

PARADISE ON EARTH

RUSSELL FERGUSON

James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* was published in 1933. It tells the story of an intrepid but alienated British diplomat, Hugh Conway. After a plane crash in the Himalayas he and his three companions become trapped in the lamasery of Shangri-La. It does not take long for Conway to find his situation increasingly congenial. In due course it emerges that the atmosphere of Shangri-La enables human life to be extended for many hundreds of years. The monks, anticipating cataclysmic disaster for the outside world, plan to preserve knowledge and civilization for future generations. In 1933, geo-political disaster was indeed just ahead. As one of the characters puts it, "the whole game's going to pieces."¹ *Lost Horizon* was a massive best-seller and put Hilton's myth of Shangri-La into wide circulation, which Frank Capra's 1937 film based on the novel only increased.

In 1997, a rural Chinese town in Yunnan Province near the Tibetan border, Zhongdian, declared itself—with the hope of attracting tourists—to be the model on which Shangri-La had been based. A dozen other towns in the region immediately followed suit, precipitating a marketing battle known as the Shangri-La War. The ensuing chaos eventually impelled the Chinese government to recognize Zhongdian as the winner of the war. Zhongdian

was renamed Shangri-La, thus gaining official recognition as the real site of a totally invented place. It is now the centerpiece of a fifty-county area around the base of Meili Snow Mountain known as "The China Shangri-La Ecological Tourist Zone." The current hard-nosed marketing of the Shangri-La myth to tourists had itself been prefigured in Hilton's novel, when the callow Mallinson, one of the stranded party in Shangri-La, grudgingly acknowledges the spectacular landscape: "I must say, though, the view is rather good, in its way. Fine winter sport center if it were in the right spot. I wonder if one could get any skiing on some of those slopes up yonder?"²

This conflation of the real and the fictional has long been fascinating to Patty Chang, whose work has often explored such juxtapositions. Chang decided that she herself would visit Shangri-La: a real journey to a mythical place. *Shangri-La* (2005) is a forty-minute video, accompanied by a sculpture over eight feet high of a mirrored mountain. As in the original *Lost Horizon*, the video begins with a flight that descends through the clouds that shroud the spectacular mountain landscape. It continues with the artist meeting a group of monks in the mountains, although these mountains turn out to be part of the decor of an atrium in a tourist hotel. Within the first few



Publicity photograph for *Lost Horizon*, 1937, directed by Frank Capra

moments of the piece the viewer is caught up in a rapid oscillation between the genuine world of Zhongdian and the fiction around it, a fiction that quickly supplants what was there before.

The mountain that towers over the valley is one of the key features of Shangri-La. It is dramatically unveiled to Conway early in Hilton's novel:

The moon, which he had thought to be hidden by clouds, swung over the lip of some shadowy eminence and, whilst still not showing itself directly, unveiled the darkness ahead. Conway could see the outline of a long valley, with rounded, sad-looking low hills on either side jet-black against the deep electric blue of the night sky. But it was to the head of the valley that his eyes were led irresistibly,

for there, soaring into the gap, and magnificent in the full shimmer of moonlight, appeared what he took to be the loveliest mountain on earth.

Yet no sooner than the mountain is introduced with such grandeur, its very existence is called into question: "It was so radiant, so serenely poised, that he wondered for a moment if it were real at all."³ This vacillation between the real and the imagined or constructed is at the heart of Chang's project, beginning with her initial journey to a place that both does and does not exist.

Chang's earlier work consists primarily of videos and photographs that document her own performances. These performances often had a strong narrative quality, in which



left: *Candies (XM)*, 1998, C-print
right: *Melons (At a Loss) 2*, 1998, C-print

the artist's interactions with various objects contributed to the articulation of the story. This is perhaps most clear in *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998). On one level, the narrative of the piece comes from Chang herself, who speaks directly to the camera. She tells an affecting and apparently authentic story from her childhood in which she receives a commemorative plate to mark the death of her aunt. To this sentimental narrative, however, she counterposes shocking action, calmly cutting into the melon concealed in her bra and spooning out the flesh. Even in work that is apparently more static, such as *Candies* (1998), Chang's businesswoman costume, the candies that fill her mouth, and the clamp that holds her mouth open combine to impose a strong if ambiguous narrative onto the scene, although in this case Chang drools rather than talks.

