



MELONS, 1998, stills from SD video: 4 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.

Abject, Exposed and Potent Desires

PATTY CHANG

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

In early May, Patty Chang sent an email asking me to enumerate my fears. “The fears can be about anything,” she wrote. “They can be personal, global, societal, mundane or profound; everything is valid.” Her only stipulation was that the list be written stream-of-consciousness style. As part of a project she has been working on recently, called *Milk Debt* (2019–), she asked several people in Hong Kong to complete the same exercise. She explained that she was compiling these lists into one long script for a performer, who read out the text while pumping breast milk into a bottle in a live performance that took place in June at Tai Kwun in Hong Kong.

Milk Debt unpacks many of Chang’s recent concerns around grief, mortality and the environment, yet also harkens back to her earliest works—which dissect the body and identity—developed during her provocative early years in New York beginning in the mid-1990s. Though she was initially interested in becoming a painter, she pivoted to performance after studying under artist Eleanor Antin—a performance artist who famously took photographs of her naked, emaciated self during a month of crash dieting—for her BFA at the University of California San Diego. After graduating in 1994, she moved to New York and aligned herself with experimental art and underground club movements, performing at art spaces such as Exit Art and downtown galleries, as well as intersectional venues such as the Meatpacking District’s Clit Club and Performance Space 122 in the East Village. At these events, Chang staged seemingly unscripted actions that perverted tropes of femininity, such as holding a crystal ball between her teeth, forcing herself to smile, while wearing a traditional white wedding gown; gorging herself on phallic hot dogs; or smashing eggs that she had stuffed inside her pantyhose, with the ovum sliming down her legs and ruining her prim, working-girl suit.

Around the same time, Chang began to record these performances on video and, separately, to make short Super 8 films, having been exposed to video’s possibilities through her gigs with a New York-based cybersex company. “We had little platforms covered with felt and these little video cameras on tripods, a computer and a keyboard,” she explained. “It was weirdly intimate yet detached; the camera was a few inches from you. Around that time I started using video.”

Her earliest Super 8 films, often created in collaboration with queer cinematographer Anie “Super 8” Stanley, probed society’s relationship to deviant behavior by staging fictional stories that address extreme violations—such as rape and necrophilia—and the underground environments of pornography, queer and club culture. These early cinema works firmly cemented Chang as a “Bad Asian,” a term coined by cultural theorist Eve Oishi in her 2000 essay, “Bad Asians: New Film and Video by Queer Asian American Artists”: “Bad as in ‘badass.’ Bad as in anyone who does not covet white patriarchal approval; anyone who challenges racism, class oppression, sexism, homophobia; anyone who talks candidly about sex and desire.” In particular, Oishi pinpoints the Chang-Stanley collaboration *Paradise* (1996), a gritty porno film, as being a radical setting “for [the] subversive and raucous staging of queer sexuality.” In this film, by having two queer women—Chang and Stanley—play the roles of a white john and an Asian hooker respectively, the duo presents “queer desire masquerading as hetero-sexuality,” creating, essentially, a safe space by exploiting society’s heteronormativity.

Chang’s performances from the late 1990s and early 2000s played not only with sexuality and the feminine Asian identity, but mixed them provocatively with cultural taboos. In *Melons* (1998), she eats scoops of her own “breasts”—juice-yielding cantaloupe strapped in her brassiere—while speaking about the death of her aunt. In *For Abramović Love Cocteau* (2000), Chang riffs on artist Marina Abramović’s 1996 gesture of consuming a raw vegetable, as Chang and another female performer—who uncannily resembles herself—take turns eating a white onion, passing it back and forth between their mouths. The recorded footage of this action is played

backward in the video so that the onion is gradually re-formed and the two figures’ stream of tears shrinks to drops. Later, Chang recorded the same intimate action with each of her parents for the two-channel video *In Love* (2001), where she challenges conventional definitions of familial affection—it looks like she and her parents are kissing—as well as the dynamics of reproduction, as they all play an equal part in “birthing” the onion from their mouths, instead of the mother and father “producing” a child. In these videos, Chang symbolically relinquishes part of herself into inanimate objects, only to devour them, literally or metaphorically, much like the mythical symbol of the *ouroboros*, a snake or dragon that consumes its own tail, symbolizing eternity or endless cycles of change. Through these actions, Chang reclaims conceptions of the self—such as vanity or narcissism—on her own terms, in a repudiation of the patriarchal subjugation of women’s bodies.

