

The Calgon Imperative

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On a window sill [in Brecht's study] stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign round its neck on which he has written: "Even I must understand it."

-Walter Benjamin, 24 July 1934

I. Divination from the Discount Aisle

A curious moment occurred in early 2009 on the American edition of the *Antiques Road Show* when appraiser Alasdair Nichol surprised an unsuspecting grandmother, who walked onto the set carrying a 1937 figurative painting by Clyfford Still. The artwork, which predated Still's better known Abstract Expressionist compositions by about a decade, offered Nichol the rare chance to wax poetic about Rothko, Klein, de Kooning, and the relationships between midcentury representational painting and AbEx. Conservatively appraised at half a million dollars, Still's work suddenly became one of the most valuable objects seen on the show, and as such, bridged the gap between the far-flung poles of Sotheby's and the local flea market. At a time when most *Road Show* viewers were obsessively tracking their net

worth in relation to spiraling market conditions, the event briefly aligned the metrics of two seemingly disparate value systems, suggesting ways that the avant-garde and kitsch continue to coincide and interpenetrate each other.

Commissioned by Art in General and presented in November 2009 as an installation comprising video projections, performance, and sculpture, Shana Moulton's *Whispering Pines #9* intervenes into the structure and vernacular of the *Antiques Road Show*, offering up a set of humorous, yet slyly critical observations about widely differing systems of value. Moulton has shrewdly picked up on the quiet, anxious moments of appraisal that fuel the television series, a suspenseful mix of hope, criticism, and chance – a dynamic that curiously models some of the anxiety that accompanies some studio visits or critiques. In drawing a parallel between the popular series and *Whispering Pines*, I want to suggest that the Moulton's practice is a kind of productive riffing on the convergence of economic, spiritual, and aesthetic spheres of interest – a project that proposes that the old Greenberg binary is irrelevant, breathes some Benjaminian aura into the everyday.

At the center of the *Whispering Pines* series (ongoing since 2002) are Cynthia (Moulton's increasingly autobiographical protagonist) and her possessions: objects that populate her world, trigger narrative flow, compel her to action in both video and performance. Filmed and produced on what seems to be video equipment from the early 1990s, and unfolding in cheaply-assembled sets suggestive of trailer parks and community access

stations, *Whispering Pines* reads as part children's show, and part Lynchian soap opera, where Cynthia's attempts at self-fulfillment are invariably catalyzed by a pastiche of these therapeutic, orthopedic, or otherwise outmoded homeopathic objects: neck braces, feathers, crystals, colored sand, meditation tapes, pore cleansers, towel racks. In nearly all of the episodes of *Whispering Pines*, Cynthia's body and a wide array of objects are in a state of flux. She inexplicably loses her limbs, is seen wearing orthopedic supports or braces, and suffers from unseen physical and psychic strains. To alleviate these problems, she attempts to self medicate, subscribes to a variety of women's health cures as advertised on 1980s cable television, seeks out massage and other natural remedies, exercises awkwardly along with fitness videos conducted by an alarmingly libidinal Angela Lansbury. Alternately helping and vexing Cynthia, at times shuffling in stop-motion fashion as Moulton's camera dwells on their presence, these objects frequently hover, are rendered using outdated chroma video effects, and ultimately, migrate from screens into three-dimensional props for use during performances. Cynthia's possessions are best read as consumer-grade fetishes. They unsettle the eye, are *unruly*. They are at once *animated* and *animating*, mass-produced, yet mythical.

As with many installments, the latest episode of *Whispering Pines*, "The Undiscovered Antique," opens with Cynthia in her home, greenscreened into a tableau of meticulously arranged kitsch: a disquieting blend of earth tones, pastels, and iridescent objects. (Like the calculated lo-fi quality of the

greenscreen, a southwestern bric-a-brac aesthetic, described elsewhere quite correctly as "Kmart ugly," has become something of a signature look for Moulton's work.) While watching television – another recurrent trope in the series – Cynthia obsesses over an authentic Zuni basket presented on the *Road Show*, valued at over fifteen thousand dollars by the appraiser, who declares, "Well, I guess we know it's real." The value of the artifact inspires Cynthia's belief in the authenticity of her own objects; she is thus driven to embark upon her own vision quest, donning an adobe head pot painted in gaudy southwestern patterns, and grabbing a walking stick before traversing a stone garden suggestive of O'odham "man-in-the-maze" sculptures.

