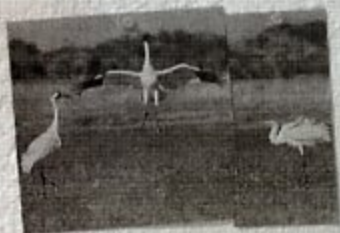


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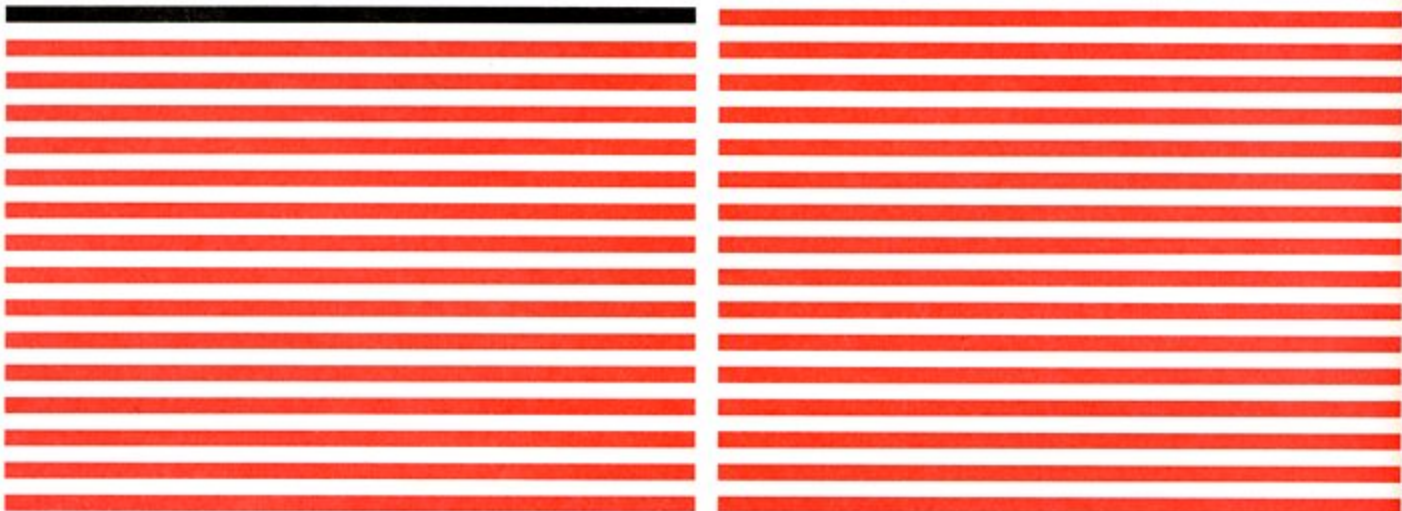
Passionate Interaction:  
Interview with Patty Chang

Eve Oishi



1. Patty Chang. "Fountain." 1999. Video still.

2. Patty Chang. "In Love." 2001. Video still, two channel video.





In discussing her 1999 show, "Fountain," at New York's Jack Tilton Gallery, New York artist Patty Chang cites the works of Marina Abramovic and Jean Cocteau as inspiration. This is a fitting way to summarize two major strains in Chang's work: the influences of early performance artists like Abramovic and Ana Mendieta, who use their own bodies to cross and blur the boundaries separating film, video, photography and live performance; and that of surrealist cinema, with its ability to suture what appears to be unconnected and to split what appears to be whole.

In "Fountain" Chang poured water onto the surface of a round mirror lying flat on the floor and, kneeling over it, strenuously slurped the water off. This action, which was repeated for thirty to forty-five minutes at a time, was captured by a stationary video camera, and the image was projected both on a monitor outside the gallery and onto a screen behind Chang's body. The video image was tilted to make Chang's face and its reflection appear upright on the screen. The effect was a prostrate live body drinking water from the floor, while behind it, an enlarged, straining image kissed itself in a mirror. "Fountain's" ambiguous image of a labored, mirrored kiss reappears in her most recent video installation, "In Love" (2001), which was part of the recent "Moving Pictures" exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In this piece, one monitor displays a close-up of Chang's face pressed against that of her mother while a second monitor pairs her with her father. The two screens document the slow and intimate process of Chang passing an onion from her mouth to her parents', slowly consuming it until it has disappeared. The footage is run backward, however, so the audience actually watches the onion being reconstructed by the tearing, kissing faces.

Chang's short films (some in collaboration with filmmaker Anie "Super 8" Stanley) have shown in underground and experimental film festivals throughout the world. She has created and exhibited over a dozen performance pieces, and she has moved into photography, with collaborator David Kelley, as a third medium of expression. Despite the variety of media she uses, Chang's body of work is drawn together by the bold, outrageous, and yet subtle use of her own body to test the borders of flesh and the body and to explore the physical and ideological ways in which women's bodies are stitched, clamped, hooked, squeezed and dismantled into femininity. In one performance entitled "Melons (At a Loss)" (1998) Chang inserts melons into the cups of her corset. As she tells a fantastical story about inheriting a poisonous commemorative plate at the death of her aunt, she slices into one of her breasts, scoops chunks out and eats them. In another, "Gong Li with the Wind" (with Rajendra Roy at New York University Cantor Film Center, 1995) she gorges on beans and shits them out from under a hoop skirt. In all of her work, the line between her own body and the props of her performance is deliberately troubled.

