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USA

## NEW TERRITORIES: INTERVIEW WITH PATTY CHANG

BY MING LIN

*The New York-based artist Patty Chang has been making daring forays in performance art since the late 1990s. In Eels (1999), she captivated viewers onscreen, appearing to be somewhere between throws of ecstasy and pain—but irreducible to neither—later attributing this to the live eels that filled her blouse and wriggled uncontrollably against her skin. In another work, Chang came uncomfortably close to incest by making chewing movements against the lips of her own parents. Teetering precariously between humor and embarrassment, Chang's early works push the body to its limits, alluding to the fluidity of identity by confounding any attempt at characterization. In the past few years, the artist has left her performance practice for documentary filmmaking and, along with her partner, David Kelley, begun composing narratives that delicately explore a nuanced dialogue between the East and West through the interweaving of fact and fiction. Over email, Chang discussed this shift with ArtAsiaPacific, sharing some insights on her latest projects.*



**PATTY CHANG**, still from *Eels*, 1999, video, 16 min. Courtesy the artist.



**PATTY CHANG**, *In Love*, 2001, two-channel video, 3 min 28 sec loop. Courtesy the artist.

### **What have you been working on lately?**

I'm working on a project about the "Wandering Lake," which is based on Lake Lop Nur in Xinjiang, China. A Swedish explorer at the beginning of the last century was asked by the Chinese government to find a modern Silk Road—a way to travel through the desert. He was searching for Lake Lop Nur, which changed locations and was mapped differently by various explorers. I'm interested in shifting geography and how geopolitical situations affect landscape, and vice versa. So far this project deals with searching for the Wandering Lake of Xinjiang, the Uighur/Han population, the Aral Sea, and thinking about irrigation as a form, along with some other stuff.

### **There's a tendency in your work to make the mechanisms of the film apparent (camera and personnel giving directions are visible at various moments) allowing the viewer to maintain some semblance of reality. What is your intention behind this?**

In *Flotsam Jetsam* (2007), my collaborator David Kelley and I wanted the filmmaking process to be very apparent. The strategy of using film within the film was in order to present our own subjectivity of coming to the Three Gorges Dam and trying to make a video about a place we did not live, where we were outsiders, which was an issue we first encountered while making our work *Shangri-La* (2005). Within the project there is an intersection between the narratives and issues that unfold and our own issues of processing this information.



**PATTY CHANG** and **DAVID KELLEY**, still from *Flotsam Jetsam*, 2007, HDCAM, color, sound, 30 min. Courtesy the artists.



**PATTY CHANG** and **DAVID KELLEY**, still from *Route 3*, 2011, three-channel HD video installation. Courtesy the artists.



**PATTY CHANG**, still from *Shangri-La*, 2005, video, 40 mins. Courtesy the artist.

### **How do you reconcile these multiple, nonauthoritative positions?**

In our film *Route 3* (2011), for example, the road is the protagonist—literally and metaphorically. The narratives don't follow a linear trajectory. The road is intersected by the paths people use through it and around it, serving as a point of meeting and departure. The camera travels from Laos' border with Thailand to its border with China and includes visual images of the road and the life of people along it. Surreal events occur and perspectives get altered along the way. There were real facts and consequential economic events happening while we were there, resulting in imagery of a better life and constructed narratives about place on both a national and personal level.

### **Who are your actors? What is your rapport with them? In your film *Shangri-La* (2005) you had local artisans give physical form to a fictional utopia. How did they react to this and were there any interesting real-life consequences?**

*Shangri-La* involved reproducing the iconography found in James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, which involves the rituals and imagery of Tibetan Buddhism. I chose these symbols, but the physical form was a collaborative process affected by translation and the limitations of materials available to us locally. People had come from different parts of China to work as fabricators and contractors. Thus the makers were often foreign as well. We asked a contractor to build a reproduction of an oxygen pressure chamber and a sacred snow mountain. The sacred snow mountain was built behind a karaoke complex on the edge of town that was run by a monk. He was very opinionated about how the snow mountain





**PATTY CHANG**, still from *Shangri-La*, 2005, video, 40 mins. Courtesy the artist.



**PATTY CHANG**, still from *Shangri-La*, 2005, video, 40 mins. Courtesy the artist.

should look, telling the contractor how big to build it. It turned out that he wanted to keep the snow mountain in front of his karaoke bar after we finished building it in order to attract customers to the joint. It was still there six months later when we came back.

**Whereas your earlier works seemed to focus much more on the body (yours), you made limited appearances in projects proceeding *Shangri-La*. Can you explain this shift? How has stepping away allowed you to advance?**

I started with performance and I still consider that to be a very important aspect of my work. The performances I made with my body were emotionally tiring and I decided to find other ways of sustaining a practice. In my current work, I'm still interested in mythologies and imaginaries, the politics and poetics of being in the world. I'd like to follow the example of Louise Bourgeois who had a long and full life of artmaking. During the seven or so decades of her career, she had various ways of working from drawings to sculpture to installation and performance. I hope that my work continues to evolve and change and if it doesn't look the same in 2040 as it did in 1995, I would be very happy.

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