These notions of self-consumption and wholeness are most clearly embodied in *Fountain*, first performed in 1999 at Jack Tilton gallery in New York. For this work, Chang installed a large round mirror on the floor of the space and covered it with water. Wearing a nondescript gray suit, she knelt and slurped the liquid from the mirror, appearing to engage in long, repeated kisses with her reflection for 35 to 40 minutes. These actions recall Jacques Lacan’s conception of the “mirror stage,” in which young toddlers see themselves in a reflection either real or socially engendered, triggering a lifelong conflict between the fragmented infantile consciousness and vulnerable body, and a newly presented, unified physical image. Responding to the idea of the racialized Asian-American woman, often viewed by society via her fractured—and, as cultural theorist Anne Anlin Cheng might say, “ornamented”—parts, Chang moves her face toward and away from the silvered surface, fragmenting and unifying her image repeatedly, and revealing a self that is fluid, moving and capable of being reconstituted back into the body, which she does so with noisy, delirious gusto.

Fountain also marked Chang’s integration of experimental video into live performance, as she streamed footage of the performance on monitors behind her and onto the walls of the gallery, heightening the work’s thematic strands of looking, subverting the male gaze, and spectatorship with this all-surrounding, intimate display of self-love. Chang set up the cameras to capture herself at a tightly cropped angle, and she rotated the footage so it appeared to be of an upright reflection, as if the mirror is against a wall. The resulting close-up, it has to be noted, resembles the magnified faces of webcam sex workers.

Chang’s extreme performances tested the politics and trauma of her Asian, female experience, and she often pushed herself beyond normal physical and psychological limits. *Shaved* (1998) consists of five minutes of tense action as the artist attempts to shave her pubic hair blindfolded, the blade at times hovering perilously close to her genitalia. In the oddly erotic video-performance (*Untitled*) *Eels* (2001), she slips live wriggling fish into her button-down blouse, squirming uncontrollably as she struggles to contain her own disgust and the unpredictable thrashing of the creatures inside of her shirt. The “Stage Fright” series (2002–04) depicts Chang feasting on takeout food while sitting on a toilet. She then purges her stomach’s contents immediately after, and



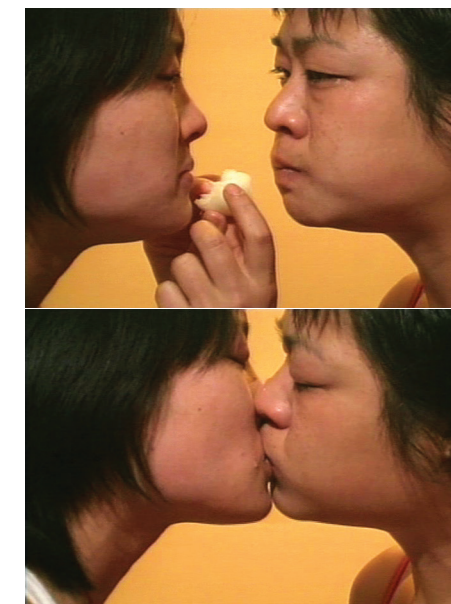
FOUNTAIN, 1999, still from SD video: 6 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



(UNTITLED) EELS, 2001, stills from SD video: 17 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



HD, 1999, photograph, dimensions unknown. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



FOR ABRAMOVIĆ LOVE COCTEAU, 2000, stills from two-channel videos: 4 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



CONTORTION, 2001, stills from video: 2 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.

repeats the actions over the course of an hour. Later, she recalled that with these works, as with *Fountain*, she “would get out-of-body experiences. Because I was just in one place for so long. I did [*Fountain*] for an extended period and almost died from drinking so much water. I had no idea. I was an idiot. When I did *Eels* for the first time, time slowed down because I have a fear of snake-like animals. I had no idea how much time had passed. Looking back on it now, it seems like a traumatic experience.”

