

# FROM PICTURE PLANE TO ASTRAL PLANE

Shana Moulton's *Whispering Pines*



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10* (2018), frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.

FAITH HOLLAND &  
SETH BARRY WATTER

My body no longer seemed weighed down by gravity. It was as if I had no body, in that every function hummed along perfectly, every nerve rejoiced, the harmony punctuated by each beat of my pulse which served in turn only to remind me of the delightfulness of the moment. ... But then suddenly I got something in my eye.  
— Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

I

Encounters with objects are always fraught affairs in Shana Moulton's work in performance and video. Cynthia, the pallid protagonist played by Moulton herself, confronts her anxiety in a plasma globe with wolves. When it offers no solace she turns to the ceramic dolphins; or to the electric blanket; or crystal fountain or dreamcatcher, or some other like object. Despite their tawdry cheapness, each has been mass-manufactured to soothe. And each fails spectacularly as a technique of healing, thus begetting more objects and more disappointment.

*The Galactic Pot Healer* (2010) opens with a view of the bizarre Sea Ranch Chapel in northern California, which looks like a crossbreed of wizard's hat and mollusc. It dissolves into a view of Cynthia in the bathroom, opening her mouth repeatedly in a stretching exercise. As soon as she stops, it snaps back to a pout. She opens the medicine cabinet with its health-hygiene products and from these she selects an anti-diarrheal; though her choice of Imodium over the adjacent Pepto-Bismol seems prompted less by reason than preference for color. Indeed the blue-green fluid matches the hue of the cheap ceramic pot on her living room table. Everything here is some shade of pastel in a space that overlooks a pasted-in landscape. Yet the idyll does not last, for she knocks the pot over, and the sight of its broken pieces moves her to tears. It is as if the turquoise liquid now swirling inside her is expelled or rejected in these turquoise pot shards. More trips to the bathroom result in helpful messages that place the depressive on a path to self-healing. The promise, the name, and the address of her healer are disclosed in a caplet, in Pepto and a tissue. The Rejuvenique Spa in Fresno, California is apparently home to this mysterious healer, who lays Moulton down to sculpt a pot from her back. A microwave functions as a kiln in a pinch and transmutes this horrid lump into the original blue-green vessel. Woman and object are once again whole because they are really one and the same. But the band-aid that flies toward the screen at the end seems to augur more problems, as in a "band-aid solution."





Shana Moulton, *Galactic Pot Healer* (2010), frame enlargement.

Two things in this video are especially striking. One is the contrast between the action and the setting—that its esoteric ritual takes place in a strip mall spa. But this sense of incongruity reflects a real condition, the gradual absorption of New Age by mass culture. It reflects a social landscape where online shopping cures depression and cafes around the corner sell “self care” tea-and-soap kits. Second is the way that objects in the household not only go awry but self-regulate too. The empty caplet that announces “There is someone who can heal your pot” has effectively diagnosed the occupant’s problems. The tissue that reveals the Pot Healer’s address is an advertisement for the service that will treat those same problems. Automated cycles of diagnosis and treatment are no longer just the stuff of dystopian fiction; they are fast becoming real in “smart” homes in “smart” cities. In general we are seeing a glut of new ailments and new band-aids to treat them as they arise. The body, the city, even the earth and climate are reconceived as demos for constant real-time patching. Hence the language of healing grows ever more technicist, and healing itself ever more technocratic. So when Stanford professors teach students to “design” their lives—to “prototype” options for

a life they want to live—the work of Shana Moulton reminds us through laughter that design is best left in the hands of wonks and planners.