In its own way, *Shangri-La* is just as much performance documentation as those earlier pieces. When she arrived in Shangri-La, Chang immediately inserted her-

self into the ongoing creation of the Shangri-La fiction by becoming a participant in the process of its construction. She began to fabricate a number of objects through which she could tell a story. Most importantly, she arranged for the mountain sculpture to be built, a mirrored version of the mountains that surround the "real" Shangri-La and at the same time stand in for the holy mountain of the myth. On discovering an oxygen chamber in Shangri-La used to treat altitude sickness, she had a replica of one of those constructed as well. That was followed by a cake decorated with both the mountain and tank. All of these elements are part of the same process of construction, a process that is documented in her video.

She also participated in "Taiwanese-style fantasy wedding photography," one of the local businesses designed to attract couples who might like the idea of getting married in the imaginary heaven-on-earth. All of these activities bring increasing pressure to bear on the



Mountain 2, 2003, digital C-print

nature of this Shangri-La, generating a *mise-en-abyme* of reality and unreality. As Chang's mirrored mountain is transported on a truck, it passes a billboard showing a mountain scene, while in the background the real mountains rise up above their replica.

Chang's participation in this highly constructed and indeed fictionalized version of Chinese culture is something that she had already explored in a number of earlier works. In *Melons*, the story she tells revolves around a completely fictional Chinese custom. In *Death of Game* (2000), she plays the Bruce Lee role from an iconic scene in *Game of Death* (1978) in which Lee fights with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Chang's piece is a parodic re-enactment of an already super-fictionalized version of Chinese culture. In *Contortion* (2000–01), she appears as a Chinese contortionist holding an initially convincing but virtually impossible pose. The series of mountain photographs that Chang made in 2003 is particularly relevant here in that they introduce the idea of the mountain in the form of a Chinese hat. The half-fictional world of today's Shangri-La, then, is a perfect real-world counterpart to the variously inauthentic versions of Chinese culture that Chang had already been making use of in her work.

Despite the playful quality of some of these works, Chang is quite clear that her own presence in them as an Asian American woman gives them a specificity that she could not eliminate even if she chose to, as she indicated in an interview with Eve Oishi:

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'm always doing an Asian woman.⁴*

When Chang first thought about traveling to Shangri-La, she did not think that she would focus on the people who lived there because she was "afraid to make it an ethnographic study." As she increasingly involved herself with the construction of her own quasi-ethnographic objects there, however, her position changed.

I realized it was not possible to work without involving people. It was necessary to work with and hire people to



make what I wanted to make. And the misunderstanding and difference became an interesting aspect of it for me. It rooted the mythical in something as everyday as construction and going to the store. It showed the work propping up the facade of any tourist destination. That interaction and process is a large part of the piece.⁵

As Chang worked with the residents of Shangri-La on the construction of her mirror-covered mountain, the glittering reflective surface began to constitute a pivot point between the world of this real Shangri-La and the myth of the mountainous retreat from the everyday world, a relationship echoed in the juxtaposition of the Tibetan and Han Chinese workers with Chang herself, an outsider of Chinese descent.

In Chang's installation *Shangri-La*, the rotating mirrored mountain sculpture constantly changes as it moves. It constitutes, in the artist's words, "a cross between a prayer wheel and a disco ball." The phrase captures the spectacular element that has long eclipsed the more spiritual part of the utopian vision, the element that has led to Magic Mountain theme parks and Shangri-La hotels.

Utopian schemes have long been closely linked to a rhetoric of transparency, glass, and mirrors, a perpetually shiny vision of the future. In 1914, Paul Scheerbart's influential text "Glass Architecture" predicted that the entire planet would be transformed for the better through the wholesale adoption of glass as a building material.

The surface of the Earth would change greatly if brick architecture were everywhere displaced by glass architecture.

