

INTERVIEW

Shana Moulton

The New York-based artist talks about character, the West Coast, process and slime

by Graham T. Beck

Shana Moulton is based in New York, USA. This year, she had a solo show at the John and June Allcott Gallery at the University of North Carolina, USA, and her work was included in the group shows 'Stage Presence' at SFMoMA, San Francisco, USA, and 'Campaign' at C24 Gallery, New York.

I had read that Cynthia, the surreal central character in Shana Moulton's long-running video and performance series 'Whispering Pines' (2002–ongoing), was intimately autobiographical; a kind of psychedelic self-portrait set up to explore living and ageing and believing in a world where prescription drugs, beauty products and spiritual principles all carry equal weight. Through ten instalments,

Moulton has danced, cried, laughed and green-screened Cynthia into a variety of anxiety-fuelled situations that operate with the logic of late-night infomercials, *The Mighty Boosh* (2004–07), *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and the more hallucinatory parts of *Fantasia* (1940). So when the time came to sit down with the California-born and New York-based artist, I was expecting some seriously astral vibes. There were a few, but mostly we spoke about character, the West Coast, her process and slime.

GRAHAM T. BECK

On the way over, I was wondering whether I would sit down with Shana, the artist, or Cynthia, the character. Is there a big difference?

SHANA MOULTON

I don't have to 'get into character' or anything. It's always there under the surface. I just have to go be alone, and I'm Cynthia.

GTB *Do you mean that when I leave, you'll become her?*

SM As soon as the door closes! No, not really. But it's me in the bathroom; it's me worried about ageing; it's me looking at a beauty magazine.

GTB *But it's turned up, right?*

SM I'm sure Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton are closer to the surface in Cynthia, but they're part of my normal life too. We share a brain. I don't even think of her as a character. It's just me. Getting into character is just getting into me.

GTB *So, are you a kind of video star then? Have you created a celebrity for yourself?*

SM As a kid, I always wanted to be the one in a picture in the local paper, so maybe that's part of it, but I didn't end up starring in the videos because I consciously wanted to. It was more practical. When I started, I had no idea how to direct anyone but myself.

GTB *For a native Californian, whose work draws on a landscape and a kind of plastic-fantastic kitsch that's so heavily informed by life on the West Coast, it seems that you show far more in New York and Europe. Why do you think that is?*

SM I've been trying to figure that out. I want to have more shows in California. I was just there with my collaborator Nick Hallett doing our opera *Whispering Pines 10* [2010] at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of the exhibition 'Stage Presence' this year. Actually, that was my first non-DIY show in California. For a while, I thought it was just a by-product of going to grad school in Pittsburgh then in

Amsterdam and, later, of living in New York, but someone else was saying to me that maybe it was too close: that California doesn't need the kind of work I do because what I make is always going on there. Or that in Europe I can be the crazy Californian or American who fits in by sticking out.

GTB *When Whispering Pines 10 premiered at the Kitchen in New York, I remember reading reviews that positioned it as a kind of environmentalist art work. Certainly, there are environmentalist components that feature prominently in the visual language as well as in the plot – redwood trees; the anti-logging activist Julia 'Butterfly' Hill – but it seems pretty far from being environmentalist with a capital 'E'.*

SM I'd love for my work to have an environmental impact or a tangible effect on the way people think, but I don't want to be explicit about any statement.

GTB *Why not?*

SM For me, it's not magical. There's nothing magical about being direct.

GTB *Do you have a routine for conjuring magic?*

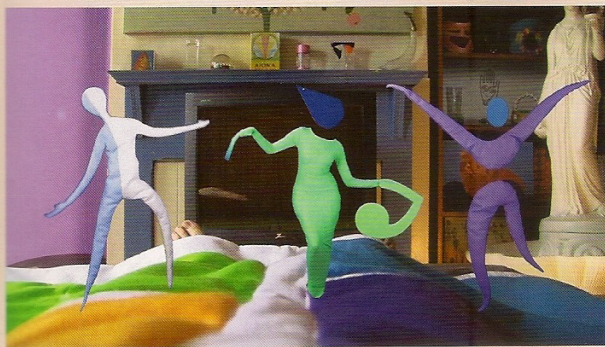
SM I can't just work one hour out of the day. I need to watch television for 10 hours and go to my parents' house. I have to get in the zone. I have to have a big pot of ideas floating around until I have to produce.

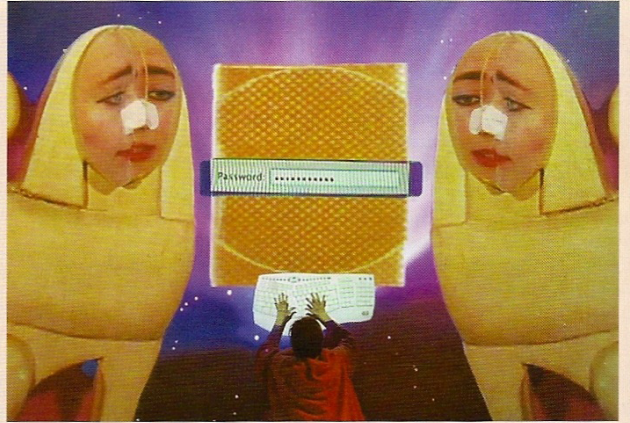
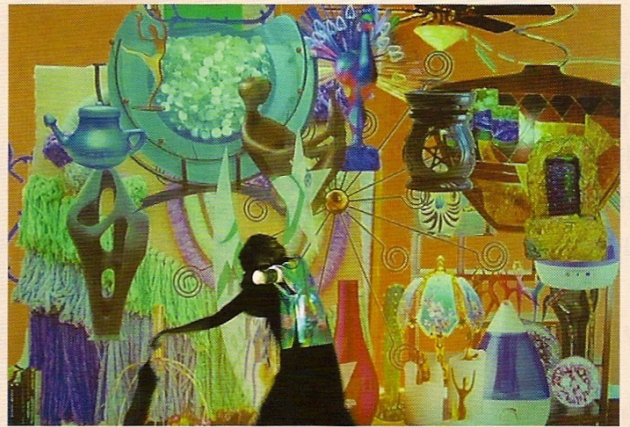
GTB *You mentioned Keaton and Chaplin earlier. Can you talk a bit about the role of comedy in 'Whispering Pines'?*

SM Doing these performances and videos is the most embarrassing thing ever. I mean, performance art is the funniest thing. I can't believe it when performance art is really serious. Don't get me wrong. I love performance art, and I take it seriously, but there's this part of it that you have to laugh at. That's why I love it so much when performance art comes up on television. There's a *Seinfeld* episode in which George Costanza dates a performance artist, and he gets covered in gunk. It's the ultimate cliché, but it's also really cathartic and powerful to cover yourself in slime. I do it in my work. You have to embrace it and laugh at it.

1 & 2
Restless Legs Syndrome,
2012, video stills

3
Shana Moulton and
Nick Hallett, *Whispering Pines 10*,
2010, from the
series 'Whispering Pines'
(2002–ongoing),
performance documentation,
SFMOMA, 2012





3