## II

Viewers will recognize the character Moulton plays from *Whispering Pines* (2002- ), of which this is one installment. On the figure of Cynthia she collects and projects the everyday traumas of female consumers. This much is made clear in “Squiggles, Trees, Ribbons and Spirals: My Collection of Women’s Health, Beauty and Support Group Logos as the Stages of Life in Semi-Particular Order” (2010). As one scrolls down the page of this web-based picture-essay, one moves past a set of debased Matisse cutouts, central-core imagery, and clichés of the goddess, whose breasted figure blends with trees. The assembly of the feminine from three or four lines, free from the grip of right angles and patriarchy—such is the state to which Cynthia aspires. And occasionally she succeeds, as in *Whispering Pines 4* (2007), where a healer found on Google treats her carpal tunnel syndrome. She does this by means of an Avon reflexology glove, applying vibratory pressure

to different regions of the hand. The glove is tagged and color-coded in accord with the theory that the hand is an image of the body as a whole. Fingertips affect the sinuses, the thumb’s phalanx works on the brain, the upper palm spans the lungs and the shoulders both. It is part of the special logic of *Whispering Pines* that these varicolored zones should become a makeup palette, from which the healer can daub onto Cynthia’s face making her over into a butterfly. “I am free to access the infinite,” says a voice, “I am more than my physical body.” This new self propels her into a nearby forest; and as her body dissolves into patterns of fractals, her movements approximate the squiggly-logo ideal. But, inevitably, the peak-experience will sour—become what Jane Howard dubbed pique-experience instead. The sequel has Cynthia once more in bed, laid up with a neck brace, whose curious throat-hole she tries to fill with feeling.

The episodic nature of *Whispering Pines* aligns it more with TV than with cinema or the gallery, although it still gets shown in both. Its format is like a sitcom, without narrative progression. Instead it works by accretion and recombination of settings and props around its protagonist. Like Pee-wee she inhabits a playhouse of sorts, full of object-character-friends in assorted bright colors; unlike Pee-wee, however, the antics of objects are unrelieved by humans like Miss Yvonne or Cowboy Curtis. This is why every episode of *Whispering Pines* offers the same solution to its dour inhabitant: buy, plug in, arrange and reapply. As Pascal would have said, she cheats on the present by looking too much to the future; “and since [she is] always planning to be happy, it is inevitable that [she] should never be so.” Butterfly clock, animatronic peacock, scented candles and fountains are purchased for comfort; and yet they can offer no comfort to Cynthia. Her unshaken belief in the power of positive thinking only deepens that wretchedness of her condition.