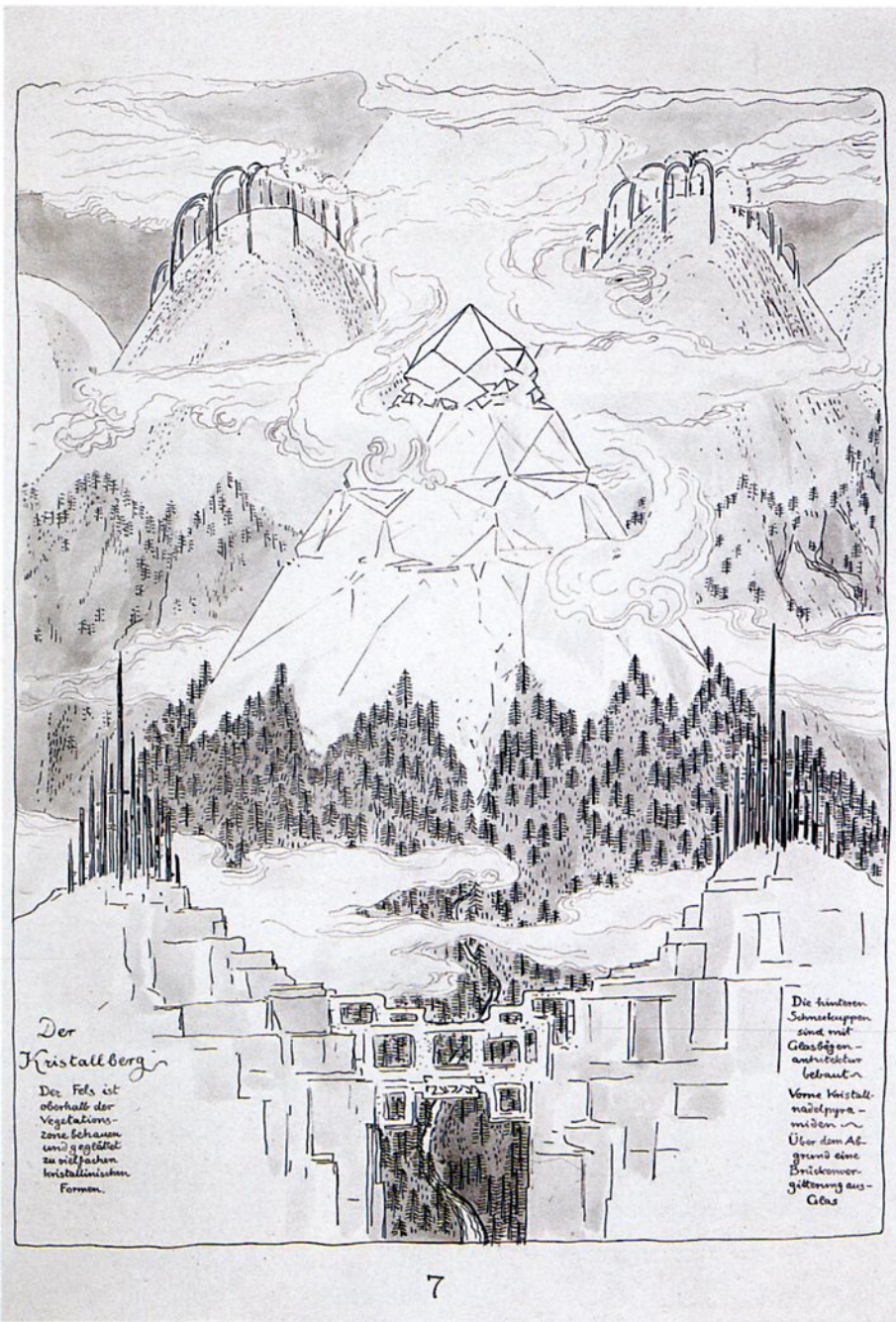


It would be as though the Earth clad itself in jewelry of brilliants and enamel.

The splendor is absolutely unimaginable. And we should then have on the Earth more exquisite things than the gardens of the Arabian Nights.

Then we should have a paradise on Earth and would not need to gaze longingly at the paradise in the sky.⁶

Scheerbart's text was dedicated to the architect Bruno Taut, whose Glass Pavilion (1914) (itself dedicated in turn to Scheerbart) is the point of origin for the many glass houses that have succeeded it. The passage is revealing not just for its linking of utopian transformation with glass and reflection, but also for its explicit association of such a utopia with an exoticized and fictional other world, in this case that of the Arabian Nights.

