

SHANA MOULTON— WANTS TO BELIEVE

By Renata Espinosa

“I’m completely convinced that I’m almost a diabetic, even though I’m really careful,” says video artist Shana Moulton, who as an undergrad once did a performance where she covered her face with a caramel mask, waited for it to dry, peeled it away and ate the entire mask. Then she washed everything off in a basin filled with white sugar. “I was almost puking,” she says, and explains how at the time, she’d just learned her parents had Type 2 diabetes. So her self-professed hypochondria isn’t completely unfounded. In Moulton’s ongoing video series, *Whispering Pines*, she plays a character named Cynthia, an alter ego who is plagued with a variety of illnesses, perhaps more imagined than real. She’s constantly looking for a cure, or some kind of answer to all her problems. Cynthia tries everything from beauty products promising miracles, to water fountains spouting New Age energy speak, to an Avon lady hand healer. It’s these illnesses and the subsequent remedies that are the catalyst for Cynthia’s fantastic escapist adventures through the looking glass. Whether Cynthia actually finds liberation - or salvation - is unclear, and the video’s low-tech aesthetic and over-the-top citric acid color scheme make the viewer feel a little loopy, as though you’ve just stayed up all night, bleary-eyed, watching cable access infomercials for crystal-wielding psychic healers. Moulton grew up in Northern California, a hotbed of spiritual self-help and seekers of healthy alternative lifestyles, but she’s recently moved to Brooklyn. We meet up around the corner from her house just as she’s finishing the final edits of her latest video, “Sand Saga,” to discuss Cynthia’s fate, New Age kitsch and why Kombucha tea is Moulton’s new hope in a bottle.

Renata Espinosa: So you’re working on a video for your new show opening next week. What is it about?

Shana Moulton: It’s basically another episode in this series I started in 2002. I keep going back to this character Cynthia, who is my alter ego. I’m doing another episode with her, but I’m calling it something else, giving it a different title.

RE: Does it signify a break in the kinds of things that are happening to her?

SM: The video is slightly more abstract than the other episodes, but it’s the same sort of narrative style, going from a mundane reality to a parallel universe. I still don’t exactly know what’s happening at the very end yet, but it’s a really generative way for me to work, and it has been since I started the series.

RE: How did the series come about?

SM: When I was in grad school, Cynthia came out of these costumes I was making. They were dresses with medical devices embedded into the fabric, like a neck brace was part of the dress, or a hemorrhoid pillow, or a walker. They weren’t so interesting on their own, so I tried to think about what kind of person would have to wear these dresses.

RE: The clothing was kind of like a medical prosthetic device?

SM: Yeah, and it was also extreme fashion at the time.

RE: So the idea is that she’s plagued with either real or imagined illness.

SM: Yes. And in the videos, they also became the portals into the parallel worlds. The hole in her neck brace, or the hole in the hemorrhoid pillow was her entrance. That's something I feel is particularly important to me in all of the videos, and something I always forget to mention. It's this idea that her body and her illnesses are the actual portal to the fantasy worlds that she has.

RE: Are they fantasy worlds in a positive sense? Or maybe you're not sure.

SM: It's definitely ambiguous. I don't know if they're positive or negative. They're definitely escapist, or wishful thinking, or positive thinking. Right now the video I'm working on has these series of bathroom decorations in it. They're in the first scene, the normal section of the video, and then they reappear [in the fantasy world]. They're all heads.

RE: Is it the same kitschy aesthetic as in the other videos?

SM: This one I made in my parents' house instead of in my studio, so it's slightly more realistic, though I altered their bathroom to be more colorful and kitschy. And then my mom happened to have all of these heads she's collected. A year ago I made another video at my parents' house, and my mom also collects hands, and so I used hundreds of these hands.

RE: Like ceramic hands?

SM: Ceramic, glass, plastic. So this time I wanted to use her head collection. In the end, I place the heads on these bodies. It's actually me, dancing around in a green suit, and then I chromakey out the green and I put these bad skin conditions on the bodies. The video starts with her applying a facial beauty mask, and I'm waiting for it to dry. So that's the whole trigger for this adventure she goes on in the video.

RE: You use a lot of American beauty products in your videos, all these things designed or marketed to make a woman feel or look like more of a woman, like the Biore pore strips in *Whispering Pines* #6.

SM: With the cosmetics, I feel like those things are really similar for me to the different New Age ideas. At least for me personally, whenever I see one of these new products, I really want it to work. I think, "Here is the answer to beautiful skin." But my attitude towards it is that I'm really skeptical of it, but I actually do want it to be the answer to all of my problems. At the same time, I feel like it's garbage and it's just about making money and marketing. So for me, it's that dynamic that is really motivating most of the videos.