Much of her performance, film and photographic work involves inanimate objects with which Chang, in her own words, "interacts passionately." The objects range from a 200-pound block of ice, to a blow-up doll, to a dozen hot dogs that are crammed into her mouth, to live eels that are stuffed into her shirt, "Eels" (2001). The concept of "passionate interaction" perverts and troubles the lines between ecstasy and torture, and between desire and anxiety. Chang has the ability to find the exact line at which discomfort crosses over into pain—both for herself and for the audience—and to hold that line exactly one second too long.

In her 1996 Super8 film *Paradise*, an indictment of the twin pleasure industries of international tourism and the sex trade, Chang is a hooker servicing a john. In "Hub Cap" (1997) Chang and co-director Stanley play lovers who are murdered and posthumously raped by a sadistic police officer. Unlike many performance artists who recreate images of their own exploitation and abuse as a ritual, a way of purging and sharing the experience with an audience made complicit in the trauma, Chang's scenes of self-inflicted torture maintain a quality of critical distance, of detached reflection, even of campy humor, without losing their powerful emotional edge.

This achievement is most apparent in Chang's performance pieces, which force the viewer into a direct confrontation with the physicality of her art. In a series of performances titled "Alter Ergo" as part of the group show "Terra Bomba" at Exit Art in 1997, Chang balanced her body in a variety of poses as she performs/endures a simple act usually associated with feminine passivity. In the performance "Candies," she stands, wearing a simple gray business suit, with her pantyhose sewn together and her sleeves sewn to sides. A dental device forces her mouth open and pulls her forward via a string attached to the wall. A bright light fixes her gaze forward, and a steady stream of saliva connects her mouth to the floor, where the remains of discarded peppermint candies lie scattered. Her clothing, the instruments, even her own saliva create interlinked parts of a bizarre machine, a machine which draws our attention toward, not away from, her strained corporeality.

In another piece from the same show, Chang perches precariously on a chair, wearing a sleeveless black shift and, slowly and with great concentration, sews words into her neck with the aid of a hand-held mirror. The experience of watching these pieces is intense, for although Chang is not practicing extreme self-mutilation or torture (she sews into a prosthetic covering over her neck, not into her actual skin), her poses and activities mimic the subtle, steady and ubiquitous discomforts that women endure daily as well as the many forms of pressure—surgical, domestic, cultural—that define, shape and control the bodies of women. The tension in the piece comes less from watching a needle being stuck repeatedly into Chang's neck than in the unnaturally canted pose she strikes on her chair and the quivering, methodical action of her hands.

Her performance pieces can be best described as balancing acts, not only in the way she manipulates her body but in her ability to create works that juxtapose absolute stillness with explosive tension, sly humor with incisive revelation, and penetrating commentary with emotional force.



Eve Oishi: Your body is always the central subject in your work. How do you feel about the different possibilities for using or working through your body in the various media you employ like photography or performance? Do you feel that the use of your body is different if you're doing something live or if you're packaging it to put it on film?

Patty Chang: Packaging is a way to put it. The process is different when I think about "fitting" a performance within the format of a video. I control much more which parts of a performance are seen, but the elements of presence and the level of audience engagement that requires are eliminated. People who walk in and out of video installations are much lazier than people who sit through performances.

Oishi: The video of "Fountain," taken out of context of the live performance, takes on a life of its own since you don't know exactly how the image was produced. For example, you can see the strain on your face, which is gravity pulling your face downward, but in the video, your face and its reflection are upright, so the effect is instead a horizontal pull of your face toward its reflection.

Chang: Yes, it's the physical inevitability of being drawn to drink in yourself.

Oishi: Tell me about your process. I remember being blown away once when, after a particularly grueling performance, "Fountain," you mentioned to me that you had never rehearsed it. Do you ever test your pieces beforehand or are they always performed for the first time at a show?

Chang: That depends on the performance. I generally don't rehearse my pieces like in theater. I have an idea in my mind about how it would manifest, and then I take it from there.

Oishi: I would be afraid that a lot of the pieces couldn't be done. Like the peppermint one.

Chang: "Candies." I did end up performing it a few times at Exit Art Gallery [1997] and later on as well. But the first time I did it, I had no idea if it would actually work. As a rehearsal I stuffed the mints in my mouth to see if I would drool.

Oishi: I would be worried that you simply would not be able to endure it.

Chang: The first time I attempted "Fountain" I thought, "Two hours of drinking, no problem!" I could only do 45 minutes.

Oishi: Straight?!

Chang: It was painful, and I thought I was going to puke. I was fighting back and thinking, "Okay, don't puke. It's kind of tacky at the opening."

Oishi: Well, actually, in all of the performances that I've seen you do, the endurance aspect is really a large part of it. It always feels like there is this tension—in us watching it and you doing it—about whether you can sustain it.

Chang: Endurance is just something that lasts a little too long. The line between comfort and discomfort is slight, and the point is to balance right on it.