Gradually, over the course of the 2000s, Chang began “stepping outside of the frame of performance” and shifted her ideas around identity related to the human body onto other “bodies”—of landscapes, cinema or otherwise. In the photograph and video series “Contortion” (2000–02), Chang playfully symbolized this detachment—from self as subject to self as auteur—by recording herself from the waist up and another faceless woman from the waist down, arranging the two as a single body. In a vaguely odalisque pose and wearing a scarlet-and-gold outfit, she confronts the paradox of the hypersexual yet demure Asian female. As Oishi writes: “Bad Asians,” such as Chang, “find their voices through a perverse identification and relationship with popular culture that uncovers, tweaks and plays with the racialized fantasies, fears and representations that make culture popular.” Here, Chang plays gleefully with those fantasies; she smirks, as if to taunt the viewer who tried, and failed, to objectify her body for their own pleasure.

Bodies of the Real-Imaginary

By the mid-2000s, as Chang was removing herself from her performance works, she became interested in the early cinema landscape—in particular the Euro-American suppression of global cosmopolitanism and intellectualism, and the impact that had on transnational figures such as 20th-century Asian-American screen siren Anna May Wong, who struggled against racial pigeonholing throughout her acting career. In *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West* (2009), Chang records three academics attempting to translate on the spot an article written in German into English by Walter Benjamin, about his encounter with Wong in 1928. Scenes of the translators struggling with the text are juxtaposed with location shots of the Walter Benjamin Archive library in Berlin and a film studio in Hangzhou, depicting the awkwardness of cross-cultural exchange such as that between Benjamin and Wong, where the former reduces the latter to a stereotype with passages such as “her hair flowing loose like a dragon romping in water.” A follow-up work, *The Product Love (Die Ware Liebe)* (2009) presents a subversive masquerading act similar to the earlier *Paradise*, in which two Chinese actors play Wong and Benjamin in a fictionalized account of their encounter, set partially in Hangzhou instead of the original Berlin, and, in Chang’s retelling, is an erotic love affair rather than a professional meeting.

These experiments in the language of cinema inevitably bled into Chang’s curiosities about other forms that can carry personal, sometimes invisible histories, such as natural landscapes. In 2005, Chang was commissioned by Three M Project—the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the New Museum, New York—to produce a work for the three venues. Chang had been considering the idea of constructing artificial landscapes—what she calls “performative spaces”—to evoke real-life memories or narratives. For the multi-installation project *Shangri-La* (2005), she was inspired by the history of the Yunnan town of Zhongdian, which in 2001 was renamed Shangri-La after the fictional lamasery featured in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. As depicted in the 40-minute video component of the work, Chang loaded a pickup truck with a silvered “mountain”—a multi-faceted, mirrored chipboard sculpture—and hired several locals to drive it around Shangri-La. The camera following this journey occasionally captures the seamless alignment of the artificial hill within the actual mountain ranges, before the truck turns the corner and the sculpture becomes a detached object once more. Elsewhere in the video, robed monks lie in a hyperbaric chamber wearing oxygen masks. Here, the artificial accompanies the real: the scale model is fabricated, but inspired by nearby mountains; and the oxygen chamber was also crafted by Chang, based on real equipment used to treat altitude sickness. Similarly, *Shangri-La* was conjured up in the mind of James Hilton, but is now an actual place. In engaging with these invented yet simultaneously real settings, Chang reveals how narratives can be built, and how they in turn can provide the foundation for new stories. Chang noted in 2005 to the *Los Angeles Times* that “the interactions with the townspeople were the only way to combine the ideas of a real place and a fantasy place,” effectively suggesting that this merger produces a third, metaphysical place, one that is neither real nor artificial.

Shangri-La prefigured the establishment of the artist’s semi-ethnographic, semi-magical-realist style, one that is more discursive rather than straightforwardly narrative. *Flotsam Jetsam* (2007), a 30-minute video made with her longtime collaborator and partner David Kelley, for example, ties together several disparate elements: an underwater seamount in the Pacific Ocean into which a nuclear submarine supposedly crashed; the impact of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, which displaced some one million people; and Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Playing on the ideas of visible-invisible and real-imaginary, the video contains footage of a submarine sculpture sailing on the Yangtze near the half-built hydroelectric dam, with actors and dancers performing on the vessel, interspersed with scenes from a psychotherapy session in a swimming pool; and people swimming across the river, a reference to Mao Zedong’s dips in the same body of water. Commenting on the project in the arts journal *Afterimage*, Chang said: “When people have feelings in a place, their interior is exteriorized onto a landscape—that’s a way to create affect in the landscape. The people are exposing something for us to feel. They’re trying to externalize something so that we can feel something in that place too.” Thus the water becomes a sort of conduit for dreaming—one woman in the film recalls a fantasy about flying in the air while reclining in the pool—or collective anxiety around the dam and reservoir, which, as Chang noted during the filming of *Flotsam Jetsam* was full of ghost towns built well above the dam, in case people had to move from their original low-lying homes in the event of flooding.

