004, though, when I was making *Whispering Pines 3* at Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture], that I realized Cynthia was me. I was wearing the orthopedic dresses to the residency parties because I'm a hypochondriac who likes to make their ailments visible. Cynthia is that person too. After discovering that, I thought I was ready to move on, but every time I had a new idea I needed her to execute it. I started referencing digital technologies because they've all but taken over my life, but also because of ongoing physical problems caused by the computer interface.

So you channeled your own experience into Cynthia's?

Yes. During the late 1990s and early aughts, I had a job at an internet company in San Francisco called LookSmart, and we were trying to organize the entire internet into categories; I had the anthropology and astrology categories. I got really bad ulnar tunnel syndrome there and underwent a series of therapies like wax dipping, deep tissue massage, and acupuncture. Since then I've had a lot of anxiety about computer work damaging my body—just looking at a mouse sends tension from my pinky finger to my jaw.

Did the astrology categories influence Cynthia in any way?

I've never directly addressed astrology through Cynthia, but the aesthetics of those astrology webpages and GeoCities websites influenced Cynthia's taste and her ideas of what the mystical and occult should look like.

Cynthia's house contains a mix of domestic items—lava lamps, air fresheners, etc.—but also sculptures you've made from women's symbols. Is Cynthia a feminist?

Hmmm, that is complicated. I consider myself a feminist, and Cynthia is me, but she exists in a mainly asexual universe. In *Whispering Pines 4*, I imagined Cynthia having a new take on second-wave feminist notions of the goddess—which I've always been drawn to, but am disappointed by when they seem to espouse essential ideas of the feminine or fertility.

Cynthia takes on a goddess form after undergoing an Avon makeover in *Whispering Pines 4* (with the Avon lady doubling as a witch/healer). She then turns the goddess form into a symbol of bodily liberation and psychedelic empowerment. I wouldn't say she is doing that consciously; she is just experiencing the results and feelings of an Avon-witch-doctor makeover. In *MindPlace ThoughtStream* she discovers and eats Activia to the tune of k.d. lang's *Constant Craving* in a wooden shack covered in goddess effigies...isn't that feminist? Lol. Seriously, though, this experience and the Activia commercial with Shakira do lead her to rip the waist trainer from her belly and channel Jill Bolte Taylor's really incredible TED Talk.

Is eating yogurt somehow inherently feminist?

Ha! No, not really, although perhaps as a folk medicine. Years ago, a friend told me about how she told her doctor that she was eating yogurt in order to cure her yeast infection. He condescendingly jeered, "Where did you hear about that, some women's magazine?"

EW. I guess myths and stereotypes get perpetuated in equal proportion? Speaking of repetition, the recurring motifs in your videos often leave the viewer with the sense that everything is connected. Cynthia is often in her bathrobe while dreaming; floating in outer space; dealing with, or at least referencing her cat; getting her feet massaged; or pressing buttons in an appliance that will make an invisible function turn on.

Yes! That, for me, is the place where Cynthia gains agency or happiness: making connections. In *Whispering Pines 9*, she was really unhappy to hear that the pot she'd brought to the antiques roadshow was only worth 20 to 30 dollars because it was a modern foot-massage bath and not an authentic Zuni pot. She is legless and can't use the foot-massage bath, but after the pieces of her broken body are reassembled at home, she decides to fill this foot bath with water and is rewarded with a new set of legs. So her journey to gain money becomes a healing pilgrimage. In *Whispering Pines 7*, Cynthia's Bioré nose-pore strip becomes a sphinx singing, "Now that I'm a woman, everything is strange." Then the Sphinx's nose-pore strip turns into a fortune-cookie-style message from a self-help book:

"Your whole body, from wingtip to wingtip, is nothing more than your thought itself, in a form you can see. Break the chains of your thought and you break the chains of your body too."

What does that quote mean to you? Is it supposed to make sense?

Sort of. The quote is taken from Richard Bach's self-help bestseller *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* where a seagull discovers he can fly to new heights by freeing his mind; so in that context it makes sense. But removed from the original story, the combined imagery of breaking the chains of a thought and imagining my body from wingtip to wingtip makes me chuckle, and I have the feeling that there is something important to learn from that amused confusion.

