

Ruination and Rumination on the Anthropocene

Patty Chang's ecological art struggles with its own fatalism.



Louis Bury December 2, 2017



Patty Chang, Image from the series "Letdown (Milk)" (2017), inkjet print on custom plywood panels, 17.17 x 23.5 inches (courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY)

In the middle of the artist's book published in conjunction with her gnomic and unsettling Queens Museum exhibition, [*The Wandering Lake, 2009-2017*](#), Patty Chang puts forth a stunning meditation on the role of art in the Anthropocene. Contemplating the practice of Japanese Ama divers, who descend as much as sixty feet underwater without breathing equipment, Chang cites mid-century scientist Pierre Dejours on the four stages of underwater breath-holding: the "easy-going phase"; the "gasping point"; the "struggle phase"; and the "breaking point." According to Dejours, the struggle phase begins with involuntary gasps for air and ends, if the diver cannot get back above water in time, with loss of consciousness and, shortly thereafter, death.

Chang has long been aesthetically interested in situations of bodily discomfort and duress. Dejours’s respiratory schema pinpoints the hard-to-measure “moment before a trauma.” In diving and other endeavors, Chang asks, what are the “signs of a struggle phase?” Her ecologically inflected response is, “Art making as a grieving of living as opposed to a fight against it. Is it a sign of acceptance or giving in?” The proposition — presented first as a statement, then, more tentatively, as a rhetorical question — is literally and figuratively breathtaking. We like to believe that contemporary ecological art engages in a struggle for positive cultural change, but Chang entertains the possibility that such work is actually engaged in a struggle with its own fatalistic and disempowered sense of grief over the culture’s impending demise.

The spare and elegiac constellation of videos, photographs, prints, and sculptures that comprises *The Wandering Lake* embodies the book’s notion that contemporary art often mourns a trauma on verge of arrival. The two-part *Invocation for a Wandering Lake* (2016), which greets visitors to the show — single channel films projected onto fifteen-foot-long cardboard panels in a dark, cavernous room — sets the valedictory mood. In the first panel, Chang ritualistically scrubs a beached ship’s large rusted hull with nothing more than a sponge and bucket of water; in the second, she wades thigh-deep into shoreline waters and scrubs a rotting whale carcass. The contrast in size between Chang and the boat and whale lends her scrubbing gesture a touch of the absurd, but, unlike the antic absurdity of her earliest performances (for example, sitting with a swarm of eels tucked into her blouse), this gesture manifests a heavy-hearted gravitas.



Patty Chang, Still from “Invocation for a Wandering Lake, Part II” (2016), projection, 12:49 minutes, dimensions variable (courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY)

This mood of melancholy, tinged with inanity, pervades the rest of the exhibit. Just beyond the *Invocation* videos stands *Letdown* (2017), a small forest of bisecting plywood panels with inkjet prints of barren landscapes and used tableware affixed to them. The photographs are from Chang's travels to China, Canada, and Uzbekistan, but the logic of their arrangement on the panels appears associative rather than narrative. Each image reveals traces of a human presence — tire tracks, remnants of meals, a cup filled with Chang's breastmilk— but remains uninhabited. In both *Invocation* and *Letdown*, ponderous themes of mourning and absence contrast with the artworks' flimsy cardboard and plywood construction.