Significantly, Cynthia's body is rendered incomplete at the beginning of her journey via a series of low-fi video edits. Passing through a decidedly unmonumental new-age inspired landscape populated by what might be best described as Second Life/Kings Quest detritus, a legless Cynthia arrives at the appraiser's table, only to learn that her possessions, while resembling "authentic" artisanal objects, are "merely" modern massage tools. The appraiser's earlier passing comment, which alludes to issues of connoisseurship extending far beyond the *Antiques Road Show* crowd, is thus linked quietly to Cynthia's own question—when her Zuni pot is revealed to be an Avon foot massager painted in a southwestern motif, she waivers, asking, "So, it's *not* real?"

To say that Cynthia is initially distraught over the dismissive appraisal would be an understatement – her body is

pixellated, fractured into shards, and strewn across the floor. Her crisis, however, is soon ameliorated by the ambiguous fetishes themselves: in a ritual equally channeling shamanism and 1980s era home health care, her body is reconstituted: As 10cc's "I'm Not in Love" gently throbs, a new pair of legs grow from the Avon Zuni footbath. Outfitted with a set of psychedelic chroma key appendages, Cynthia dances in euphoric abandon suggesting yet another valuing of the real, one existing alongside—yet incompatible with or otherwise apart from—certain market forces. Cynthia's objects are no less "real," yet their value remains unrecognized, undetectable to the appraiser.

II. Getting Beneath the Tinsel

Moulton's work is frequently situated in relation to a collective—and largely generational—expression that variously celebrates, laments, and exploits the visual hangover of 1980s and 1990s: wonky video tricks, experimental MTV shorts, Children's Television Workshop psychedelia, and the subcultures that such phenomena have inspired. Like Cory Archangel, Ryan Trecartin, or Paper Rad (individuals and collectives with whom she frequently exhibits and performs), Moulton is a shrewd collage artist in possession of an uncanny sense of comedic timing and, when necessary, restraint. The mediatized format of *Whispering Pines* has likewise inherited some of the sensibilities of a slightly older generation of artists (including Mike Kelley, Bruce Nauman, Tony Oursler, and Pipilotti Rist) who have worked

the fault lines between performance, video, and an expanding sculptural field. To this end, Moulton's Cynthia may be quite productively compared to Michael Smith's ongoing tragic figure "Mike," who similarly shifts from the space of videos to performances and installations, from the familiarity of museums to cable television channels and comedy clubs. And like Cynthia, Mike occupies a similarly outmoded space, the *just past* of slightly old and decidedly unhip technologies and fads. Finally, there remains the episodic nature of *Whispering Pines*, a progression that finds Cynthia aging over the years, yet, not unlike Wile E. Coyote, inexplicably reconstituted, healed, or otherwise *reanimated* at the beginning of each episode. Indeed, Cynthia's regenerative powers are cartoonish: a kind of denatured sorcery.

In "The Undiscovered Antique," Moulton subtly situates much of the above alongside an earlier moment of artistic obsession with a proliferating visual culture, namely that of the Taos-based community of artists and writers who descended on the Southwest during the first decades of the twentieth century. Made widely visible by Mabel Dodge Luhan, an interlocutor who worked to broker local connections for D.H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe, and others, the Taos scene of the 1920s and 1930s was a world of another *just past*: Remington's buffalos, the strange cubism of decaying pueblos and churches, bleached bones and skulls: all of these objects embodied a kind of exotic strangeness, for O'Keeffe a series of striking, potentially radical forms. Yet in a remarkably short period of time, the imagery of the West, once

fresh and strange, devolved into a hoary, popularized version of itself: dude ranches, tourist sites, novelty blankets. As Alexander Nemerov has written on Remington's fixation with the vanishing Old America, "when an image loses the time and place in which it was made—when it loses the sense *that* it was made at all—it becomes reified, or mistaken for what it represents. An image of the West becomes the West. As such, it gains the power of common sense of what is 'natural' about its object."

