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‘Ye Olde Tchotchke Shoppe’

by Mara Hoberman

Shana Moulton’s first Parisian solo show brings a hearty dose of the California-born, NYC-based artist’s signature new age kitsch aesthetic to the heady gallery scene in Belleville. Known for campy videos and live performances featuring her alter ego Cynthia—a Sky Mall-reading, Antiques Roadshow-watching hypochondriac who sports patterned muumuus, orthopedic sneakers, and an unflattering bobbed wig—Moulton here presents a video relating Cynthia’s latest escapade accompanied by sculptural “artifacts” from her surreal adventures.

*A Unique Boutique*, 2013, is a nine-minute video shot in a gift shop near Moulton’s hometown of Oakhurst, CA, where the artist herself was once employed. Teeming with tchotchkes—candles, wind chimes, key chains, unidentifiable baubles of all shapes and sizes as well as vaguely spiritual sundries like dream-catchers, crystals, and incense burners—this boutique would seem to be the genesis of Moulton’s visual language. Fittingly, it is also where Cynthia shops.

Typical of Moulton’s narrative videos, Cynthia’s bizarre retail adventure in *A Unique Boutique* leads to hallucinations, a spiritual awakening (aptly set to Enigma’s 90s hit single “The Return to Innocence”) and, of course, plenty of tacky clothes and decorative schlock. While trying on a turquoise and purple striped jacket, Cynthia gazes at her reflection in the mirror and sees her own face morph into a series of Hollywood beauties—from sophisticated Diane Lane, to sultry Angelina Jolie, to cute Reese Witherspoon. When a clay pot with an ostensible tribal motif catches Cynthia’s eye she begins to levitate and shrink, eventually floating right inside vessel like a gawky Barbara Eden entering her *I Dream of Jeannie* bottle. Ultimately, however, it is a small enigmatic trinket that Cynthia brings up to the register. Arriving home with her purchase—a fist-size hexagon of bubble-wrap dangling from a strand of beads—she begins to burst the air pockets one at a time. As each bubble pops, a new object (each one tackier than the last) magically appears on her apartment’s bare shelves. Pop: a pink flamingo radio! Pop: a picture frame with a photo of a goldfish! Pop: an anthropomorphic sun and moon alarm clock!

Moulton’s amateurish filmic style—her editing and special effects techniques are intentionally clumsy—is well suited to her emphatically un-slick narratives and theatrics. Although the videos are skillfully made using sophisticated technology, there is a crudeness that makes Moulton’s digital art refreshingly comic and approachable. This is partially because she employs basic visual tricks that have delighted audiences since the dawn of cinema: stop-motion, dissolves, and superimposition. Instead of updating to seamless digital manipulations, however, Moulton calls attention to gimmicky special effects in a sort of homage to cheesy TV shows from *Bewitched* to *Out of this World*.

The installation of sculptural objects in the gallery’s front room transposes Cynthia’s fictive domain into the real world. A pair of walking canes, each wrapped with multicolor yarn and adorned with borderline-creepy personal items such as a toe separator and pill divider (*EL’AMARA* = *Star Gate*, 2013, and *O’SHANA* = *Star Companion*, 2013), are, indeed, props from an earlier video. Moulton’s obsession with aging, solitude, and self-help therapeutics is epitomized by a “Sock Aid,” which forms the basis for the wall hanging *MOHA;RA* = *Pure Thoughts*, 2013. But perhaps the most alarming reference to the losing battle between vibrant youth and decrepitude is a bright blue dress whose clingy fabric accentuates the perfect bust of its display mannequin, but whose bottom skirt flairs out to accommodate a walker. Channeling the outrageous costumes from Jack Smith’s campy films and performances from the 1960s and 70s—the conical bra worn by his stuffed penguin co-star, Penguina, comes to mind—Moulton’s fashions and props provide a tactile link to an alternate universe where fantasies and phobias are explored beyond real-world conventions of behavior and taste.