

Clara Hernanz, *Artist Shana Moulton on creating a surreal, wellness-obsessed alter-ego*,
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Artist Shana Moulton on creating a surreal, wellness-obsessed alter-ego

Using video, opera, and performance, the artist and professor uses ‘Cynthia’ as a means to channel contemporary anxieties

Like most of us navigating our culture’s obsession with wellness and self-improvement, Cynthia is a woman looking to heal. Alone, mostly at home, she has tried everything: self-help books and soothing knick-knacks, palm reading, and sugar-free drinks, complicated skincare routines, pilates. One minute she is smothering her face in peanut butter to “attract and feed birds”, the next, she turns to “magic globe relaxation”, a massage technique that looks like patting plasma-filled light bulbs on your cheeks.

Shana Moulton’s long-time fictional character is desperate for meaning and spirituality, so it’s fitting that she’s being shown in a London chapel, a former Methodist space that is now home to the Zabłudowicz Collection. In this new instalment, Cynthia is trapped in a pink tower that rises over six metres and displays, through different videos and sounds, bold new steps towards self-actualisation.

Do these rituals bring any form of relief? The artist is not quite sure. Cynthia’s anxiety briefly melts away when soaked in bubble baths and personal sauna tents, or when she ascends a ladder, like Jack climbs his beanstalk, into an ecstatic, one-woman rave. Most of the time though, efforts to improve herself only send her into a spiral of self-doubt.

“We’re both in this loop,” Moulton says, jokingly. Unlike other artists, she won’t try to conceal the similarities between herself and her alter ego: they are both treading water, but at least they are doing it together. “I do hope we’ll figure our way out of that eventually!”

Moulton’s relationship with Cynthia is a lot like meme culture. Essentially, the artist uses her shapeshifting character to explore her fears and endlessly mock them. At the same time, Cynthia’s saturated world reveals a lot about our own. “I am not very direct about (politics) because I get lost in the semantics or knowing exactly what I want to say about those issues,” Moulton explains. Yet, in Cynthia’s manic search for health and happiness, it is easy to see oneself, tumbling forward and keeping up with an accelerating society that might leave you behind.

“My work with Cynthia is the result of modern society and trying to be honest about how contemporary society is affecting my psyche and my behaviour and hopefully that’s political, just trying to show that.”

We caught up with the artist to talk about “making art about what you know”, and how to cope with loops of anxiety-inducing ideals and failures.

How would you describe your work to someone new?

Shana Moulton: If I had to describe it in a couple of words I would say “home decor” and “spirituality”. But if I had to use more words... I haven’t got my simple spiel yet and I should! It’s video art and performance art. The body of work I’ve been making since I was a student always

makes use of an alter ego and it's all under the title "Whispering Pines" which is the mobile home park I grew up in.

Who is Cynthia?

Shana Moulton: Cynthia started out as me imagining what kind of person would need to wear these dresses I was making as a student. The dresses were embedded with various medical devices. One was a neck brace dress. I had a walker dress. A haemorrhoid pillow dress. (Cynthia) was this heightened state of anxiety or a caricature of discomfort and pain whether it was psychological or physical. She became a combination of myself and other female relatives, but she doesn't really have specific biographical details. She often gets described as a housewife, but I don't know if she's married. I'm not married! She is described as an agoraphobe... I don't know about that! She is always depicted in her home alone. What her story is about is what I personally think about or do when I'm alone at home wondering how to escape reality, or defy ageing, or death. Maybe she has a social life but it's not part of that narrative!

I spend so much time at home alone! I am sort of trapped by work or laziness or whatever it is. A lot of the narratives end in transcendence by being outside or being in nature. But yeah, I'm definitely a hypochondriac! That's for sure. But maybe in a way, a lot of us are worried about dying... Who isn't?

How do you find showing work here compared to the US?

Shana Moulton: I feel like I've ended up showing more work in Europe in general, and the UK, than the US for some reason. It could be just because I studied in Amsterdam for two years and my closest artist friends ended up being from here. Or, it could also be that my work is too American and it somehow is more exotic and interesting outside of the US.

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What do you mean?

Shana Moulton: When I was starting out I was determined to only reference pop culture and what I knew from growing up than making art about art. So, in the beginning, it was rooted in media and nostalgia for a lot of pop culture references. And when I went to Amsterdam I had a studio visit with an American artist called Martha Colburn and she said if I wanted to be successful I had to reference Art History. The first time was just tongue-in-cheek, and I just threw this new age-looking Mondrian painting into this video, and then suddenly all of my tutors really liked it. "Oh, we get your work now!"

You said you take inspiration from your life. How important is your personal experience? Could you make work that isn't about the self, or specifically yourself?

Shana Moulton: Well, the thing that I know the most is myself. Or the thing I know the best. I would feel uncomfortable making work from another person's perspective besides really close relatives. When I was in undergrad, I had a really great performance professor that said, "make work about what you know". That really stuck with me and I've just found it generative to use myself as a sort of frame for making work. I hope sometimes it's touching on current things or more universal things.

