

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

China's Buried Past and Submerged Future: Patty Chang and David Kelley's 'Flotsam Jetsam'

by [John Yau](#) on July 6, 2014



Patty Chang and David Kelley, "Flight Attendant" (2007), pigmented inkjet print, 40 x 50 inches (all images courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

In the opening moments of the film [Flotsam Jetsam](#) (2007) by Patty Chang and David Kelley, currently playing at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (March 15–August 15, 2014), a bridge-like structure is seen in the distance, partially traversing what seems to be a wide river. It is a grey and overcast day, with a polluted-looking sky. The camera's cropped view, from the prow of a tour boat, frames three passengers sitting in the front row. A young woman in a pale blue uniform with a red and white scarf walks to the front, turns and welcomes them (and the audience) to the China Southern Airlines. She is a flight attendant and her instructions include how to blow air into a life

preserver.

With this displacement, *Flotsam Jetsam* begins with decisively bent logic and does not let up. The flight attendant is one of a handful of anomalous characters populating this beguiling film, which seamlessly weaves together different forms, including documentary realism, fiction, television news, dream-like passages and a film-within-a film. In a sequence that comes shortly after the attendant appears, we see a man standing on a container in a shipyard, holding a sound boom. Just below him we see a man dressed in a tiger's outfit lying on the ground as workers pass by. As the camera zooms in on the tiger man, a voice instructs him to get up, run and hide in an enclosed area. His wife chases him around with a stick. By including the boom operator in the frame, while focusing on the wife chasing the tiger-man around, the audience knows it is watching a film-within-a-film.



Patty Chang and David Kelley, "Linyi and Tiger" (2007), pigmented inkjet print, 40 x 50 inches

Near the end of the sequence the couple's daughter enters the enclosed area (or stage set) and stops the mother. Once the filming is done, the workers walk away. What are we to make of this stand-alone sequence about a fractious Chinese family with a daughter? Is the tiger-father Chang's version of the Western stereotype, the Asian Tiger Mom? If so, what are we to make of the mom who beats the tiger-father away?

Out of an *mélange* of discrete sequences, such as the two I have briefly described, Chang and Kelley construct a complex, lyrical view of the impact of the Three Gorges Dam project on China's landscape and its people. Other moments tellingly include characters in and around a swimming pool; a group of men swim near the barge pulling life preservers behind them; two soldiers march along a pool's edge, the camera trailing them; a psychotherapy session takes place in a community pool; and the flight attendant walks alone near a swimming hole. In other sequences she sings to the tour boat passengers, and is framed in close-up, blinking.



Patty Chang and David Kelley, "Captain" (2007), pigmented inkjet print, 40 x 50 inches

In Chang and Kelly's film, which was made in 2007, before the Three Gorges Dam (1994 – 2012) was largely completed, one of the characters asks at two different points: "What is the imaginary?" According to *Flotsam Jetsam*, it is the beginning of loss, of no longer being able to return to actual places. In effect, the Three Gorges Dam project has turned a part of China and its history into a fairytale. The central sequence focuses on the construction of a one-sided wooden replica of a submarine, which is fitted together on a barge that is sailing toward an unspecified destination. A rectangular aperture cut into the submarine's side suggests a portal that will enable passengers to see what was submerged by the Three Gorges Dam, a project responsible for the displacement of more than a million people, the flooding of many important archaeological sites, and the extinction of the Baiji (Chinese River Dolphin) and other aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. While there are numerous

allusions to the Three Gorges Dam, I heard its name cited only once in the film.



Patty Chang and David Kelley, "Submarine" (2007), pigmented inkjet print, 40 × 50 inches

Flotsam Jetsam is not only about the irrevocable change that will take place in the riverbed's landscape, and its possible deleterious effect on China as a whole, but also, on a personal level, about the anxieties and preoccupations of individuals such as the father of the flight attendant, who encourages his daughter to study English. Both dream of a better life for her that may not be possible to attain. China might be upwardly mobile as a nation, but that isn't the case for many of its hopeful, self-motivated citizens. Perhaps this is also the beginning of the imaginary for the flight attendant who is also an aspiring singer. And what will it mean for China if its citizens (compelled by law to one child per couple) can't dream about a better life through their children?



Patty Chang and David Kelley, "Linyi and Yang" (2007), pigmented inkjet print, 40 × 50 inches

Since 1999, Chang has expanded her practice from performance (and being in front of the camera) to filmmaking (and being behind the camera). After memorable and in some ways groundbreaking performances, such as "Melons (At a Loss)" (1999) and "Eels" (2001), Chang began making films and video projections – *Shangri-La* (2005) and *The Product of Love* (2008). In her mixing of documentary and fiction film techniques, she has transformed innovations by Abbas Kiarostami and Jean Luc-Godard into something all her own. With *Flotsam Jetsam*, I see the possibility of Chang making another move. Realizing that the film was made in 2007, I left MoMA wondering what this wonderful but still under-known artist is dreaming up now.

*Patty Chang and David Kelley's **Flotsam Jetsam** is on view at The Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through August 15.*

David KelleyFilmMoMAMuseum of Modern ArtPatty Chang