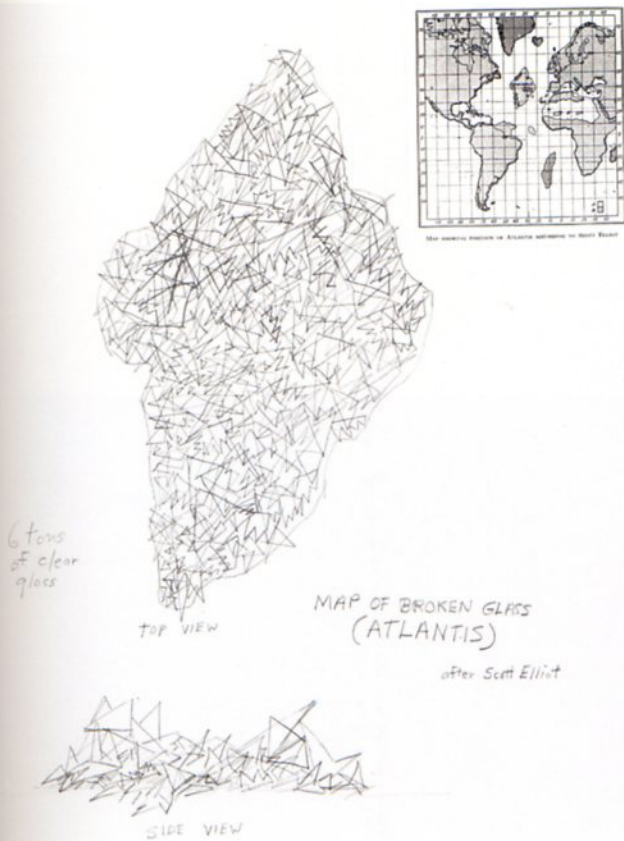


Bruno Taut
The Crystal Mountain, in *Alpine Architecture*, 1919–20
 Pencil, pen, and ink on paper
 Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin

This exoticism has gone hand in hand with Western visions of utopia. The purely glass structure has always within it an element of emptiness, of a vacuum made visible. The glass utopia has thus had to balance the void at its center with the rhetorical need for a place to exist, and when the site for this plenitude of emptiness has not been the European city razed by the destruction of war, it has been a mythologized East. Taut himself published his visionary collection of drawings, *Alpine Architecture*, in 1920.⁷ It combined a deep interest in pacifism and Buddhism with a transcendent vision of glass and towering mountains. Taut eventually fled East from the Nazis, reaching Japan in 1933.

Taut's mystical vision was in large part a response to the unprecedented carnage of the First World War. Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924) appeals to a similar desire to escape to a purer, higher place. The icy purity of the mountains is seen as cleansing. Mann's alpine setting has much in common with Taut's vision and with the Himalayan magic mountain of Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. (In his film, Capra actually used footage of Mont Blanc to stand in for the Himalayas). In both novels, sensitive heroes find themselves unexpectedly caught in idyllic—and totally insular—mountain communities that gradually come to seem preferable to the worlds they have left behind. In both books, a mysterious and unattainable woman fascinates the protagonist. Everyday concerns fall away into irrelevance. The crystalline world of the mountains ultimately suggests that concerns of the flesh can be transcended and perfect calm can reign in at least part of the world.

The glass mirror has long been seen as a potential point of transition between the quotidian world and an



unearthly realm. In Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (Orpheus, 1949), for example, the mirror is the point of passage between the world of the living and the hidden world of the dead. Cocteau's film, made just after the cataclysm of the Second World War—just as Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Hilton's *Lost Horizon* followed on the heels of the First World War—posits another world, another way of looking in the mirror for a society that might not like what it saw there. Instead of reflecting unhappiness and despair, the glassy mirror might offer a sought-after escape. Cocteau shot the supernatural as if it were real and the real as though it were supernatural, blending the two until they became inseparable. Orpheus is told that mirrors are doors through which death can come and go, but the other side of the glass seems almost more desirable than the world of the living.

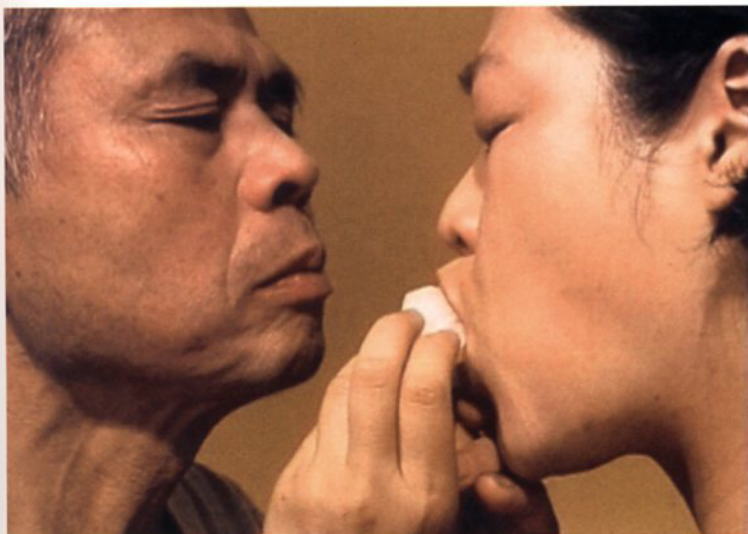
Robert Smithson used mirrors in relationship to landscape throughout his work. He wrote: "The mirror and the transparent glass bring us to those designations that remain forever abolished in the colorless infinities of a