RE: Cynthia is trying to find something to believe in order to cure herself. But in the episodes I saw, she never really seems to get to that point. In one, you end with a quote from "Jonathan Livingston Seagull": "Your whole body, from wingtip to wingtip, is nothing more than your thought itself, in a form you can see. Break the chains of your thought, and you break the chains of your body too." That seemed like a more hopeful way to end.

SM: I really do believe that quote, that if you break the chains of your mind, you break the chains of your body. I want to believe it. I think I believe it. I'd love to go with an Eastern philosophy, or at least our New Age version of that, but at the same time, I mean, something like "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" I mean, Neil Diamond made the soundtrack, and that quote is just so absurd.

RE: There is a lot of cheesiness to that kind of New Age stuff. It's rooted in a very sincere place, but it's hard to separate it from the kitsch factor.

SM: I'm not really being ironic. I really want to believe in this. But then, I sort of am being ironic. I'm at this stage now where I feel that one day, when I'm mature enough, I'll be able to believe this stuff, but not now.

RE: Is Cynthia is representation of someone older, or is she more of an everywoman? Does she exist

in a particular time and place?

SM: I've never been able to pin her down. She's really just me, but maybe slightly dumber [laughs]. It's me, and a combination of other women in my life.

RE: She reminds me of a kooky aunt.

SM: She's definitely a conglomeration of different women in my family, like my mom and my aunt. They love shopping and they collect these things, like the hands, or crazy fountains. The first video I made was totally inspired by this fountain that both my mom and my aunt had bought at a department store. When my mom put it in her bathroom, I told her, "Mom, that is so ugly! You have to get rid of that! It's awful." And then, five months later, it struck me how amazing it was, that it was actually the coolest thing I had ever seen. It had green and blue pebbles around the base, and then a classic crystal middle part that rose up like a mountain and then an emerald ball in the center. I was in Pittsburg and I said to my mom, "You have to send that to me." But she had gotten rid of it because I had told her it was so ugly!

RE: Is that the same fountain that Cynthia buys in Whispering Pines #6?

SM: No, it's a different one, but a very similar idea. I'm always trying to recapture the feeling that this fountain gave me. You know when you think something is ugly or bad, and then later you realize that it's actually really cool, it's just an amazing feeling or revelation. So that happened with that fountain.

RE: So you grew up near San Francisco?

SM: I grew up in Oakhurst, which is near Yosemite, in Northern California. The whole Whispering Pines series is named after the trailer park I grew up in. I think it's also slightly inspired by it. It was a senior center, so there were a lot of widows who lived there and they would have these amazing collections of little things.

RE: New Age-type collections?

SM: The women there were from an older generation, so not necessarily New Age, but they definitely had their little altars of things. So I think part of the videos came from that. Oakhurst is also slightly New Age-y, though not as much as the Bay Area. It's definitely a more conservative town.

RE: Tell me a little bit about the color palette of the videos. What was it influenced by? Did you watch a lot of television growing up? I was saying to you the other day how it reminded me of kid's shows, like Pee-Wee's Playhouse. It's so acidic and neon.

SM: I was a massive fan of Pee-Wee's Playhouse. Growing up I watched so much television. I think I probably watched 6 hours of TV a night. But part of the reason I have all these colors is because my advisor in grad school was a video artist, and said that black and white don't show up well on video, so I avoid black and white. Bright colors just work better on video. The quality is so bad with video, that if you're going to have really bad quality, you should at least make it look really bright and exciting.

RE: They're very graphic and hypnotic. The color makes it hard to look away.

SM: I went to grad school with someone from Paper Rad and he influenced my work a lot as well. I don't know if I could make something that wasn't colorful. I've never been a fan of black and white films, for instance. It's really hard for me to watch them.

RE: Do the bright neon colors act as a representation of Cynthia's psyche? Are they the rose colored glasses that she sees the world through?

SM: It definitely goes along with her fantasy worlds. Although there was a criticism, at least when I was in Amsterdam two years ago, that the mundane worlds that Cynthia starts out in are already so

fantastic looking, so that when you go to the next level of fantasy, it's not that big a leap. I took that to heart. After I left Amsterdam, I started to make the videos in more real environments.

RE: On the other hand, it could be that her nightmares or her parallel universe is more mundane for her.