Chang’s works took a more fatalistic turn around the time of her father’s death. In *Que Sera, Sera* (2013), Chang cradles her one-year-old son as she sings the titular song to him and her father, who lies immobile and mute in his hospital bed. Popular since its release in the 1950s, the song—a first-person story of a woman from the perspective of her younger self in conversation with her mother



SHANGRI-LA, 2005, still from single-channel video: 40 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



SHANGRI-LA, 2005, stills from single-channel video: 40 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



FLOTSAM JETSAM, 2007, stills from single-channel video installation created in collaboration with David Kelley: 30 min. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



Installation view of **GLASS URINARY DEVICES**, 2017, 32 hand-blown borosilicate glass, plastic, tape and cardboard sculptures with brass mounts on custom foam, plywood, and metal table, dimensions variable, at "The Wandering Lake 2009-2017," Queens Museum, New York, 2017-18. Photo by Hai Zhang. Courtesy Queens Museum.



CONFIGURATIONS (BREAD), 2017, part of the project "The Wandering Lake" (2009-17), inkjet print, 71.1 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



Photo installation from the series "Letdown (Milk)," 2017, part of the project "The Wandering Lake" (2009-17), inkjet print on custom plywood panels, 43.6 x 59.7 cm. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



INVOCATION FOR A WANDERING LAKE, PART I, 2015, still from video projection with sound: 12 min 49 sec, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



Photo installation from the series "Letdown (Milk)," 2017, part of the project "The Wandering Lake" (2009-17), inkjet print on custom plywood panels, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.

about her future—takes on a menacing sheen in the context of the world's ecological devastation. In Chang's frantic a capella rendition, she grapples with the grief of her dying father and her anxiety over her son's future. Although Chang appears in control, one sees her resolve breaking under pressure as she quaveringly repeats the song's lines: *Que será, será / Whatever will be, will be / The future's not ours to see / Que será, será / What will be, will be.*

The Milkmaid and her Whale

In his book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), based on a 2013 essay first published in the *New York Times*, writer Roy Scranton urges that we must accept the inevitability of human extinction—and that we are beyond the point at which it was possible to create a viable future for the planet. He writes: "The greatest challenge we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality." Scranton's warning gave Chang insight into the malaise that she had been experiencing, which had colored recent projects, in particular *Shangri-La* and *Flotsam Jetsam*: "There was [already] a certain level of mourning in these works. I was already thinking about how the environment puts pressure on the body." These ideas coalesced in the ambitious and wide-ranging *The Wandering Lake* (2009-17), which, in looking at grief around humanity's potential extinction in the harsh light of day, triggered a profound metamorphosis in Chang's practice and outlook on life.

The Wandering Lake is, superficially, about civilization's role in environmental loss, in particular the disappearance of water. Over a period of eight years, Chang embarked on several expeditions across China, Uzbekistan and Fogo Island in Newfoundland, initially inspired by Swedish explorer Sven Hedin (1865-1952), who published important reports on water migration in Central Asia. She first went in search of Xinjiang's Lop Nur and Uzbekistan's

Aral Sea, endorheic lakes that dried up due to human intervention—dams, in the case of Lop Nur, and, for the Aral Sea, an irrigation plan executed by the Soviet government to hydrate surrounding deserts. She then traced the history of the Atlantic cod fish—which in 1992 was declared an endangered species due to decades of aggressive overfishing—back to Canada's Fogo Island, which since the 15th century has been a prime commercial fishery for Europeans and North Americans. Most recently, in China, she charted the ducts and dams of the ongoing South-to-North Water Diversion Project, which aims to transfer 44.8 billion cubic meters of water annually from the Yangtze River to the arid, water-stressed north—an infrastructure project expected to displace hundreds of thousands of people.