static perception."⁸ Some of his projects seem to be direct antecedents of Chang's project. *Glass Strata* (1969) consists of twenty-five sheets of glass arranged as a pyramid. Perhaps even more relevant is his drawing *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* (1970), which proposes a six-ton mound of broken glass to represent the mythical land of Atlantis, the glass thrusting jaggedly into the air. This utopian—or dystopian—vision of a mythic place converted into a glassy reflective sculpture clearly prefigures Chang's mirrored mountain of Shangri-La. And of course Smithson's quasi-anthropological expeditions to New Jersey and the Yucatán both parodied and acted out the search for a transcendent exotic that *Lost Horizon* articulated. Both the conflation of fiction and reality, and the use of mirrors as a means of displacement, are echoed in Chang's *Shangri-La*, despite the obvious differences in context between Smithson's trips in the 1960s and Chang's visits to China in 2004.

Smithson's overarching interest in entropy, in fact, bears a distinct resemblance to the slowing down and stretching out of time that Conway experiences in

left:
Robert Smithson
Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis),
1970
Pencil and collage on card
Collection of the Vancouver Art
Gallery, Permanent Collection
Fund

right:
Robert Smithson
Yucatan Mirror Displacements
(1–9), 1969 (detail)
Nine chromogenic-development
slides
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York



Video stills from *In Love*, 2001

Shangri-La. In Smithson's version, "The 'time traveler' as he advances deep into the future discovers a decrease in movement, the mind enters a state of 'slow motion' and perceives the gravel and dust of memory on the empty fringes of consciousness."⁹ Or, as Conway suggests with a shrug to the High Lama: "Perhaps the exhaustion of the passions is the beginning of wisdom." "That also," replies the High Lama, "is the doctrine of Shangri-La."¹⁰

Chang is still perhaps best known for her work in performance and the videos and photographs that derive from those performances. The mirrors that in *Shangri-La* show mostly empty landscape are the successors to a series of mirrors or mirror substitutes that in Chang's earlier work have shown mostly herself. In Jacques Lacan's well-known account of the "mirror stage," a child's early encounters

with his or her own image in a mirror initiates a process of more-or-less fictional projections of the self that play a crucial role in the formation of adult identity.¹¹ In *Fountain* (1999), Chang is seen lapping water from a mirror. The image is rotated ninety degrees so that her face is vertical, and she appears not to be drinking water from a mirror but instead engaging in a prolonged kiss with her own image.

Two years later, in *In Love* (2001), Chang made use of a formally similar motif in a video that showed her with each of her parents in turn. *In Love* records each pair eating an onion simultaneously from the outside until it is gone. The video is shown in reverse, so that the opening scenes appear to show a couple kissing passionately, and weeping, before the onion slowly begins to emerge from their mouths. In the work, Chang partially removed herself from the narcissistic dyad of *Fountain* while greatly increasing the disturbing psychological power of the work.