SM: That would be an interesting flip to do, to have her fantasy worlds be really boring and colorless. But I do feel like people's home decor can be really odd. In the videos, everything is really fantastical in the first place and so bright and colorful, and I feel like these elements just being together in the same room combine and work their magic together to help her go to this new world. Like in *Whispering Pines #8*, she's just making a flower arrangement out of these disgusting pearls and different colored sands and then suddenly that in combination with her drinking the Crystal Light takes her to a new level.

RE: What is your relationship to illness?

SM: I am such a hypochondriac! I think "Oh my god, something inside burst, I have cancer..." I mean, I'm okay. If a friend is sick, I won't run away. I'm not afraid of germs. I'm more concerned with trying to be healthy. But it's hard, because in my family we have a massive sweet tooth. But Kombucha tea is one thing that I'm convinced about. As I was saying earlier, I'm not totally convinced by a lot of New Age or beauty-related answers, but I'm sold on the Kombucha! Maybe it's just the alcohol percentage, but I feel like it's an easy answer to a whole range of problems. It's supposed to be good for your skin, and I've been fighting a cold for the past week, so I've had two kombuchas a day and now I'm not fighting it.

RE: Do you see your work as a critique of New Age culture, or maybe just that very commercial aspect of New Age spirituality?

SM: For me, I'm critical of anyone who is not self-aware. I'm really self-conscious. On the one hand, I always really admire when someone is not, but I'm not like that. I'm really trying to figure out a spirituality that works for me, but I feel like I can never fully go with any of these different systems.

RE: You're just too smart for them.

SM: Or maybe it's just laziness! I don't really want to do all of the stuff they want you to do. When something becomes really dogmatic, I can't go all the way with it. I want to believe, and I need something. But I think the version that exists in a lot of these places like Northern California is just so capitalist. It's crazy. They put out these magazines, and in the back there are these ads where everyone's a "life coach" and it costs a lot of money.

RE: It feels like such a scam. Someone I know called me a few weeks ago to tell me all about some "personal development" seminar he had done, and tried to convince me to do it as well. But I felt like the motivation behind his call was that he was going to get some kind of discount on his next seminar. He was probably just calling up everyone in his phone book.

SM: Those things are so tied up in making money. I could never really get into it. In one of my new videos, I use these reflexology gloves that my aunt bought me from Avon [A popular door-to-door cosmetics company in the U.S.]. This product was so exciting to me, because it really sums everything up. It's Avon and it's New Age reflexology. They are the ultimate object for me. I was even using them for a while and thought, "This works!" They have massagers with magnets in a pyramid shape. In the video, my mother plays a hand healer named "Lady Nova." She was like an Avon lady witch doctor.

RE: The beauty industry really is like the new New Age.

SM: A lot of it is probably motivated by not wanting to age.

RE: We don't want to deal with our own mortality.

SM: The cover girls of those New Age magazines are always these beautiful, angelic looking ladies with long, flowing blonde hair.

RE: It's funny, because you'd think it shouldn't really matter. Supposedly we're all going to go to this other plane of existence and leave our bodies behind.

SM: I was in L.A. once, staying near Venice Beach at this woman's house, and her reiki massage healer came over and she was so gorgeous it was scary. And I was talking to her and she was only speaking in New Age speak. Everything she said was about energy, and it was so intense. I thought she could see straight through me, and I almost started crying she was so intense. That was odd, because I couldn't tell if it was because she was so beautiful that I was affected by her, or if she actually had these powers. It was really freaky. At the same time, she was really L.A.

RE: She seemed like she was just inhabiting a character herself?

SM: Yes, exactly.

RE: At the same time, she was someone who felt really authentic.

SM: Something was definitely going on. Usually, I feel like I can see through someone like that, but it was like she could see through me. I know some other people like that, where they've just got that in them. Either they think they are enlightened, or maybe they really are, but something happened to them and they speak in that "energy speak" and I can't be around it. It's too intense. Maybe it's because I feel like a fraud, or I'm not enlightened enough to be around them. Or maybe it's because it's bullshit.

RE: They have a way of making you feel really uncomfortable.

SM: I hope if I ever do become enlightened, it's not like that!

RE: I feel like if someone is truly enlightened, when you're around them you're not going to feel anything but good. You shouldn't be thinking, "Who is this person, they're bullshitting me" because they should be so amazing that you're not even aware that there's anything going on or feel like they're better than yourself.

SM: I would hope so. Maybe it's just that those others are in a younger, earlier stage of their enlightenment and they haven't reached that wise, mature level yet where they're not constantly thrusting their amazing powers at you.

RE: Right, with their gorgeous, amazing bodies!

SM: Luckily, you don't meet many people like that in New York, which is great.