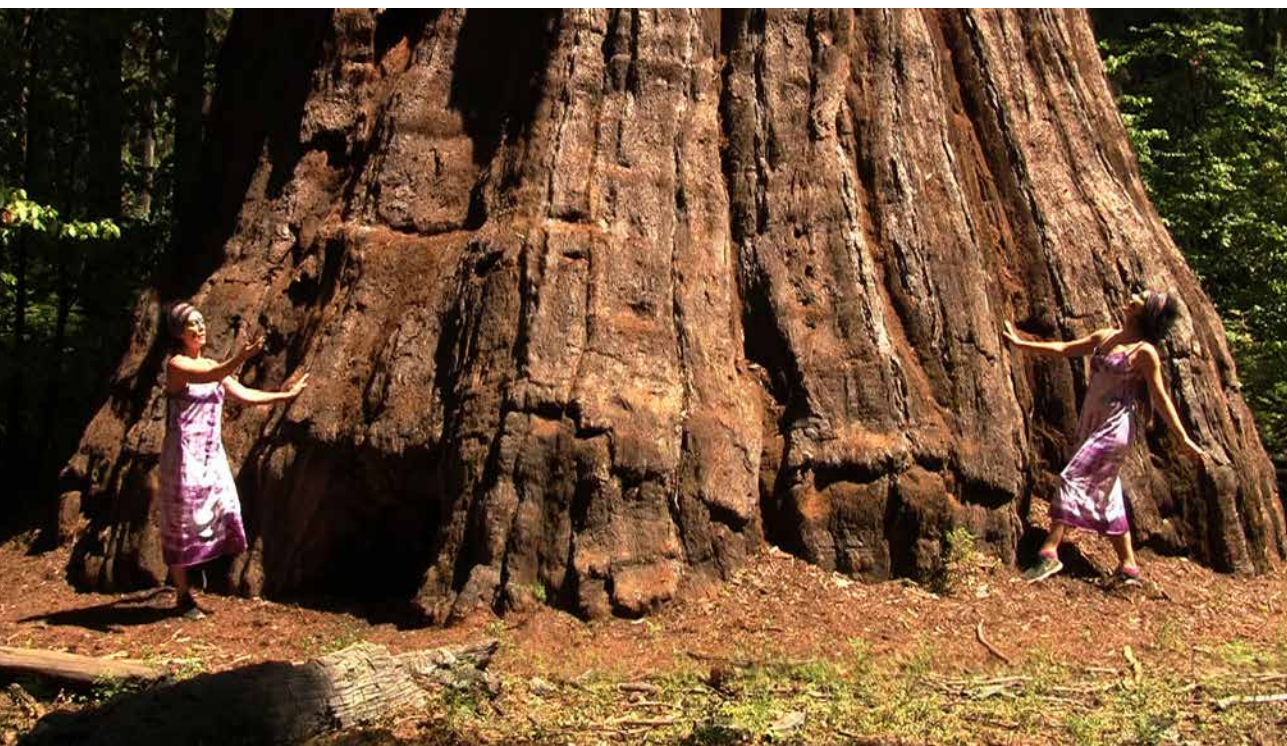
Interesting to note is the series’ origins in a set of orthopedic clothing Moulton made as a student. These *Medical Dresses* (2001-2002) have chic built-in walkers, sphygmomanometer fringe, and most famously a hemorrhoid pillow stitched into the rear. The latter appears in *Whispering Pines 1* (2002) and *2* (2003),

where it cushions the body and also acts as a kind of stargate. Yet it never reappears after these first two forays, perhaps over-specific in its location of illness. What remains is that general IBS of the spirit that, since internal, is projected on everything. The source of discomfort is less and less bounded. And as obvious debilities fade into the background, she is forced to confront herself in the light of a bathroom mirror: unfree, white, and of ambiguous adulthood, overwhelmed by objects and unable to do without them. Like the “ocnophil” type described by Michael Balint, she “lives from object to object, cutting [her] sojourns in the empty spaces as short as possible.”



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 7* (2006), frame enlargements.





TOP Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 2* (2003), frame enlargements.  
ABOVE Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10* (2018), frame enlargement.

Almost every episode pinions her against a too cluttered backdrop in a shallow space or field. And this planimetric quality is carried much further by the mixture of real and unreal objects in space. Simply by cutting a hole in the image, a chasm yawns open to another world. Subtle but evident shifts in the objects' scale, not to mention resolution, unsettle the viewer more than they do Cynthia. But above all it is green screen that creates a synthetic space. Whether ineptly or deliberately, or ineptly and then deliberately, Moulton retains a fringe of green around her figure. So if objects seem distant or even displaced, they are—the body of the actor is literally someplace else. Which is not to say their presence would bring them much closer.

The particular nature of these objects is worth exploring. They are not simply kitsch. Moulton has more than a passing interest in New Age and collects its ephemera in her private museum. Her character drifts as if abandoned by a T-group and left to find her own way to the Age of Aquarius, in an object-world ranging from ancient Egypt to Spencer's Gifts. And surely it is cheaper to buy gemstones on Amazon than to see a psychoanalyst three days a week. The books she consults (*The Feeling Good Handbook* is a favorite) assure her that illness is a result of morbid thinking; that health will return upon adjustment of the brainwaves to the good vibes emitted by a balanced environment. The mixture of quackery and esoteric learning that marks the healer's handbook is brought to bear, accurately, in the mise-en-scene of Cynthia. Of course it owes something to the real *Whispering Pines* as well, the California trailer camp where Moulton grew up: "It was a senior park with lots of widows... who make puzzles or who have lots of cats or birds, or that sort of thing." Her indulgence in New Age products is never self-indulgent, her humor never vicious,

her irony not quite full. Genuine enthusiasm tempers the critique while critique prevents the artwork from falling into camp. She truly wants that fountain or salt lamp to work; and her character takes on the Sisyphean task of mending herself through these technical objects.

