



Museum of
Contemporary Art
SANTA BARBARA

Shana Moulton: The Invisible Seventh is the Mystic Column

Shana Moulton (b. 1976, Oakhurst, California, USA) works with video, installation, and performance to explore the anxiety, isolation, and mystical journeys of her alter-ego, Cynthia, as she traverses an evolving, yet cyclical loop of self-diagnosis and treatment. Moulton's video series *Whispering Pines*, originating in 2002 and named after the senior mobile home park run by her parents near Yosemite, follows Cynthia on surreal and uncanny adventures as she attempts to reconcile societal anxieties, while grappling with existential discomfort. Appropriating New Age therapies, personal wellness products, physical movement, and spiritual healing, Cynthia attempts transcendence, navigating the complex territory of self-excitation and self-care in her search for meaning.

Essentially a caricature wavering between gravity and humor, between critique and emphatic acquiescence, Cynthia embodies Moulton's quest for liberation from earthly suffering, which, in Cynthia's case, is inextricably tied to her physical body and psychological isolation. Staged within her domestic sphere, on top of sequoias, the mountains of northern California, and in the proximal cosmos, various dream-like backdrops act as projections of her inner landscape, affording insight into the state of her psyche. Interactions with anthropomorphic objects, gadgets imbued with magical qualities, soothing bubble baths accompanied by angelic song and harp music, and a variety of goofy movement techniques, offer moments of joy and diversion.

Whispering Pines 10, 2018, exhibited in MCASB's Norton Gallery, has been described as an eco-feminist Gesamtkunstwerk by composer Nick Hallet, Moulton's collaborator on this particular episode. Accompanied by an original musical score and libretto written by Hallett, who appears in the videos, along with vocalists Daisy Press and Katie Eastburn, the video opera was inspired by Julia Butterfly Hill's 738 days tree-sit, which took place between 1997 and 1999. Here, Cynthia is reborn as an environmental activist, having been informed that she is needed on earth to save the human race. She ultimately fails in her mythic quest and the opera ends with Cynthia being eaten alive by birds.

The discomfort and uneasiness that haunt Cynthia do not belong exclusively within the universe of *Whispering Pines*. More than a year into the pandemic, deep-seated feelings of isolation, alienation, anxiety, and loneliness, are pervasive. Cynthia's hypochondria, which in the recent past may have been dismissed as a quirk, has crept into the examination of our own daily activities. The titular work of the exhibition, *The Invisible Seventh is the Mystic Column*, 2021, shot and edited by Moulton while in quarantine, picks up where Cynthia's journey of self-investigation left off in *Whispering Pines 10*. In 2021 we, as audience members, are more clearly attuned to the eccentric coping mechanisms of Moulton's persona, as they are now uniquely familiar to us. In *The Invisible Seventh is the Mystic Column*, Cynthia turns her attention to exercise and

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breathing techniques in an attempt to counteract vulnerability. However, she is betrayed, inhaling invasive home decor objects, similar in shape and size to human organs, which take up residence in her body. This is a work that will continue to evolve throughout the course of the exhibition and you are invited to return to see how the piece develops over time.

The Pink Tower, 2019, which sits in the Museum's Bloom Gallery, bears references to the local community, having been filmed in and around the campus of University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), where Moulton is currently an assistant professor. In this instalment of *Whispering Pines* Cynthia finds herself trapped in a pink tower (inspired by UCSB's Storke Tower) solving riddles in an attempt to escape. Cynthia's efforts mirror those of Saint Barbara, namesake of the city, a 3rd century Christian saint whose endeavors to escape her pagan father, and jailor, led to her beheading.

Moulton's work is brimming with references to historical art movements including Surrealism, popular culture from *Twin Peaks* to *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, ancient myth, the fairytales of Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty, the psychotherapy of Carl Jung, idealistic hippie spiritualism from the California of the 1970s, and European social theory such as Walter Benjamin's concept of the *Furnished Man*. These varied entry points invite a layered reading of her work, full of discoveries to be made. Her lo-fi approach -- Moulton has stated that she often forsakes technical mastery for immediacy -- joined with a modern-day tech aesthetic invigorates the restlessness underlying Cynthia's exploits. This, however, causes us to be no less compassionate for her plight, as we find our own human fragility epitomized in this unusual sympathetic character.

Shana Moulton: The Invisible Seventh is the Mystic Column is curated by Alexandra Terry, Chief Curator. Exhibition text by Alexandra Terry.