What else has your work taught you?

That you can address serious issues without taking yourself too seriously.

Absurdity is definitely a constant in your work. What's changed?

An increase in complexity, which is mostly challenging myself to learn new technologies and tricks. How can I make a video performance look like it's interactive when it's actually just pre-choreographed? How can I replicate the mechanical unfolding of an 18th century Roentgen's writing desk with a green screen and 2D animation?

Working with composer Nick Hallett opened up the opportunity to expand the budget and scale of the video performances, but the budget for making the videos has not changed very much. I transitioned from SD to HD in 2009 and 2010, and still use the same HDV camera I started with. I don't spend very much money on production and do most everything myself.

This is your largest show to date. If this is a portrait of you, what do you most hope people will remember?

I hope it will give other people ideas for creative production. A lot of my best art and film experiences include an underlying free-associative stream of thought that has nothing to do with the piece I'm looking at, but is somehow triggered by it. Otherwise I hope they will remember creative ways to channel neuroses, body issues, shallow desires, embarrassing predilections, or bad taste.

Paddy Johnson is the Founding Editor of Art F City. In addition to her work on the blog, she has been published in *New York Magazine*, *The New York Times* and *The Economist*, among others. Paddy lectures widely about art and the Internet at venues including Yale University and the Whitney Independent Study Program. In 2008, she served on the board of the Rockefeller Foundation New Media Fellowships and became the first blogger to earn a Creative Capital Arts Writers grant from the Creative Capital Foundation.

MORE THAN MY PHYSICAL BODY: SHANA MOULTON'S HEALING OBJECTS

BY KATHERINE PILL, CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG

Shana Moulton is a video and performance artist who, through her alter ego Cynthia, creates humorous yet earnest explorations of New Age self-improvement methods. Demonstrating a finely-honed yet low-tech aesthetic featuring masking and green screen techniques, pastel colors, and a cast of home décor objects, Moulton examines the commercialism of wellness therapies and products, which are worth consideration in our age of quick-fixes and online searches.

The exhibition title *Journeys Out of the Body* references Robert Monroe's 1971 publication of the same name. His interest and research in altered consciousness led to the founding of The Monroe Institute, still in operation today, with the mission to "further the experience and exploration of consciousness, expand awareness and discovery of self." Moulton's Cynthia might seem a perfect candidate for a Monroe retreat, as she is in a perpetual state of searching—perhaps yearning—for self-betterment.

The Gateway Voyage® Affirmation begins each exercise at The Monroe Institute: "I am more than my physical body. Because I am more than physical matter, I can perceive that which is greater than the physical world." In *Whispering Pines 4* (2007), Cynthia listens to a similar chant: "I am more than my physical body. I am endless, limitless, unbounded, unrestrained and unrestricted. I am free to access the infinite, open to my true dynamic nature, constantly changing and shifting, continually adapting, evolving, perpetually expanding and transcending." Cynthia is incessantly searching. Her malleability is integral to the *Whispering Pines* series and her journeys. She transforms constantly (parts of her body disappear and reappear regularly in the videos), but still yearns for improvement. In Moulton's video *MindPlace ThoughtStream* (2014), k.d. lang's 1992 hit *Constant Craving* plays both backwards and forwards, driving home the unending cycle of desire.

Objects, the things she owns, are key to Cynthia's transformations. Philosopher Bruno Latour has argued that objects become almost invisible in daily life, as their mediation of social relations is rarely acknowledged¹. Much has been debated about subject-object relationships in recent years, most notably through Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), a philosophical term coined by Levi Bryant in 2010, building upon Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy developed in his 1999 dissertation. Essentially, OOO argues that objects exist independent of human perception—the human subject is not privileged over the object, and that everything exists equally.

How OOO fits into contemporary art debates over relational aesthetics² and the paramount importance of the viewer is complicated. Art historian and critic Michael Newman wrote a rebuttal to Harman's object-oriented philosophy as it pertains to art³ and disagrees generally with the deprivileging of the human subject. There is benefit, however, in increased study of objects: "We are [...] living through a time when, for all sorts of reasons, including climate change giving rise to the concept of an 'anthropocene' epoch, economic crisis and the emergence of post digital technologies (the Internet of things, 3D printers), we need to think more about objects, what they are and how we relate to them."⁴ Throughout the narratives of Moulton's videos, there are ample opportunities to see larger connections between our bodies, our environment, and the objects that mediate our everyday lives.