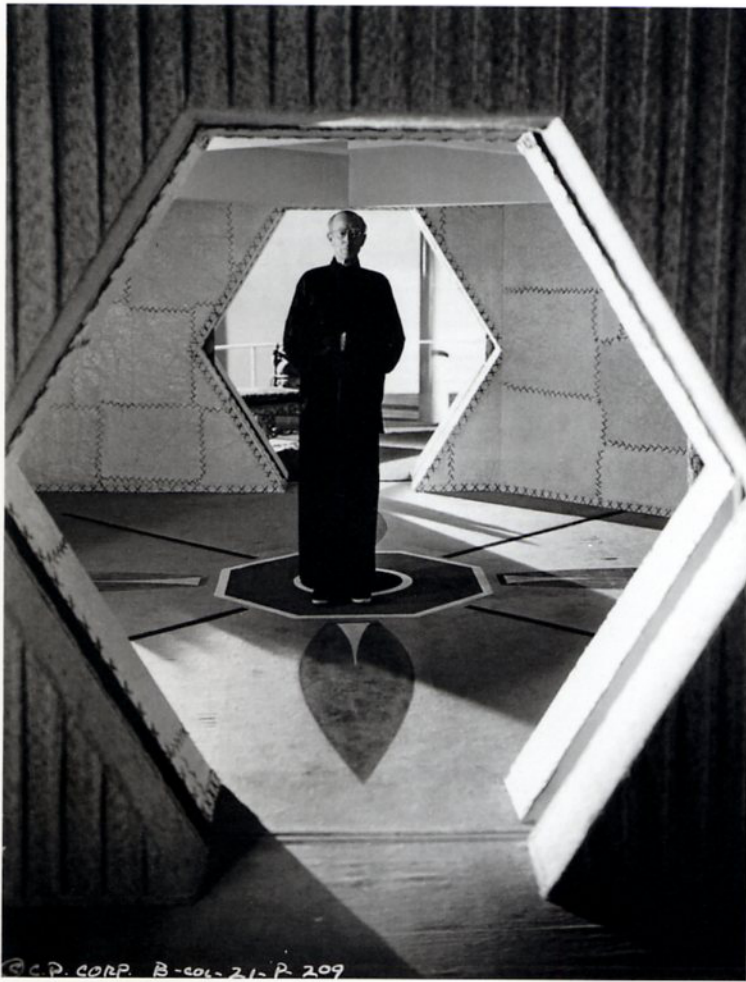


Sorority Stage Fright, 2002
digital C-print

Over the last two years, Chang has been “thinking of how to take the focus of performance off of my physical self as the main subject and turning it into a catalyst for specific situations.”¹² This withdrawal is all the more striking in that her position as protagonist has often been so dramatic in her earlier work, as she has consistently tested the limits both of herself and her audience. The change is perhaps most marked in *Chez les Grecs* (2004), in which young Greek men reenact Chang’s performance *Shaved (At a Loss)* of 1998. While retaining the basic element of a blindfolded protagonist wielding a razor close to her or his own genitalia, the shift of gender drastically alters the tenor of the piece. Similarly, *Sorority Stage Fright* (2004) shows sorority members from the University of Southern California gorging themselves with food until they reach

the point of throwing up, reenacting Chang’s performance *Stage Fright* of 2002.

Since so many of Chang’s performances have explored highly stressful or emotionally charged situations, these reenactments are a fascinating investigation of the degree to which the content of the work can be separated from Chang’s own charismatic presence in it. Given how central that presence has been, it can be an awkward transition, one that frustrates those whose engagement with the work is primarily through the figure of Chang herself. As she has said, “It is difficult when people say they empathize with me going through something in my performances, and that is what they want to continue seeing. As if I was a recurring character and it is some sort of soap opera they are watching.”¹³ The low-key watercolors that Chang has



Still from *Lost Horizon*, 1937,
directed by Frank Capra

begun making around and in addition to her other work could also be seen perhaps as part of this process of gaining a certain distance from the direct video record of her own actions. The inherent softness of watercolor diffuses the immediacy of video.

In *Shangri-La* she is perhaps the least visible she has ever been in her own work. Apart from the relatively brief scenes of her “wedding,” in which she is once again, unequivocally yet ambiguously, “doing an Asian woman,” she can be seen only occasionally in the video, directing others in the construction of the work. In the wedding fantasy, she allows herself once again to be a kind of prop for the photographer, an experience that she compares to the process of making photographs of her own earlier performances, since she could not see the results until afterwards. This visible surrender to the manipulations of another in the end elucidates the

broader theme of identity construction that runs throughout the entire video.

There is one sense, however, in which the artist is present in an almost hidden form. Early in the novel *Lost Horizon*, after Conway and his companions survive the crash landing and are lost in the mountains, the monk who will shortly offer them sanctuary in Shangri-La approaches them:

*Conway bowed again, and after a suitable pause began to explain briefly the circumstances that had brought him and his three companions to such an unfrequented part of the world. At the end of the recital the Chinese made a gesture of understanding. “It is indeed remarkable,” he said, and gazed reflectively at the damaged aeroplane. Then he added: “My name is Chang.”*¹⁴

Obviously, Chang is a very common name. Nevertheless, the coincidence—that the guide to Shangri-La shares a name with the artist—certainly resonates with (Patty) Chang’s work over the last several years, as she has begun the process of withdrawal from the central role. The monk Chang is self-effacing yet ubiquitous. He guides the visitors to the lamasery with an all but invisible hand. In *Shangri-La*, Patty Chang’s role behind the scenes, yet everywhere directing the action, has much in common with the unobtrusive yet crucially important Chang of the novel.