Whispering Pines has been going for 17 years. When you look at earlier work and what you're doing now, what differences do you see?

Shana Moulton: (Whispering Pines) started out as this caricature of what I thought this alter ego was. It was maybe a little more ironic in the first place, a little more funny, more light-hearted. And then I began to incorporate what felt to me like heavier aspects. Even if they were in this multi-coloured, playful world, it was still becoming more and more about isolation and death. The work became more autobiographical and slightly heavier. But also maybe more open-ended. Also, Cynthia is ageing! That's one benefit of working with the same alter ego with so long, the theme of age becomes really obvious.

When did you start making video art? Was there a moment when you realised you could use film for more than documenting your performances?

Shana Moulton: Yes! I totally had a moment when I realised what I could do with collage and special effects. It became more than documentation because if I had this idea of doing a portal or green screening, I had to set the camera, and the lighting, and consider those things more carefully. That's when I learned basic Adobe After Effects and realised anything was possible, even if it wasn't perfect looking or seamless, I could still make something happen. The way I've been working between performance and video has sort of fed off each other. I learn from one way of working and end up applying that to the other.

Can we talk about the new commission? What inspired you to build a tower?

Shana Moulton: Yes. Saint Barbara! She is a Christian Saint. I was googling something and I knew I wanted to make work about a tower. I found a book called something like The Sacred Spirituality of Saint Barbara. I saw that her story is related to a tower and she is a precedent for Rapunzel and other women trapped in towers. She is perhaps the first version of that! I also had just moved to Santa Barbara so I got excited about that connection.

Saint Barbara was trapped in a tower by her pagan father but she had this Christian revelation and wanted three windows in her tower for the trinity. And her father was really mad so he ended up cutting her head off. There's also a connection to sleeping beauty and the idea that she finds the loom up in the tower and pricks her finger.

I wanted to make something that had height. I was thinking of a cat tower, but I'm just not really an architect and I couldn't design that. I had this Montessori building block set called "the Pink Tower" and we ended up basing it on this.

I was reading about the madwoman in the attic figure and the idea that a female character is traditionally described as either an "angel in the house" or a "madwoman in the attic", a monster... Is Cynthia any of those two?

Shana Moulton: Could Cynthia be both? Could she take ownership of those ideas? Maybe she is not trapped in the tower, maybe she just wants to be there. Maybe she just doesn't want to be around anyone else. I tried to make it a domestic scene inside this tower but it became more office-like, just because of the furniture I have in my studio, like this really awesome ergonomic desk. She is in an office-type scenario in her tower. And she's researching something. So she is in an ivory tower, a tower of learning! That's all I will say about that...

I have this theme of climbing; going up and going down. It's part of Whispering Pines 10, ascending the giant sequoia. In Whispering Pines 8, this ladder grows out of a flower arrangement and I take it up through this attic portal into a rave. There's a lot of that in the work. Going up the tower in this ergonomic standing desk!

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It’s aspirational! Cynthia develops many different strategies to cope with anxiety, whether that’s to do with death, everyday life, caring for the environment... Would you say these activities make Cynthia free?

Shana Moulton: I don’t know! I do think there is something in aspiring towards some sort of understanding of the world and better physical health, even beauty. Those things are all aligned for me, for better or worse. Even if I don’t achieve those things, there’s something positive about the struggle to keep trying. At the same time, I have a very deep fear of this idea of being caught in a loop. Having done some psychedelics in the past, the worst thing about them was getting caught in a mental loop. There’s the fear of being caught in a spiritual loop too. Cynthia and I are sort of caught in that loop and I do hope we’ll figure our way out of that eventually! I always film myself or Cynthia walking in labyrinths. They’re peaceful but you don’t go anywhere.

Would you say Cynthia’s obsession is reflective of a wider culture?

Shana Moulton: I think about it in light of this idea of aspiring to be a rich person. In the US, we’ve elected an insane person basically because he is rich and that’s something that people aspire to. It’s also why we watch soap operas. Or at least we did. One of my favourite TV shows was Santa Barbara, which is just about these very dramatic rich people. Although for Cynthia, it is not so much about being rich. It’s more about solving the problems of the universe or even, trying to figure out what’s happening in her reality because she’s confused by a lot of it.

For you as an artist, is humour the only way of freeing yourself from anxiety?

Shana Moulton: Oh! I think you answered the question! That’s such a great way to put it. When you said “freedom” that’s when I thought of the loop. I keep going between Cynthia, and then, my use of Cynthia, and it’s hard for me not to confuse those two things. But both myself and Cynthia are stuck in a loop. At the same time, Cynthia has been very liberating for me as an artist because it’s allowed me to tackle any idea through her. Yeah, humour is my personal way of dealing with the anxiety of life! And Cynthia doesn’t really get to do that. She’s not necessarily laughing.

Shana Moulton runs at London’s Zabłudowicz Collection from 12 September – 15 December 2019