### III

Among the common tropes of the New Age healing narrative is that the self must be dismembered before it can be made whole. Visualization and channeling, aromatherapy and crystals are aids to that labor of self-excitation. Moulton's deft use of the video medium has often gone far to portray such experience—to make graphically manifest the metaphysics of feeling-good. But as her skillset evolves along with her avatar, the medium itself becomes a site of cathexis. Cultural techniques of healing and spirit switch from tchotchkes to touch screens, from pink sand to pixels. Both image and self are composed of many layers and the astral plane coincides with the digital picture plane.

This is nowhere clearer than in *Whispering Pines 10* (2010-2018), the summa of the series to this point in time. The 30-minute epic is the first of the series to be released as shorter webisodes on a dedicated website ([whisperingpines10.com](http://whisperingpines10.com)). Made with Nick Hallett, it is continuous with the world of Cynthia so far described; but there is a shift in its mise-en-scene. The flattened space of other episodes is here transformed into an interface, nearly an operating system of healing. The digital is no longer just behind the scenes but is thematized directly in the iconography. The spirit guides, for instance, who lead Cynthia on her journey are portrayed as digital assistants of an older variety. They pop up



periodically as Clippy would once have in Microsoft Office. The similarity is often graphic as well as functional in nature: they are minified to cute size and arranged at the bottom of the frame. They express themselves in operatic song or singsong speech.

Cynthia's journey is instigated by the question, "What is your tree?"—posed by the forest spirit with butterfly facepaint. Four moments mark her progress toward an answer to "what is it in your life that calls you to be bigger than what you think is possible." First, after following a bird that flies out from an M. C. Escher on the wall above her bed, Cynthia enters a secret portal through a door in the adjacent room. There, through the drywall, we see her ascend her roof and her chimney and finally a giant redwood. At the top of the tree she meditates with the requisite wind chimes. Second, the spirits summon her back to earth "to save the human race." Inadequacy overwhelms her and she cracks up, quite literally; she falls from the tree and shatters, like a porcelain doll. The second phase of her journey is the search for an inner key to reconstitute wholeness. In the third sequence, having found the light and truth that can piece her together, she awakens in bed and soon gets to work: bathing, cleaning, aerobics and stretching, all activities she had tried earlier but which anxiety prevented. In the fourth and final phase, anxiety returns to halt her progress. So, naturally, she covers herself with peanut butter to attract her friends the birds; but they swarm, attack, and ultimately annihilate her. Such is the end of the series for now.

