Above: Patty Chang, (detail) Glass urinary devices, 2017. Installation of 32 hand-blown borosilicate glass, plastic, tape, and cardboard sculptures with brass mounts on custom foam, plywood, and metal table. Courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY

Below: Patty Chang, Configurations (Aqueduct), 2017. Vinyl print, 108in x 168in. Courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY

Patty Chang (b. 1972, San Leandro, CA) is a performance and video artist known for probing taboos, stereotypes, and cultural myths. In her earlier works, Chang's humorous and sometimes unsettling work mocked and deconstructed depictions of Asian women in Western popular culture. Chang frequently appears in her own work, investigating complex aspects of Asian identity by impersonating contortionists and legendary street fighter Bruce Lee, while her earlier notorious performances tested the boundaries of social acceptability. She marked a shift in her practice with Shangri-La (2005) by moving behind the camera to direct a video work which she later exhibited in a sculptural installation. A chronicle of a real journey to an imaginary place, Shangri-La examines the mythic utopia in the collective imagination in her pilgrimage to the rural Chinese village of Zhongdian, one of several places claimed to be the “real” magical city from James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon, and the subsequent film by Frank Capra.

Chang received a B.A. from the University of California, San Diego in 1994. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at such institutions as The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; New Museum, New York; BAAM: basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, the Netherlands; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Ti-Art Centre de Art Contemporain Jourda, Fribourg, Switzerland; Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, England; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; M+ Museum, Hong Kong; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden. Chang has received grants from Creative Capital, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Guan-Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Tides Foundation, and Guggenheim Foundation. Most recently, Chang participated in the 2016 Shanghai Biennale. She lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.
Patty Chang
The Wandering Lake
2009–2017

The Wandering Lake, 2009–2017 is a project by American artist Patty Chang. Chang, comprising a personal, associative, and narrative meditation on reality, place, and self. How the instability of geography can mirror and rupture our sense of how the earth and the body may function together? Art-making as a grieving of living as opposed to a fight against it: Is it a sign of acceptance or giving in? How could it be an exploration of how the human body and mind may function together?

Chang's project began in 2009 with the artist's first visit to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China, the location of the body of water behind it, and flows out over more level regions a more sober, placid stream. The river ages; its course grows ever slower and quieter. The stream. The river has passed the noon of life, as man does. Now it struggles no longer, it has become passive, begun to vegetate; it gradually decreases in size, and at last it dies and fade forever into its grave, Lop-nor, the "wandering lake.""

The project began in 2009 with the artist's first visit to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China, the location of the body of water that constantly effaced its location as described in her book. Arriving after rioting and conflict between local Uighur and Han Chinese, Chang's travel to the Lake Lop-nor was prevented by the uneasy geopolitical conditions of this region and the lack of established transportation to the remote Lake. Chang's project continued on Figo Island off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, the longtime home to a major fishing fleet where there is now a moratorium on cod fishing. There, upon encountering a beached whale carcass, Chang, prompted by her experience of the wrecked animal's body, performed a ritual washing of the dead animal's body. The resulting work, Letdown (2017), an installation of single-channel video, 24:09 minutes, sound, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY. Photo by Hai Zhang.

The Tarim in its different stages, like most desert rivers, resembles a youth, a rushing, roaring river, whose banks are lined with intricate patterns probably not visible from space but possibly from an airplane. Human Innovation had misguided the water into holding restrictions, Chang, in the process of weaning her son, photographed her breast milk which she had pumped and deposited into random receptacles after meals. "A sympathetic loss of flow," these photos stood for her frequent nausea and hyper-sensitivity to smells, Chang performed a ritual-washing of the dead animal's body. The resulting work, Letdown (2017), an installation of single-channel video, 24:09 minutes, sound, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY. Photo by Hai Zhang.

Since the sea shrinks and recedes, Mijuk is in the middle of a desert. The thousands of miles of pipelines and canals that irrigate water away from the Aral Sea are proof that the sea still retains its power and will not give up its water easily. In all its complexity and abstraction, Chang invites us to find a place for life. In its cyclic abstraction, Chang invites us to find a place within it, to draw parallels between her thoughts and aesthetic expressions for life, both in unfamiliar landscapes and her own body.

The exhibition as a whole weaves together strands of narrative with visual and textual analysis. In the gallery, the thousands of miles of pipelines and canals that irrigate water away from the Aral Sea are proof that the sea still retains its power and will not give up its water easily. In all its complexity and abstraction, Chang invites us to find a place within it, to draw parallels between her thoughts and aesthetic expressions for life, both in unfamiliar landscapes and her own body.

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Patty Chang, Letdown (Milk), 2017. Photographs, chronicles Chang's second visit to the Aral Sea in 2014. Unframed photographs, chronicles Chang's second visit to the Aral Sea in 2014. Unframed images from her travels and research, both her own and found. The exhibition as a whole weaves together strands of narrative with visual and textual analysis. In the gallery, the thousands of miles of pipelines and canals that irrigate water away from the Aral Sea are proof that the sea still retains its power and will not give up its water easily. In all its complexity and abstraction, Chang invites us to find a place within it, to draw parallels between her thoughts and aesthetic expressions for life, both in unfamiliar landscapes and her own body.

Chang's first artist's book is an integral part of Patty Chang: The Wandering Lake, 2009–2017, a first-person photo-travelogue by Chang, it includes over eighty images from her travels and research, both her own and found. Her writing is deepened and extended through excerpts from a wide range of authors including Jill Casid, VALIE EXPORT, Herman Melville, Rosalind Krauss, Alice Walker and many others treating subjects such as the forced sterilization of girls and women in Japanese deep sea divers, the concept of care, and water management in Uzbekistan.

Chang has described the project as a bereavement for life; it collects and compiles images and materials that she has paid close attention to over the years. In the process of weaning her son, she collected her urine in plastic bottles to draw parallels between her frequent nausea and hyper-sensitivity to smells, Chang performed a ritual-washing of the dead animal's body. The resulting work, Letdown (2017), an installation of single-channel video, 24:09 minutes, sound, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY. Photo by Hai Zhang.

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