On these journeys, Chang followed a path carved by civilization's collective actions and enacted her own rituals, suggesting that, while we can't ignore environmental devastation, we can, as individuals, "re-look at our relationship with our world from a non-hierarchical, non-capitalistic viewpoint." For example, every time she came to an aqueduct in Hubei province, she would urinate into makeshift "feminine urinary devices"—plastic water bottles with cut-out "funnels" made from waste, including a hot dog bun, collected on her travels. On Fogo Island, she filmed herself washing the body of a dead white whale, in a moving elegy to the mammoth creature. In the Aral Sea, she performed the same ablution on the hull of a rusted fishing boat lying on the sand. After giving birth to her son Leroy, she revisited the lake and documented that journey through photographs of the breast milk she left in empty metal tins, saucers, cups and plates, after the local government forbade her from further photographing or filming the area.



Installation view of **INVOCATION OF A WANDERING LAKE, PART II**, 2016, projection of single-channel video: 12 min 49 sec, dimensions variable, at "The Wandering Lake 2009-2017," Queens Museum, New York, 2017-18. Photo by Hai Zhang. Courtesy Queens Museum.



Photo installation from the series "Letdown (Milk)," 2017, part of the project "The Wandering Lake" (2009–17), inkjet print on custom plywood panels, 11.7 × 16 cm. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



MILK DEBT, 2019, still from video in production. Courtesy the artist, David Kelley and Bank/Mabsociety, Shanghai.



Image of live performance MILK DEBT, at Tai Kwun, Hong Kong, 2019. Courtesy the artist, Melissa Lee and Tai Kwun.

Photographs, videos and ephemera from these trips were displayed in her traveling solo exhibition, which premiered at the Queens Museum in New York in 2017 and was then mounted at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2019. In the show, Chang used these symbols and rituals of labor—washing, weaning—to implicate herself in the landscape and to connect with the objects she encountered on her journeys. Videos and photographs of her actions were screened on folding panels set at different angles, the arrangements looking almost like abstractions of limbs, torso and head. Chang had the improvised feminine urinary devices from her trip across China pristinely re-created in borosilicate glass by a Brooklyn-based glass blower, transforming them from their plastic banality—and their link to the planet's death—into shamanistic objects. Additionally, her son's birth and father's death, both which took place over the course of her making *The Wandering Lake*, lends a journal-like quality to the exhibition. Pictures of Chang's breast milk and her singing voice in *Que Sera Sera* feature alongside images and videos of sand and sea, as if to link the ebbs and flows of the landscape with the comings and goings of human existence, and reminding us, in Chang's words, that both life and landscape are "temporary, lyrical and impacted."

These intense emotions spill over into her latest project, *Milk Debt* (2019–), which takes its title from the Chinese Buddhist idea that we each owe an unpayable debt—or a bond—to the parents and forebears that gave us life. For this project, much like in her earliest performances, Chang once again focuses on the possibilities of the human body, this time charting its emotional and physical register through the most nurturing, and perhaps also valuable of liquids: breast milk. Having the performer list fears crowd-collected from a specific city, she mentioned, is a way to take

the temperature of that place, and to evoke the various large and small bonds that take us through life: such as between mother and child; and between the landscape—Mother Earth—and the people who govern it. Notably, the performance at Tai Kwun's JC Cube occurred the evening before a monumental protest against a proposed extradition bill in Hong Kong, and as such, the lists, which had been collected a few weeks prior, were fraught with political fears—"anxieties that are not always so visible" all the time, Chang reminded us, yet are constantly present. On a physical level, there was also an emphasis on the Donna Haraway-esque cyborgian productions inherent in the female body, made explicit by the absence of a baby and the introductory sound of the pump mechanically sucking at the air before the performer, local schoolteacher Heather Lin, joined the machine to her body and began to speak. Currently, Chang is working on a video, with fears collected from other places and other people read out by the Los Angeles-based performing artist Kestrel Leah.

Chang frequently ruminates on her own fears, much in the way that the author Roy Scranton adheres to a recommendation found in *Hagakure*, an 18th-century Samurai manual: "Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily." As part of that practice, she has begun to stitch her anxieties onto comforters as a way to reconcile with these worries, and also to utilize them in order to remain present. "DEATH / LEROY'S FUTURE DEATH / DEATH OF THE HUMAN SPECIES / DEATH OF THE EARTH," one quilt reads, the letters loosely sewn into the bulky fabric. While the eels, eggs, vomit and urine of her earlier works are gone, one might say that her relationship with these blankets, which can smother as well as comfort, is even more unorthodox. She doesn't just confront her own mortality so much as she snuggles with it—and isn't that the most extreme performance of all?