

Meandering Meaning in the Art of Patty Chang

By Pauline J. Yao

That contemporary art often deals in matters of abstraction and unknowability has become a common, if predictable platitude. Ambiguity, indeterminacy, provocation, questioning and doubt-filled gestures have become the order of the day, and it would seem that more makeshift and open-ended work of art tends to be, the warmer the embrace by the contemporary art world. This is not to say that meaning is absent, rather it is increasingly obscured or politely deferred, to the point where a given work is marked not by what it says but by what it doesn't say. This shift in contemporary art making might be attributed to undercurrents in our globalizing world, namely the growing uncertainties, insecurities and contingencies that penetrate our daily lives and as a result, infect artistic and creative practices; or to the implicit and perpetual attempt to express that which is inexpressible. More than ever before, we find our lives oddly united by profound experiences of dissociation, disruption or disjuncture, just as we are simultaneously reminded through art of the tenuous borders that lie between truth and fiction, veracity and invention.

Unraveling the art of Patty Chang is to dive head-on into an unfolding process that skirts these nebulous boundaries and veers towards identity, gender, emotion, history and language. At times it is like taking journey into uncharted waters: a map may exist but it is highly circuitous, and encounters along the way are at times off-putting, alluring or downright misleading. Be it daring performances that test her own physical limits or the limits of the audience; or short film/video works that center upon processes of mythmaking, constructed identities and the production of real and fictive cultural imaginaries, Chang's work is designed to register meaning obliquely, and it might seem, accidentally. An example of the latter would be her 2005 film *Shangri-La*, an intuitive exploration of a real city (Zhongdian in China's Yunnan Province) that named itself after the imaginary locale Shangri-La, made famous by British writer James Hilton's 1933 book *Lost Horizon*. The film moves effortlessly between fact and fiction, mixing staged

scenes with documentary footage as it reflexively depicts the real and symbolic peregrinations of Chang herself alongside the townspeople's own repeated construction and reconstruction of their emblematic icon Snow Mountain.

If Chang's quest for meaning often takes place within an unfolding mode of psychic meandering, then the mechanisms of enunciation and speech are valuable indicators by which the expression of cultural identities and/or personal histories are either suppressed or deflected. In an early performance *Alter Ergo* (1997), Chang is literally rendered speechless as she stands immobile for hours, her mouth filled with candies as a slow ebb of drool drips down her tailored shirt; in *Melons (at a loss)* (1999), she wears a brassiere outfitted with cantaloupes, one of which she proceeds to cut open and scoop out the flesh while blankly recounting an arbitrary story from her childhood. The work is an absurd juxtaposition of an outwardly meaningless and destructive action with an even more incongruous use of language. Or take *Shaved (at a loss)* (1998), *Fountain* (1999), *Eels* (2001), *In Love* (2001), or even *Contortion* series (2000-2002)—all performances in which no words are uttered at all, instead it is the artist's body that becomes the expressive vehicle. In her more recent film-based work, Chang's decenters herself as the main subject but takes up questions of language with new fervor, a case in point being the vectors of translation, mistranslation and linguistic mishap at work in *Chinoiserie Out of The Old West* (2006). And lastly there is *Minor* (2010), a short film that suggests not just an inability to speak but perhaps an inability to be heard.

The two works included in this exhibition—*In Love* (2001) and *Minor* (2010) cogently reflect Chang's ongoing interest in pairing feelings of longing, connectedness, and desire with the conflicting trajectories of pain, absence and loss. Provocative and visually arresting, *In Love* more than hints at the unspoken, unconditional yet often bitter love that exists between parent and child, while making use of slight video trickery to further manipulate and redirect clear meaning. Depicting the artist in two separate shots with each of her parents, the dual-screen video *In Love* simultaneously shows Chang

face to face with her mother and, in the adjacent frame, face to face with her father. Slowly, on both screens at the same time, the artist presses her face against each of her parents as if engaging in a full mouth kiss. The audience soon learns (the video runs in reverse time) that the act performed is not a kiss but something just as disturbingly intimate—biting and passing a raw onion back and forth between their mouths. Their chewing is slow and methodical, and parent and child share entranced gazes, yet at the same time each fights back tears from the onion's pungent taste. Love, desire, pain and grief mix in this moving work, which in its reversal suggests qualities of redemption.

Shot in 2009 in China's westernmost region of Xinjiang, *Minor* marks Chang's fourth time filming and working in China. Weaving together disparate scenes—covertly filmed footage of a famed Tarim mummy, parachute strings dancing in the desert wind, whispered dialogue with a young Uighur girl, and motorized vehicles pattering along an empty road trailing ancestral linguistic markers—*Minor* is a meditation on the troubled relationships between territory and culture, center and periphery, open violence and hidden loss, emptiness and concreteness. As a bizarre and unrecorded footnote, during Chang's filming communicative language was experiencing its own mishap, this time at the hands of the Chinese government. As a result of the recent violent uprising, all internet access and text messaging capabilities were blocked throughout the region, and although incoming messages could be received, nothing could be sent out. Rendered effectively voiceless while wandering in a strange land, Chang's attitude towards the 'embodiment of making' takes on a new dimension of meaning. Viewers are left, in the film's final sequence, with haunting references to unspoken pain as the artist literally and silently inscribes the words "turbulence", "slaughter" and "trauma" on the glass surface of an airplane window as it soars above the boundless desert landscape, journeying towards an unknown horizon.