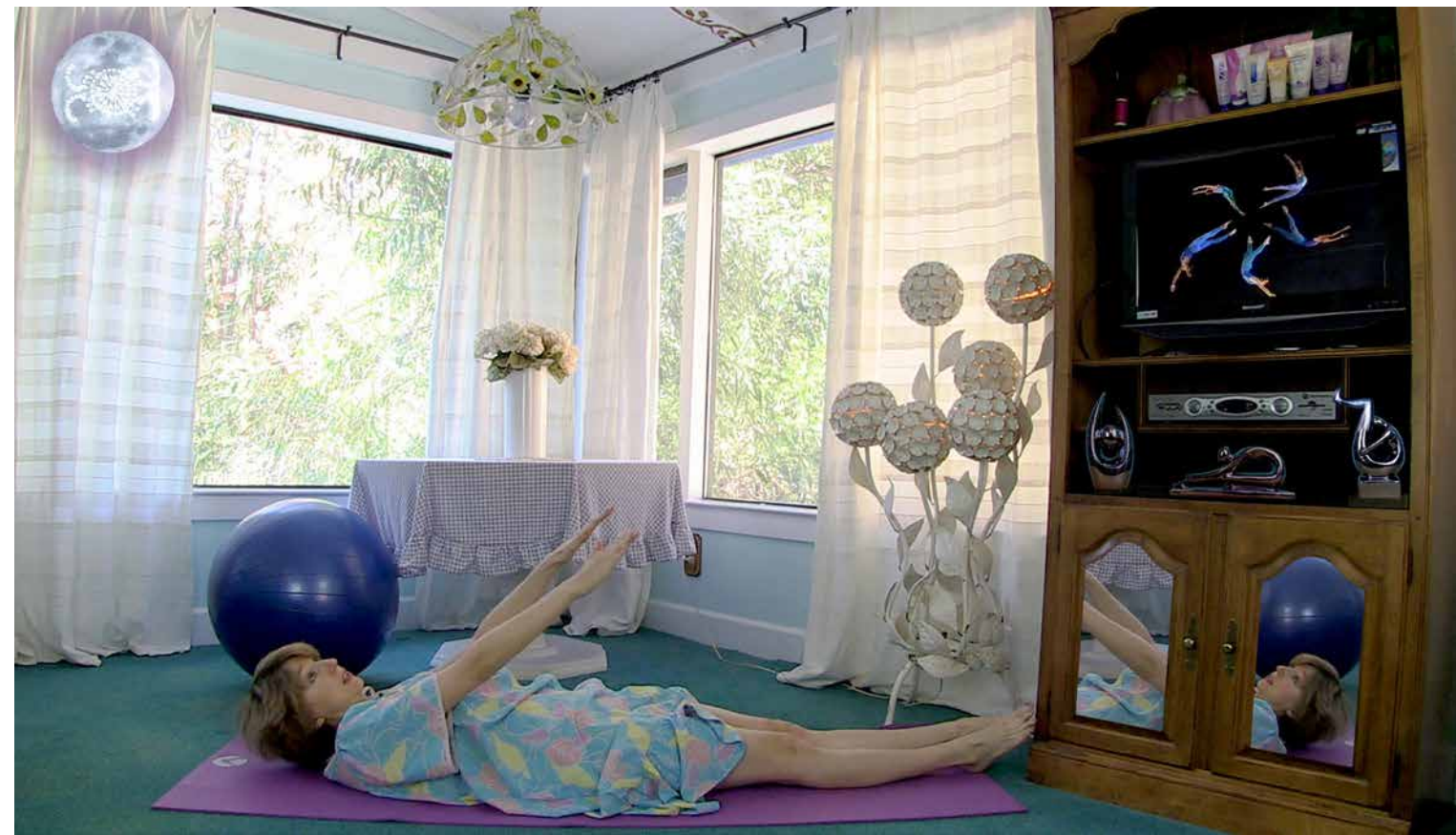
What's notable here is not just the journey but the correlation of its phases with different techniques of the interface. Cynthia's tree-climb in demure floral *schmatta* in less climbing than full-body swiping: she doesn't grip any surfaces but rather she glides past them. And the higher she glides, the more two-dimensional this redwood comes to seem, ceasing to be a tree and becoming the image of a tree. It rotates on its Z-axis and, in so doing, leaves a ribbon at the top: an image of the galaxy, later shown as the default background of macOS Leopard.

Apple-derived imagery continues to structure phase two of her soul-search, the reconstruction of self. The spirit guides conjure her limbs and organs in a heap, on the gauze of a bandaid

whose sticky ends now fold inward. While her body lies inside, her eyes remain detached at the top of the screen. A text box appears within the bandaid's center and two guides in the form of sphinxes have her enter her password—on an Apple-branded keyboard, against an Apple-branded galaxy. She attempts and fails repeatedly until the vision of a book on *How to Attract, House and Feed Birds* helps her recall it. To access your truth (or in this case, your tree) is to access your desktop, successor of the filing cabinet; and to not know the password is not to know thyself.