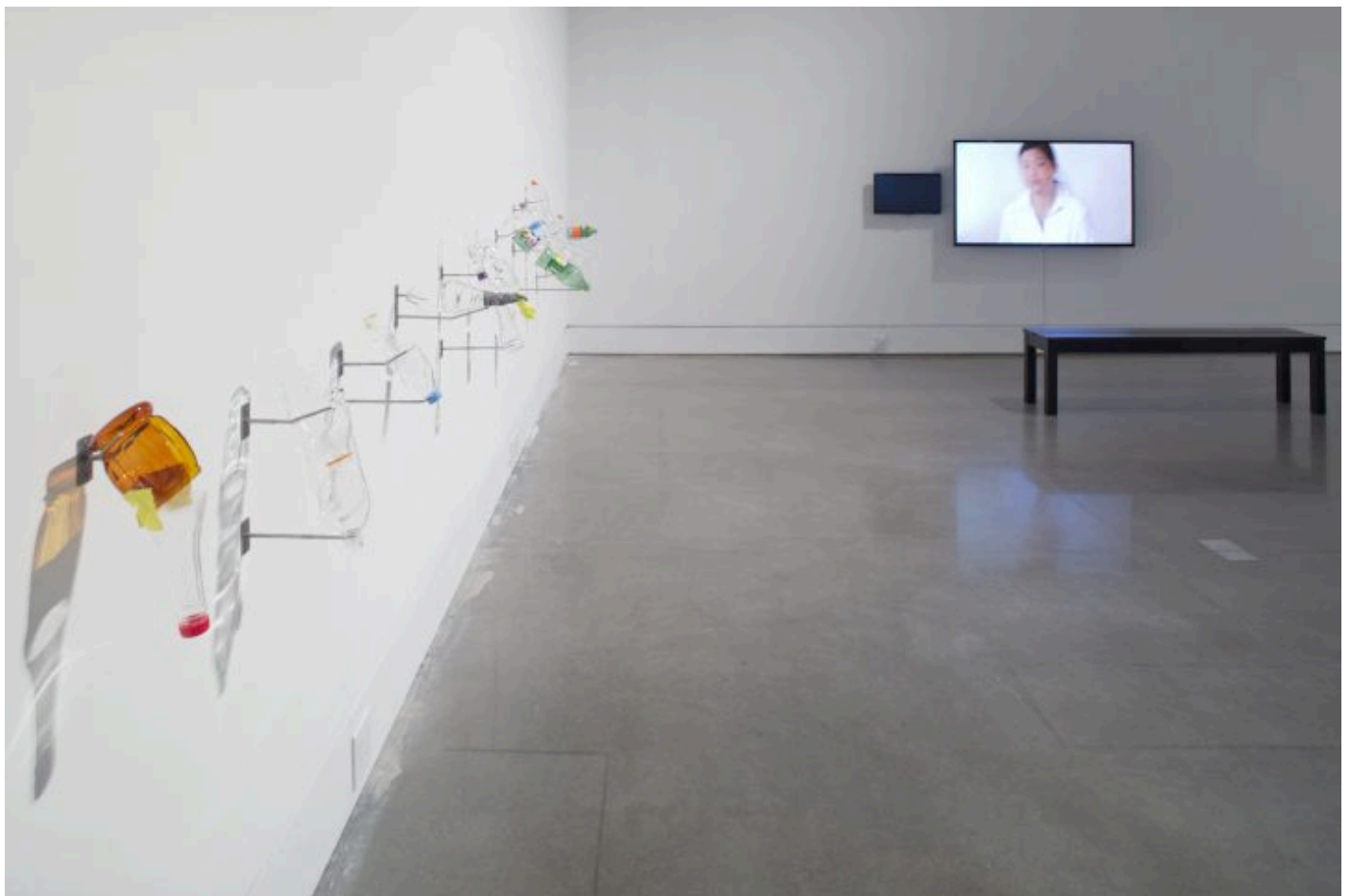
Thus far, I've held off on trying to describe the scope of Chang's eight-year-long project. This is in part because, much like the arrangement of *Letdown*'s images, the project's organizing logic is more poetic and associative than narrative and linear. The exhibition's introductory wall text explains in general terms how the project responds to colonial explorer Sven Hedin's 1938 book, *The Wandering Lake: Into the Heart of Asia*, as a way to reflect upon bodies of water that are disappearing or in flux. But the impetus behind each leg of Chang's episodic travels — which took her to China's Xinjian Uyghur Autonomous Region and South-to-North Water Diversion Project, Canada's Fogo Island, and, twice, Uzbekistan's Aral Sea — remains enigmatic. Even with its backstory, the exhibition can feel like a jigsaw puzzle whose borders have been built but whose middle pieces still need to be fit together.

The key pieces in this elliptical puzzle are those in which Chang leaves herself vulnerable or exposed. Two disarmingly personal short films about her father's death, *Invocations* (2013) and *Que Sera, Sera* (2013), stand out in this regard. In the former, Chang's mother reads an anaphoric series of phrases (“Invocation of a feeding tube”; “Invocation of bureaucratic waste”; “Invocation of gasping”) whose incantatory repetitions swell with poetic dolor. In the latter, Chang bounces her infant son in a baby carrier as she sings “Que Sera, Sera” to her father, who lies motionless on his hospital deathbed. Chilling and poignant, this film pairing shows Chang grieving an imminent loss that is palpably intimate rather than abstractly eco-political.

