

Zsofi Valyi-Nagy, *Shana Moulton on Wellness Culture, Self-Soothing, and Middle Age, Art in America*, May 7, 2025



Shana Moulton in her Santa Barbara studio.
Photo Amanda Villarosa

Shana Moulton's studio at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she has chaired the art department since July 2024, is painted a saturated pastel green—a shade that is, in the artist's words, "just good enough a green to green screen with." The studio doubled as a set for the videos in "Meta/Physical Therapy," Moulton's exhibition last spring at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which centered around a video installation starring Moulton's semi-autobiographical alter ego, Cynthia, a middle-aged white hypochondriac with an unfortunate bob and a forlorn look in her eyes. Stepping in to Moulton's studio is like entering a New Age physical therapy office, with its modular furniture, jewel-toned gadgets, and eccentric array of objects easily at home in a roadside crystal shop or megamall gadget store.

Moulton's objects are more than props. They "take on a life of their own," she told *Art21* in 2014. Her breakthrough video series "Whispering Pines" (2002–18), a 10-part lo-fi monodrama that screened in the artist's retrospective last fall at the Buffalo Institute for Contemporary Art, introduced Cynthia as she attempts to self-soothe by coveting product after product, from a miniature fountain to an Avon reflexology glove. The objects in Cynthia's home are animated in an Adobe After Effects fever dream, collapsing her digital and analog worlds. Named after the Oakhurst, California, senior citizen mobile home park where Moulton grew up, "Whispering Pines" marries 1980s kitsch and New Age aesthetics. A hemorrhoid pillow sewn into a lilac dress contains a portal to another world, and the art of floral arrangement, set to an instrumental Enya cover, becomes an alchemical act. Twenty years after the birth of Cynthia, Moulton—now middle-aged herself—continues to embody this character to explore products and exercises promising pain relief, most recently in a series of performances created in collaboration with composer Nick Hallett.

On an uncharacteristically rainy Saturday in Santa Barbara this past November, Moulton showed off some of her beloved gadgets, and led me around her favorite buildings on the same Super Handy scooter that Cynthia used to glide around the stage in “Meta/Physical Therapy.” Below, she discusses hypochondria, hospital art, and the absurdity of **wellness** consumerism.

Zsofi Valyi-Nagy: You have such an incredible collection of objects. Which one is your favorite right now?

Shana Moulton: This Visible Woman toy doll that I got as a 5-year-old. I used this in one of my first performances as an undergrad at Berkeley, in 1998. It comes with organs: You paint them and you put her body together. In that performance, I filled the doll with glittery, rainbow fishing lure worms that my dad used to hide around the house. Then I removed the worms, in a kind of surgery, one by one.



Shana Moulton in her Santa Barbara studio.

Photo Amanda Villarosa

My professor, Kevin Radley, who was such a big influence on me, helped me film it, and we projected a close-up of that over me. That was actually my first projection performance. Much later, I did a performance at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) when I first moved to New York, and I filmed the removal of the actual organs. I projected the sequence over my body and I sang the song from *The Last Unicorn*, “Now that I’m a woman, everything is strange.”

Do you mind handing me that pyramid [*pointing*]? I’ve been collecting examples of organite, which is based on Dr. Wilhelm Reich’s orgone energy. Organite is meant to balance energy or protect you from negative frequencies. It’s made of metal, usually copper, and crystals, suspended in resin. I’m trying to make my own.

ZSVN: What's your relationship to this energetic shield stuff?



SM: I think there's always more to what's going on than we know, or can know. I don't know how to use crystals, and I haven't studied them, but I'm sure there's something to them, and I feel the same with orgonite.

ZSVN: Growing up in California, did you have a lot of exposure to New Age culture?

SM: Sort of. I grew up in the Bible Belt of California, but I started to seek those things out on my own in the public library before there was the internet. When I went to college at Berkeley in the '90s, that's when I really encountered it. My roommate was into something that I think was called the Mother Wave, and she met someone who spoke to dolphins (they also claimed to be in the FBI). And of course, we went to Burning Man three times in a row.

ZSVN: Was there an aversion to mysticism in the community where you grew up?