Indeed, the world of Cynthia is rife with objects, and they take on a rarely seen importance. Items are scattered throughout her home—on shelves, hidden in drawers and cabinets—and range from 3D Magic Eye posters to sand art to facial rollers. At times these objects become appendages to Cynthia (notice her legs disappear in *Whispering Pines 9*, 2009, as soon as she picks up her walking stick; or the pot that is created from her flesh in *The Galactic Pot Healer*, 2010), or portals to new spaces. She typically discovers new items through mass media including *Health and Prevention* magazines (as seen in *Repetitive Stress Injuries*, 2008), the Internet, and television commercials. As Maeve Connolly writes, "Television is more than a mere window onto the world for Cynthia; it is a source of advice and guidance, a mirror image to be emulated and a portal through which she can literally travel to other realms."⁵

Television commercials in particular are of interest to Moulton: "Advertising was always very attractive to me, and it's meant to be attractive. Before I can remember, my mom said that I'd run out while they were watching TV, watch the ads, and then go back to doing my own thing during the television show. The ads in the videos are a platform for exactly what they're trying to do: offer the ability to change your life, or change your identity, or live the dream."⁶ With the promise of a better, more comfortable life, Cynthia tends to view commercials as gospel. In *MindPlace ThoughtStream* (2014) for instance, she delights in an Activia yogurt commercial featuring pop singer Shakira, dancing and reveling in its promise to cure her stomach ailments.

Logos also figure prominently in Moulton's work, particularly those that are associated with women's health products. Moulton culls the abstracted female body so often used for merchandising (Oil of Olay, for instance) into an impressive collection which highlights the pervasive image of the sanitized, curvy female body in mass media. In *Repetitive Stress Injuries*, we see Cynthia on the table of an anatomical theater, her organs removed and replaced by these logos. Thomas Beard writes, "The practice of appropriating and reconfiguring images that depict socially constructed gender norms or ideals has long been a prominent concern within feminist art, but Moulton raises a different set of questions by way of playful repetition. Whether this corporate icon of the wavy lady is insidious or innocuous, one can't help but wonder what its ubiquity says about the culture whose focus groups approve it."⁷ Moulton is never explicitly critical of wellness therapies and products. Certainly a healthy dose of skepticism accompanies this work, but we never see Cynthia give up on the hope of a better life.

Journeys Out of the Body highlights human physicality, but also alternate realms. A sense of magic permeates Moulton's work, as well as a hopefulness that suggests no one is alone in their quest for health and happiness.

Shana Moulton (American, b. 1976) earned her BA from University of California, Berkeley, in art and anthropology and her MFA from Carnegie Mellon University. She has been an artist-in-residence at the LMCC Workspace Program, New York; Smack Mellon, New York; Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine; and The Sommerakademie in Berne, Switzerland. Moulton has exhibited or performed at De Appel, Amsterdam; Migros Museum, Zürich; Museum of Modern Art, New York; The New Museum, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Wiels Center for Contemporary Art, Brussels; and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; among others.



¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 79.

² French curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term Relational Aesthetics in 1996 and developed its theory in his 1998 book of the same name. In it, he describes it as "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space."

³ Graham Harman, "Art Without Relations," *Art Review*, September 2014.

⁴ Michael Newman, "Relations Without Relations: A Response to Graham Harman," *Art Review*, October 2014.

⁵ Maeve Connolly, "Televsual Objects: Props, Relics and Prosthetics," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Summer 2013, 71.

⁶ Bean Gilsdorf, "Shana Moulton," *BOMB Magazine* (online), 30 November 2015.

⁷ Thomas Beard, "Now That I'm a Woman, Everything is Strange," *Deterioration, They Said* (ex. cat.), 2009, Zürich: Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 58.



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Front Cover: Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 9* (video still), 2009
Back Cover: Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 4* (video still), 2007