Through its heavy use of a placeless/timeless "Western" landscape populated by denatured forms, "The Undiscovered Antique" carries traces of these influences and sensibilities; Moulton likewise transposes the concerns Lawrence harbored already in the 1920s over the banalization of the West onto a general ambivalence toward the "realness" of her own *just past*. Her new-age aesthetic speaks to Lawrence's concerns over a "Tinseltown" engagement with native culture, demonstrates the ways forms and symbols are continually degraded as they migrate across various media, are unreflectively reproduced and repackaged. This is a detail worth making a bit more explicit: although one is tempted to cite the new collage and mashup, situate Moulton in relation to experimental video and performance of the past few years (indeed, others have done so, and quite eloquently), it might be worthwhile to consider Moulton instead by virtue of her approach to an expansive sense of animation, of *anima*, of activating what may otherwise seem inert or bankrupt.

III. From Just Past to New Age, or, the New Plasmatic

Like much of the *Whispering Pines* series, *The Undiscovered Antique* delivers a subtle, yet ambivalent – and therefore potentially critical – commentary on the more vacuous aspects of various New Age communities and obsessions. Moulton, as quasi-ethnographer/fellow traveler, suggests throughout her videos and performances that New Age-isms often regress into arbitrary systems of signification and reference; if one may distinguish between allegorical sedimentation and haphazard accumulation, then Moulton seems clearly interested in the latter – the piling up of stuff. Here, New Age philosophies may be read in a kind of ahistorical sense, a pastiche of differing eras and competing meanings.

In Moulton's hands, the "healing" aspects of New Age lapse into a seamless blur, sharing many qualities with the language and structure of self-help, home remedies, beauty products, all under the generalized sign of "wellness," and it is on this point that Moulton's recourse to unexpected associations are perhaps most salient: part of the joy in viewing Cynthia's initially bewildering escapades lies in cracking the code – understanding how, through her use of trailer park home décor and Avon cosmetics, Moulton employs strong misreading, word play, and what might be best described as a kind of animism to generate a hallucinatory universe, one where arbitrary rules abound: Foot massagers generate new appendages, plastic flower arrangements yield beanstalks leading to warehouse raves, and hemorrhoid cushions reveal portals to other worlds.

But more than simply "ahistorical," one might see New Age — like the other belief systems to which Cynthia subscribes — as resonating with the overall visual logic and structure of Moulton's cosmology. Like New Age, the rather placeless space of *Whispering Pines* comprises a densely layered milieu of objects, fetishes, practices, and beliefs, is of manifold meaning and perspective, an all-over visual embodiment of a worldview where differing registers of space and time are intentionally confused, collapsed, flattened via greenscreen and obsolete video rendering software.

To linger at this aspect of Moulton's work is to consider her manipulation of surface and depth, to wonder about the ways that greenscreened objects (including Cynthia herself) seem to flutter or hover in unsettling ways, slightly estranged or denatured from their original space of intended use. At a technical level, wonky chromakey allows Moulton to animate objects, punch them out of their surroundings; this practical (and let's face it, often humorous, and sometimes creepy) device grants the objects a kind of provisional autonomy, one that conjures what Eisenstein, reflecting on early Disney animations, referred to as the *plasmatic*: the capability of "primal" beings, represented as drawings, "not yet possessing a 'stable' form, but capable of assuming any form," to take on an animal existence of their own. To the point: Writing in 1941, Eisenstein saw in Disney's boundless animations a kind of radical American imaginary force, a pushing back against the dull landscape of mechanized assembly-line production and the Taylorist management

of time: to be unbound, plasmatic, to be able to assume new forms, was, for Eisenstein, "a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and greyness." But, of course, Eisenstein's utopian vision of Disney rings a bit wrong in the ears these days: whatever Disney has become, it has clearly not remained the refuge of refusal that it once may have suggested. Further, and more to the point, Eisenstein's concern with the plasmatic and a quality of *animatedness* still clearly revolves around an understanding of the individual as precisely that: a singular construction, a viewer who must receive the proper modern shock. We are far and away from Brecht's wooden donkey. But rather than rehearse all of the arguments about Cynthia's supposed alienation, it is more to the point to emphasize that the allusive trailer park of *Whispering Pines* unfolds in a completely different time-space, one where Cynthia's subjectivity, like her body, is subject to continual fragmentation.