SM: I would say anything outside of Christianity was considered satanic, and there just wasn't a lot of awareness of other spiritualities. Luckily, my parents were not religious and I wasn't a part of that. And my dad's brother was an astrologer.

ZSVN: Is that Chuck Moulton, who did the natal chart in the Bio section of your website?

SM: Yeah, when I was born, he did my chart. He passed away when I was a sophomore in college, after going into a coma. After that, I got to know more about his life as a poet and astrologer through his friends in Fresno.

ZSVN: These spinal decompression devices are so beautiful. What are you planning to use them for?

SM: Whenever I have a budget, it's also an excuse to buy things that I would use anyway, so I thought these could help my head and neck pain. Not that I'm good about using them.

ZSVN: In your Art21 video, you talk about your hypochondria and about always asking yourself "do I really have this?" That resonated with me, because even though I have a diagnosis, I sometimes still don't believe it myself. I've gaslit myself into thinking that I tricked my doctor into diagnosing me, because the diagnostic process for hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS) is so subjective. I've had so many experiences of misdiagnosis and medical gaslighting, but the experiences have been generative for my art practice.

SM: Exactly. Someone just asked me, how are you making work with this limitation? But actually, it's creative fodder. I didn't really have a choice, I had to make it a part of the work, because it's a performance, and it's about the body.

ZSVN: Can I ask where the neck braces came from that Cynthia wears in *Whispering Pines*? I love how they're embellished and match her dresses. Did you have to wear the neck brace, or was that just part of the character?

SM: I began my series "Medical Dresses" (2001–02)—dresses with medical devices sewn into them—in grad school. I think the neck braces were gifts, but the walker and blood pressure tester were my grandparents'. The hemorrhoid pillow was a thrift store find. At the time, weirdly, I was thinking about bipedalism, because I studied physical anthropology in college, and how strange and difficult it is for us to be bipedal. I was thinking about whether bipedalism was related to consciousness and about gravity and frailty. I was looking at Rebecca Horn and other artists who were extending the body: Matthew Barney and Hussein Chalayan, the fashion designer who did those great coffee table dresses.



Moulton modeling Hemorrhoid Pillow Dress from her series "Medical Dresses," 2001–02.

Photos Adam Davies



I stopped using those dresses

after a few years, because, at a certain point, it felt like it wasn't my territory. Although the medical devices were things that I was likely to use at some point in my life, I didn't yet have personal experience with them. I still want to go back to costume and body appendages, especially now that it *is* becoming personal. I've had this sock aid forever—I love its form, which is such a mystery—and now, I could really use it, because with my hip pain, putting on socks and shoes is one of the hardest things for me. And if I do wind up getting a hip replacement, I'll be wearing this hip abductor pillow that I love. Some of these things that I collected are weirdly becoming relevant.

ZSVN: Do you think growing up in a senior citizen community had an impact on your work?

SM: Part of it was going to the hospital for my uncle and then visiting my grandparents in the hospital as they aged, and when they were ill at home. Growing up in the senior park, I was really paranoid that my parents would get sick because they were slightly older than my classmates' parents. Back then, my dad was the kind of person who would accidentally cut himself and we'd be like, "Dad, there's blood all over you!" And he'd be like, "Oh, I didn't notice!" So maybe my sense of hypochondria comes from my dad thinking I was overreacting. If I got a scrape on my knee, I'd walk around with a limp. I was really careful because I didn't want to get hurt as a kid. I don't like pain.

ZSVN: I can relate to that, taking the smallest wounds or symptoms so seriously and recovering from a cold like it's my job.

SM: I mean, with the internet, it's such a trip to be able to look up symptoms. It's terrifying, it's empowering, it's self-sabotage in some cases, and it's anxiety producing.

ZSVN: In *Whispering Pines 4* (2007), Cynthia is typing on her desktop computer, logging her symptoms in her diary. But the physical act of looking up carpal tunnel on the internet is exacerbating her carpal tunnel. It reminded me of spending hours scrolling on my phone for the gadget that's going to cure my neck pain, and in that time, only making the pain worse. You capture that infinite scroll in "Meta/Physical Therapy" as well—the web browser takes on a life of its own, leaking into the physical realm and washing over Cynthia.



