

Shana Moulton at MCASB

The Invisible Seventh Is the Mystic Column



HER SELVES: "Tower 1" by Shana Moulton

By **Charles Donelan**

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Artists have long known the usefulness of having an alter ego, someone who, while they may occupy the same body as you, can manifest impulses that you prefer not to own in propria persona. Musicians love them – think of Ziggy Stardust, Sasha Fierce, Slim Shady, and Hannah Montana – and so do some visual artists. For example, there's Shana Moulton, who just opened a show called *The Invisible Seventh Is the Mystic Column* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. Her character Cynthia (just Cynthia) has been around since 2002, when Moulton began producing videos, installations, and performances starring this solitary, wellness-obsessed, mystical version of herself. In a series of videos named *Whispering Pines* after the senior living mobile home park in Northern California where she grew up, and in ancillary projects and installations, Moulton has elaborated an increasingly complex, fantastic, and

evolving universe where Cynthia performs a wide range of activities in pursuit of some elusive goal of transcendence. It's a brightly colored world full of surprises that's at once parallel to our own and distinctively out of kilter.

The show at MCASB contains just four works, but within these multimedia pieces visitors will find material for hours of rapt contemplation. To the left as one enters the space there's "The Pink Tower V2," a stack of traditional flat screens housed in (what else?) a pink tower. Over the course of the installation's six-and-a-half-minute loop, we see video of Cynthia negotiating a stone labyrinth on the



Courtesy of Shana Moulton

UCSB campus, pricking her finger on a pink spinning wheel, and ascending via the expanding legs of an adjustable desk through the levels of the screens as though they were one continuous space. This multi-monitor magic trick proves something about Cynthia that's important to the whole enterprise: She's real, or at least fictional in a way that transcends the boundaries of any individual frame that tries to hold her. Through extensive deployment of green-screen technology, Cynthia flies through space and time, an *Alice in Wonderland* figure whose gestures echo those of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

In the large central piece, 2021's "The Invisible Seventh Is the Mystic Column," video of Cynthia is projected on multiple surfaces while some of the objects in the videos are arranged on either side of a

freestanding wall. As Cynthia works out with an isometric band device, or does breathing exercises, background projections of mountains and lakes alternate with geometric and matrix-like shapes. Cynthia's eccentric activities in "The Invisible Seventh" follow a general pattern: They start out purposeful and relatively familiar, then get progressively more resistant and weird. The isometrics give way to twirling the rubber band device, and the breathing exercises cause her to absorb the knickknacks that occupy her home shelves into her body, eventually requiring an operation that's playfully made to resemble the old battery-powered children's game of that name.

"Whispering Pines 10," the longer video installation in a side room, is the show's most ambitious work. At a little over 35 minutes, it's a mini-opera with original music by Moulton's collaborator Nick Hallett. Based in an oblique way on the famed redwood-tree sitter Julia "Butterfly" Hill, it's a sprawling investigation of consciousness, spirituality, and the mystical effects of smearing your entire body with peanut butter. Like everything in Cynthia's fascinating universe, "Whispering Pines 10" overflows with portents of some apocalyptic transformation, yet when she's eventually devoured by birds (they're attracted to the peanut butter), you get the feeling that she won't be gone for long. This show is an outstanding example of the kind of thing that MCA Santa Barbara does best, and it's a matter for rejoicing that the gallery is open again for in-person visits.

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