The third phase begins with Cynthia in bed, enjoying her wholeness, and continues the reduction of 3D to 2D space. Just as the tree became a picture one could swipe, and the true self a desktop one unlocks with the right credentials, so are the healing objects of Cynthia's home transformed into programs on an application launcher. The sides and bottom of the frame mimic the macOS Dock as one spirit guide's lyrics ("Good morning to you / There's so much to do") move karaoke-style across the different icons; only instead of making Preview or Calendar swell in size, they hover over salt lamps or The Miracle Ball Method ball. Arranged in a row, close at hand and customizable, the Dock seems to offer New Age regimens on demand. Each item is a program—a script to be run—for personal wellness, until the operating system fails.

The fourth phase begins with a spinning wheel of death, the cursor that signals a program is crashing. It pops up over the image while Cynthia is cleaning and it arrests that joy in wholeness which made her grab the rainbow duster. The wheel swells and subsumes her, thus prompting her final, drastic action: the peanut butter facial, then full body covering, that makes her human suet for Escher-style birds. The peanut butter, Jif, is most likely a reference to the file format GIF. Her body erodes like a bad Photoshop selection as birds swarm and peck her in a cartoon version of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Finally, they jigsaw together into a ressellation: the last occlude her eyes as they slide into place. They lack any shading that might hint at real space, at something beyond the picture plane in a real world outside. From 2D they come and to 2D they return.



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10* (2018), frame enlargements.

