

UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Museum of Modern Art premieres Shana Moulton's 'Meta/Physical Therapy'

Healing meets the surreal in artist Shana Moulton's hyper-saturated dreamscape in the exhibition and performance series "[Meta/Physical Therapy](#)," which premiered at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

The exhibition, which ran Feb. 17–April 21, featured a new site-specific installation by Moulton, an art professor at UC Santa Barbara, whose work captures the banality and enormity of everyday life. Through performance, video and sculpture, Moulton chronicles the experiences of her semi-autobiographical alter-ego, Cynthia, as she navigates personal choices and physical limitations.

"When I was first composing Cynthia's domestic space I wanted it to feel like 'a room of one's own,' or like a cross between a home office and an exercise room," said Moulton. "I imagined it from one angle and I also wanted it to feel flat and claustrophobic, so the center form in the main projection is bell-jar shaped." The entire shape replicated a giant vanity mirror.

Transforming [the space](#) into a prismatic environment, the installation employs the artist's signature blend of spiritual imagery, medical technology, popular culture and references to high art and dollar-store kitsch.

An extension of Moulton's [Whispering Pines](#) series, which began in 2002, the project continues the artist's incisive examination of the aesthetics of pain and healing and the mass marketing of wellness, and explores the maladies of middle age. Presented as a multi-chapter narrative, the installation is accompanied by a series of performances created in collaboration with composer Nick Hallett, bringing Cynthia's inner world to life.

"Shana Moulton's iconic performance persona, Cynthia, embodies the complexities of contemporary life. Emblematic of the deep-seated effects of mass consumption, Cynthia is bombarded with choices, confused by technology and motivated by advertising," said Erica Papernik-Shimizu, MoMA associate curator of media and performance, who organized the exhibition. "She exists in a state of perpetual searching — for physical wellness, knowledge, purpose. Allegedly simple tasks seem onerous and overwhelming, until her limitations kaleidoscopically open up into new realms of possibility."

Moulton's sense of style comes from her mom, aunt and grandmother, she said, noting their talent for home décor, crafts and fashion on a thrift-store budget. "Realizing and embracing this, peppered with other childhood influences like Pee-Wee's 'Playhouse' and 'Twin Peaks,' was how I came up with Cynthia's visual vocabulary," she said. Combining high and low culture, newer products and media such as modern massage tools and MRI images also find their way into Cynthia's world.

"Moulton's study of the material culture around care and healing, combined with her use of magical realism and humor, points to just how surreal being in a body — in all of its pleasure, pain and chaos — can feel," Papernik-Shimizu said. "Using Cynthia as a prism, she reveals how our lives as consumers are shaped by our deepest needs and desires — and the often absurd lengths we'll go for them."

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About UC Santa Barbara

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