The associative parallel that Chang draws between different types of loss — such as her father's passing and the fact that Soviet irrigation has caused 80% of the Aral Sea to dry up — contributes to the project's scattered and mysterious quality. But such leaps also account for some of the project's greatest strengths. The variety of research sources, artistic mediums, and conceptual and emotional registers encompassed in *The Wandering Lake* allows Chang to plumb the depths of Anthropocenic change in ways at once personal and political. This approach is of a piece with the vanguard of ecological theory, in which writers such as Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett emphasize the interconnectedness of the world's cultural and biological systems. Chang's leaps across geography, theme, method, and scale create a complex and layered aesthetic ecosystem

whose diverse elements exist on a continuum with one another, even at their most seemingly disparate.

The contiguity of the personal and ecological is most acute in a series of thirty-two sculptures of female urinary devices. Produced with Amy Leclaire at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn, the bong-like silicate glass sculptures resemble the portable urinary devices that Chang improvised out of plastic bottles on her travels. On a nearby wall, film footage of her urinating through one such device pops up briefly in *Configurations* (2016); in an adjacent room, a discordantly bright and airy photograph, “Configurations (bottles)” (2017), shows a dozen plastic bottles filled with urine from her travels. As with photographs of breast milk, taken while Chang was weaning her infant son, these sculptures and images document the traces of Chang’s bodily fluids and implicate them, by context, in larger ecologies of loss, waste, and sustenance.



Installation view of “Patty Chang: The Wandering Lake 2009-2017” (2017), Queens Museum, New York

These partial and indirect self-exposures draw upon the madcap, at times scatological, performance idiom for which Chang became known in the late nineties and early aughts. Works such as *Stage Fright #1* (2002), in which she eats a full meal while sitting clothed on the toilet, then goes to the bathroom afterward, and *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998), in which she cuts open and eats a melon wedged in her corset as she recites a script about her aunt’s death from breast cancer, prod the comfort zone of audience and performer alike without resorting to outright indecency.

The difference in the more recent work is that the offbeat performance gestures take place as part of a larger, more developed project rather than discrete events.

As many commentators have noted, this evolution in Chang's artistic practice began around the time of her 2005 film, *Shangri-La*, which uses documentary and Surrealistic techniques to recreate the eponymous fictional town. As opposed to the stark and direct tone of her earlier works, which were short and easily summarizable documentations of performance stunts, the films from this subsequent phase are ruminative and essayistic, and channel Chang's penchant for performative bizarrerie into intricate, large-scale meditations on a place or theme. Indeed, as Chang's practice has grown increasingly complex, many of her earliest performance films now look like warm ups for her more holistic and sustained subsequent investigations.

The revelation of *The Wandering Lake* is how well Chang's recent methods lend themselves to discursive forms, books in particular. Excerpts from the exquisitely designed artist's book, published by Dancing Foxes Press, appear throughout the exhibition. Most of the wall labels, for example, eschew interpretive descriptions of individual artworks and instead feature an apposite block quote from the book, and the entire voice-over script of the thirteen-minute film *Configurations* derives from the book. These piecemeal texts amplify the backstory but can't express how the book, as a whole, evocatively integrates the project's multitude of discursive registers. If the exhibition is like a partially completed jigsaw puzzle, then the book, with its imbricated layers of image and text, is an image of the completed puzzle.



Patty Chang, "Configurations (aqueduct)" (2017), vinyl print, 108 x 168 inches (courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY)

Given the book's beauty, depth of thought, and thoroughness, and the exhibition's explanatory reliance on it, *The Wandering Lake* may prove to be another turning point in Chang's aesthetic evolution, this time toward textual modes of discourse and representation. But I'm reluctant to force too rigid a hierarchy of values upon a body of work so expansive and ambitious. Every facet of the project is essential, not simply because different artistic mediums do different things, but because the depth and breadth of the grief Chang probes requires every available angle of approach. Her ongoing aesthetic evolution — one sign among others of her artistic greatness — belies her supposition that art-making today is a form of fatalistic acceptance. No one who struggles this hard and this well can be said to have given up.

Patty Chang: The Wandering Lake, 2009-2017 continues at the *Queens Museum (New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Corona, Queens)* through February 18, 2018.