What *does* seem important to come away with here: that Cynthia and the fetishes that fill her curious world are precisely where Eisenstein's plasmatic seems to have gone, after it was clearly no longer to be found at the Disney studios. The *Real* that so thoroughly vexes Cynthia during her visit to the *Road Show* returns precisely at the moment when her possessions make us aware of their liberated – and liberatory – status. This revelation is further complicated when these objects shift out into *our* world, as when Moulton/Cynthia *as performer*, after several unsuccessful attempts at balancing actual pots on her

head, deftly interacts with projected vases on a screen behind her, thus emphasizing a curious continuity between the flattened world of *Whispering Pines*, and the space of the performance or installation. The aforementioned "piling up of stuff" ends up looking so flat, so utterly banal, as to be a flatness against which Cynthia seems destined to push.

It's become a bit too easy to criticize or ironically celebrate the arbitrary, kitschy, or universalizing tendencies of New Age philosophies and their aesthetic trappings; Moulton's approach is here extremely commendable, because while she targets how such practices and philosophies are readily commodified, reduced to quirky technologies such as meditational cassette tapes, beauty products, and bric-a-brac, any potentially critical observations are balanced with what feels almost like an earnest plea for the need to derive meaning from experiences with the stuff that fills up our lives (or, more to the point, the stuff that filled up our lives a few years ago). And this is perhaps Moulton at her most incisive, shrewdly turning tropes like Proustian memory into a memory foam mattress monolith; a kind of mnemonic sculptural device, simultaneously carrying the weight of time and offering orthopedic comfort: both a haven from—and symbol of—the televisual anomie from which Cynthia suffers.

IV. The Corporeal

A few more words on Cynthia's anomie and the corporeal. Nestled in "The Undiscovered Antique" is a fleeting yet telling moment:

just as Cynthia is about to head out on her vision quest, the next guest appears on the road show, brandishing his great-grandfathers' prosthetic arm. The sequence is gone before one even notices, but in its focus on the prosthetic, on an ancient false limb connoting the limits of the body, the interaction emphasizes that Moulton's most enduring concern seems to be less about a singular and easily defined trauma, and more about a prolonged state of discomfort and disability. More than an easily defined injury, the fake arm suggests what follows: a ghostlike appendage, a quiet gnawing feeling, less outright physical pain, and more a sense of awkwardness, of attempting to cope.

Developed from a complex sense of physical pain, embarrassment, and anxiety, Cynthia's character seems inseparable from such a prop. She invariably appears as lonely, in states of emotional and physical duress. Moulton's timing and sense of bodily control are crucial on this point: her presence is synonymous with rigid posture, awkward gesture and general inflexibility. When considered collectively, these concerns about injured, unhealthy, or otherwise incomplete bodies represent a deeply corporeal register that can be read across nearly all of Moulton's practice.

Cynthia's repeated attempts at healing and completing herself ultimately seem rather quixotic: at best, we can aspire to bear witness to our own fragmentation on television. These attempts immediately register as humorous, almost slapstick, like Wile E. Coyote self-destructing, only to be reconstituted, made anew just seconds later. Cynthia's attempts are likewise tragic

and wry, for we see that she places such intense hope, divines self-worth from what otherwise appear as utterly empty forms. To this end, of the myriad adventures and developments that Cynthia continues to face, it will be her ability to negotiate the different spaces, registers, and totems of *Whispering Pines*, her need to simultaneously acknowledge and refuse their respective order, that will be the most challenging and perhaps liberating.

Once more to Tinseltown. The difference between Lawrence's position (or for that matter, that of Eisenstein's) and what unfolds in the spaces of *Whispering Pines* is that for Lawrence, a genuine engagement with "authentic" or "native" culture offered a position outside of (or at least adjacent to) modernity. Notably, Cynthia strives to attain such a transcendence— but is continually denied. Moulton has taken as categorical imperative the 1980s cry, "Calgon, take me away!" and set about understanding the quiet unrest that led to the plea, showing us that "away" was never really about escaping elsewhere, but rather, learning how to build that space within ourselves.

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