

Sarah Hromack, *The Horrors of Being a Middle Age Woman in a Capitalist Society*,
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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.



Installation view of Shana Moulton: *Meta/Physical Therapy* (photo by Sarah Hromack/Hyperallergic)

Much as one might visit a prospective apartment at various hours of the day to gauge the quality of light, I staked out Shana Moulton's solo exhibition *Meta/Physical Therapy* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to understand its audience.

I first encountered Moulton's semi-autobiographical protagonist, Cynthia, about 15 years ago via her cult-hit video series *Whispering Pines* (2002–ongoing), of which this work is part. The first instantiations were characterized by a mystical, psychedelic flair that counters its heavier existential themes. Moulton's career has only moved upwards and outwards since these earliest screenings and performances. And yet, I had to work to forget Cynthia's history while sitting in the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio, the museum's black-box performance space, instead focusing my armchair anthropologist's eye on watching those around me observe the work. Retirees and international tourists drifting through for the afternoon, those seemingly in the know, my young son: All were, in a word, enraptured, as Cynthia made her MoMA debut. I can't recall the last time I saw a museum audience sit through a work's entire duration — here, around 15 minutes — not to mention more than once, and remarkably absent the company of their phones.



Installation view of *Shana Moulton: Meta/Physical Therapy* (photo by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy the Museum of Modern Art)

So, what does this say about Cynthia?

As *Meta/Physical Therapy* opens, Cynthia, resplendent in a floral housedress, receives a package: an Amazon box, that icon of American convenience culture. She struggles to find a place for its contents, a rather generic-looking teal-green ceramic vase, in an electric pastel-hued room — a full-scale, video projection-mapped theatrical set — filled with other kitschy, mass-market trinkets. Fitted with cheap, retail-style shelving, a snake plant, and a plush, amorphously shaped chaise, the room feels at once like a late-model gynecologist’s office and a new-age sex shop — a space whose aggressively soft design sensibility demands that one should simply relax, even as its purpose inspires anxiety. Cynthia steps off set for a moment and reappears wearing a sort of remote-controlled heating apparatus around her neck, one we can only assume she mail-ordered. With a push of a button, an office-style ergonomic laptop table appears, and she lounges on the chaise, frantically Googling “Where should I put my vase?” A streaming page of search results — an endless glut of content related to various ailments, menopause, and middle age — physically overwhelms her, giving way to the hallucinatory journey that follows.

The audience gasped and laughed in recognition as Cynthia performs an increasingly absurd set of physical rituals seemingly designed to glean insight into — and seize an emotional handle on — her position as a woman who recognizes her age as it is shockingly mirrored back to her by distinctly alienating capitalist forces: Cynthia digitally dissolves into thin air more than once throughout the piece. I was instantly reminded of Dara Birnbaum’s imploding woman in her ubiquitous 1978–79 piece “Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman” which is, incidentally, part of the museum’s permanent collection.

Crève-cœur



Installation view of Shana Moulton: *Meta/Physical Therapy* (photo by Sarah Hromack/Hyperallergic)

Sound plays a crucial role in Moulton's work: Audiences of a certain age will instantly recognize composer and longtime collaborator Nick Hallett's manipulation of the opening bars from Radiohead's Y2K synth anthem "Everything in Its Right Place" (2000), which he positions against Sarah McLachlan's shrilly yearning "Sweet Surrender" (1997) to both situate Cynthia in time — she and I probably shared a cigarette at the Lilith Fair — and suggest a more literal narrative arc in the search for pop-lyrical meaning. Everything does have a place as Cynthia, refusing to be waylaid by her own human condition, finally builds herself a shelf to house her vase. A small win.

Crèvecœur

Throughout the month of April, MoMA is presenting a series of activations of the Kravis Studio with Moulton and Hallett performing live — a return to IRL programming for Cynthia, who was last seen in New York in *Whispering Pines 10*, which was screened online by the New Museum in 2020. The pandemic's profound sense of collective fear and social alienation — not to mention that of the Internet — was nothing new for Cynthia. Years on, *Meta/Physical Therapy* is a celebration of the post-traumatic healing power of community, as Cynthia convenes with what is likely the largest, most wide-ranging, and ever-shifting public to encounter her in physical space. Cynthia remains as charming as ever, and Moulton's ultimate strength here, as a performer and an artist, lies in her ability to create the conditions for ritual engagement as viewers gather together, whether on demand or on the spot.





Installation view of Shana Moulton: *Meta/Physical Therapy* (photo by Jonathan Dorado, courtesy the Museum of Modern Art)

Shana Moulton: Meta/Physical Therapy continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through April 21. The exhibition was organized by Erica Papernik-Shimizu, Associate Curator, with May Makki, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance. Performances are produced by Lizzie Gorfaine, Associate Director and Producer, with Olivia Rousey, Assistant Performance Coordinator, Performance and Live Programs.