SM: What a pleasure it is to seek out these things that might solve or soothe whatever ails us. I grew up on Harriet Carter and Lillian Vernon catalogs, which were like proto–Sky Mall. I had all the gadgets, including things that you might apply to your body; those were the things I was looking at as a kid. But now it's endless. There are so many things, and a lot of them are marketed through the algorithm. Now I don't even have to look for them; they just come to me. I recently got this overpriced gadget called Sensate. It stimulates your vagus nerve in time with meditation music from an app. But of course, to access all the soundscapes, you have to pay \$50 a year on top of the \$300 gadget. I rationalized the purchase by thinking I would use it in work, but I just use it to relax.

ZSVN: I love how you use arts grants to buy objects that are probably FSA eligible. I always get ads for wellness start-ups, which remind me of the Avon lady/healer in *Whispering Pines 4* (2007) and the multilevel marketing scheme that is happening there. What do you make of this subculture that you encountered in the '90s entering the mainstream?

SM: In college, my roommate spent the money to do Transcendental Meditation (TM), and I remember being skeptical of that at the time. Years later, I finally listened to so much of David Lynch talking about TM that I was like, OK, now I can afford it, so I'm going to try it. I do think meditation is the answer to a lot, but the rigorous 20 minutes twice a day just didn't work for me. You had to keep buying things that felt Scientology-adjacent, so that eventually turned me off. I do feel like there is a lot of snake oil out there.

ZSVN: I'm curious about your relationship to Cynthia. Does it feel different to explore aspects of yourself that you're maybe a little ashamed of, such as your hypochondriacal tendencies, through a character?

SM: It does. Some of Cynthia's experiences were intertwined with issues my mom was having. More recently, they relate to my hip issues and some of the embarrassing aspects of that. It took me a while to get the confidence to ride this scooter around campus. Sometimes I use a cane and I think back to my grandma, who had arthritis and yet would never touch any of these things. I sometimes feel like I'm weaker than her. I think the MoMA piece was maybe a way to process that shame.

I'm also poking fun at my demographic to an extent, and it seems like it's been gentle enough that people can relate. Humor is such an important strategy for navigating trauma and illness and tragedy.

"Whispering Pines" also came out of poking fun at the art world, at the idea of high and low art. But now it's a totally different art world.

Cynthia is loosely based on my experience of looking in the mirror and having existential dread, or working on improving myself, and trying to take that all less seriously. But she's not an everyperson—so many people don't have the privilege to just think about themselves for hours at a time.

ZSVN: That's true, but according to the Centers for Disease Control, one out of every four people will experience disability at some point in their life, at least when they age. Your work explores the aesthetics of aging; you find beauty and style in the senior aisle of the drugstore.

SM: I like things that are designed to soothe ill people. I mean, it's similar to things that are designed for babies, the pastels and the soft biomorphic shapes. Who doesn't like that?

If a hospital is designed well, I could spend all day there. I love a good hospital. The art they have in hospitals is usually really beautiful to me.

ZSVN: There's this self-help book that you reference in *Whispering Pines 5* (2005) called *The Feeling Good Handbook* (1989) by David D. Burns, MD. He talks about negative thoughts and their detrimental effects on the body. Cynthia is reading a chapter titled "You can change the way you feel." I'm fully behind the mind-body connection, but there's a toxic positivity to this language that makes you wonder if chronic pain and illness are your own fault.

SM: I've had that thought so many times. Having made work about something and then gotten the symptoms or the illness that it was connected to, I'm like, "Oh, my God, did I make that happen?"

My mom encountered a lot of that "mind over matter" attitude when she was sick. "Oh, you just have to have a good attitude and think positive," and "it's your emotions that have created this." Or "you just have to eat completely pure food"—to cure stage four cancer. It made me really upset when she got that kind of advice. I do think there are a lot of pollutants in what we eat, but I don't like this sense of shame that comes with not being perfect.

ZSVN: When I watched the very first video featuring Cynthia, *Whispering Pines 1* (2002), as she's walking into the grocery store in her hemorrhoid pillow dress and examining this can of beans, I identified so much with her feeling of self-pity, but also with her hope that this product might help her feel better. Every time I try something new—a new product or a new method—I'm so optimistic.

SM: Yeah, it's like a high. You get addicted to that feeling of hope.