Oishi: How do you begin conceptualizing a piece and then actualizing that concept?

Chang: It's always a different process. For instance, I was watching Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus*, and I loved the part where he reconstructs a flower that has been ripped apart. I found the scene very touching. I was also watching Marina Abramovic's video where she eats a whole onion, and I felt it was so sad to be having this experience alone. Sharing an awful experience with another person binds you together. For a video, I ate the onion with a friend and after the onion was finished and our eyes were streaming with tears, the most logical thing to do was to kiss. This video is "Untitled (For Abramovic Love Cocteau)" [2000]. As I thought about this awful yet exquisitely touching act, I imagined the least likely people I would want to do it with... my parents. And this is why I attempted to make "In Love."

Oishi: When I saw "In Love" I was immediately struck by its visual similarity to the video version of "Fountain," except that instead of sharing an act of consumption/kissing with your mirror reflection, you are sharing it with your parents, whose physical similarity to you creates a kind of mirror effect. Was this a similarity that you were aware of when you created the piece? What was the difference for you between sharing this kind of "awful yet exquisitely touching act" with yourself and with your parents?

Chang: Even in "Untitled (For Abramovic Love Cocteau)," I share the onion with a Chinese girl, so the mirroring is consistently in the different stages of the piece. With my parents, the relationship is not a direct mirror, but a triangular relationship, which I was basing on Greek tragedies, going back to my original inspiration of the story of Orpheus.



Oishi: The element of endurance that you mention earlier—finding the line between comfort and discomfort and holding it just a little too long—that element is very much in evidence in “In Love.” It is an uncomfortable thing to watch the lines of intimacy and sensuality between parent and child being troubled and worried in this piece. When I saw this piece at the Guggenheim, I heard a lot of audible expressions of discomfort and unease. What was it like working with your parents on this piece? Was it difficult to persuade them to do it? How have they responded to the finished product?

Chang: I was extremely nervous about approaching them to do the piece. They had seen “Untitled (For Abramovic Love Cocteau)” already. I called my mom and explained to her what I wanted to do and I was surprised when she said she thought it was a nice idea. Then she said I had to ask my father because he doesn’t like to eat onions. He decided that once in a while was OK. After we made the piece, I edited it together and sent it to them. My mom called me and said they received it in the mail and were going to sit down and watch it that evening. She didn’t call me back to tell me how it went. Then I decided to have them make another video. I wanted them to separately think about their ideas about what love is. I asked them not to exchange notes and to film themselves separately on opposite ends of the same couch speaking into the camera about their idea of love. Then I took the footage and superimposed them together so that they are sitting together on a couch, both semi-transparent, and talking about love at the same time: sometimes it makes sense and sometimes it’s nonsense. This video is “On Love” [2002].

Oishi: I’ve written about you as an Asian American artist in the context of Asian American film and video, and in your piece “Gong Li With the Wind” you are explicitly spoofing Asian identity and stereotypes. But in your “Alter Ergo” show at Exit Art, although Asian American identity is never directly referenced, I felt that the poses and the tableaux you were creating were very reminiscent of traditional ways in which Asian women are represented: constricted, still, eyes downcast, carrying food, martyr-like. How much does that identity feature in your performance, particularly in your use of your body?

Chang: The fact that I am in almost all the pieces makes it very difficult not to reference Asian female identity; either as fitting within the confines of Asian female representation or else consciously rejecting that identity.

Oishi: The stereotypes are so deep in the cultural subconscious, that it feels like, even if you’re not explicitly saying, “I’m doing an Asian woman now,” just seeing you embodying these poses, brings the question to mind.

Chang: I am always doing an Asian woman.

Oishi: And do you play with that image or try to incorporate audience perception of your ethnicity into your performance? There is also often an assumption that Asians, particularly Asian women, represent a transparent authenticity. So anything you talk about that seems autobiographical becomes this kind of ethnographic spectacle.

Chang: In “Melons” I explain receiving a commemorative plate when my aunt dies and this is often understood by audiences as a Chinese custom, whereas it’s really a made-up story to fill a lapse in emotional memory.

Oishi: Were you trying, in this piece, to parody or subvert ethnographic conventions by being a false informant? Or was the audience belief that this was a Chinese custom something that you did not expect?

Chang: Wouldn’t it be great if you DID get a commemorative plate when someone died? Art is not always an accurate source of information; people in this line of work make things up. Only if they come in expecting something does their perception get manipulated.

Oishi: One of the consistent themes in your performances is the instability and unreliability of your body to keep its shape or its integrity. In one piece you shave your pussy while blindfolded, in another you scoop out mounds of your breasts, which are melons, and eat them, in another you shed endless layers of coats like dead skin that accumulate in a huge pile on the floor. Can you talk about the way you feel about your own skin or your body and what its function is in your art?

Chang: I like that you use the word integrity. A body with integrity is hard to find. Perhaps I am trying to take my damaged, divided and immoral body, and making it as whole as possible.

Eve Oishi is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at California State University, Long Beach. Her research is on Asian American, queer and experimental film and video, and she has curated programs for film festivals in New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Portland.