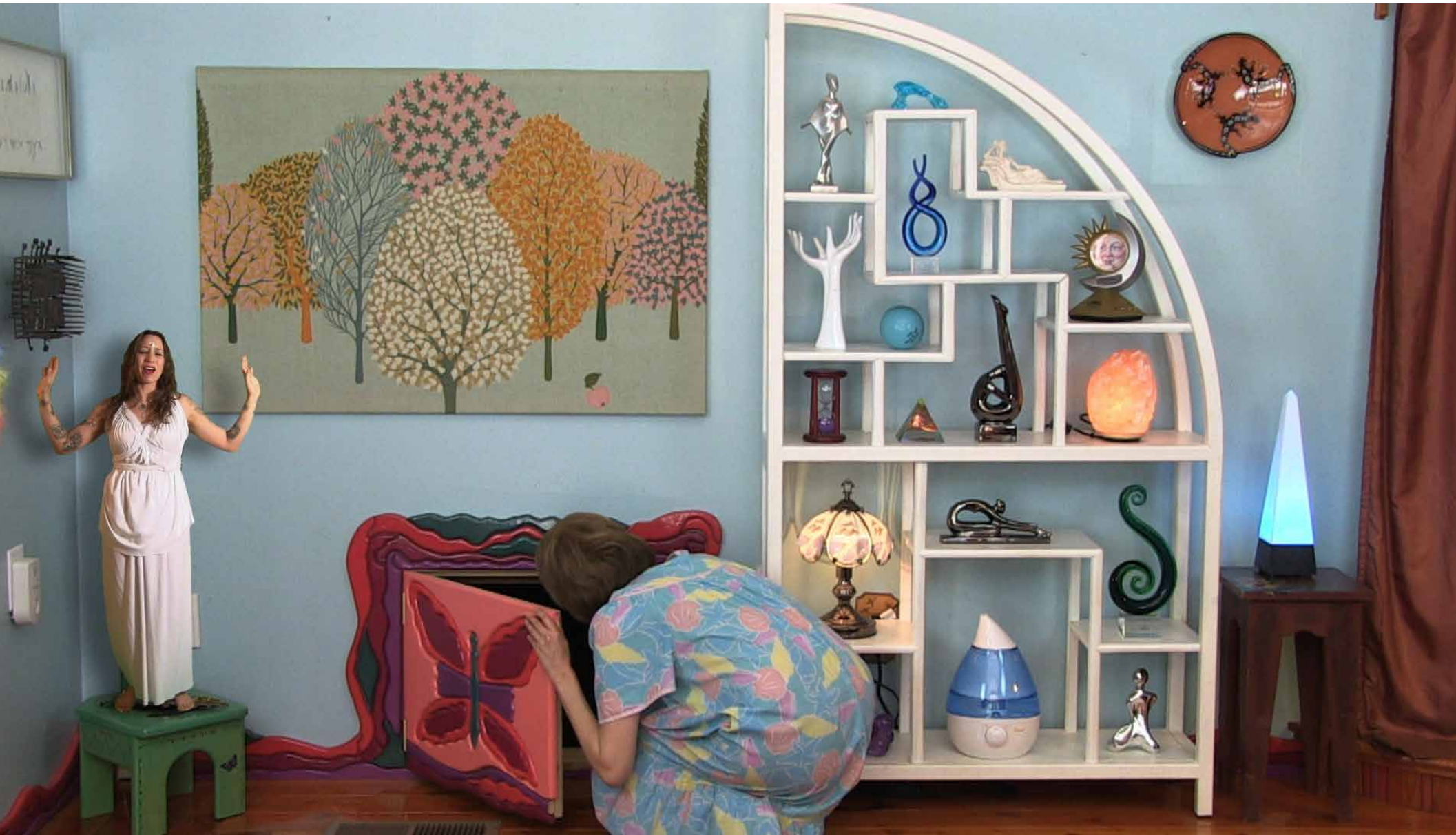


IV

The two-dimensional, touristic view of nature in *Whispering Pines 10* is one encoded in our technologies at least since the dawn of the Graphic User Interface (GUI), which became popular with consumers in the 1990s. The “windows” that populate GUIs became windows on the world when combined with the world wide web, as made evident by the names of browsers: Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, and, even today, Safari. The entire episode can be seen through the lens of a GUI, from the Dock to the many allusions to desktop imagery. Moulton’s uses of green screen, too, have always acted like windows, opening portals onto distant or imagined spaces.

As the three-dimensional is flattened into the digital, healing objects are compressed into their JPG likenesses. In this latest installment Cynthia tries to heal both herself and, through her own self-care, the planet. Nature, or its two-dimensional facsimile, rejects this New Age premise and causes catastrophe for the protagonist instead. Whether she falls from the redwood or is pecked away by birds, mastery of nature perpetually eludes her. Nature cannot be healed by an individual and certainly not, as Laurie Penny puts it, by “doing a few hamstring stretches as the planet burns.” Whatever nature is, it is not warm and cuddly, and in any case Cynthia does not go boldly forth in it. She attempts to control it from the distance of an interface as the lonely individual she cannot help but be. The loneliness follows from a discourse of self-care that—far from what Audre Lorde once had in mind—has been perverted into consumerism, that is to say, narcissism. Thus Cynthia’s combination of personal and planetary wellness is doomed to fail: ineffectual for the planet, and harmful for herself.

Women, unsurprisingly, bear the brunt of the self-care industry. It is they who need healing, as opposed to wage parity. That we can all, to some extent, see ourselves in Moulton should not blind us to the fact that her work highlights women—“everything comes from a combination of things that have happened to my female relatives and me.” Her desire for wholeness is not generically humanist but intimately tied to a range of feminine products: pharmaceuticals packaged with wispy pastel bodies, Biore facial pore strips, reflexology gloves and makeup, bath salts and scented candles. All this New Age paraphernalia, refashioned for Instagram by the wellness industry, is an ineffectual salve for the discomfort of womanhood; it is even less effective as treatment for late capitalism. The riddle posed by *Whispering Pines* as a whole is: What’s wrong? Each episode attempts in some way to solve it. Moulton offers one clue in *Whispering Pines 7* (2006) when she sings in the form of a cubistic sphinx: “Now that I’m a woman, everything is strange.”



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10* (2018), frame enlargement.