

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

A Bold Explorer Surfaces in 'Wandering Lake'

By NANCY PRINCENTHAL OCT. 18, 2017

Patty Chang made her mark 20 years ago with wickedly provocative body-centered video and performance works, the best known of which is probably "Eels" (1999). The title of this video explains what's wriggling unseen inside the artist's shirt, creating a comically — if powerfully — quasi-erotic ruckus. In another celebrated early video, she exchanges an onion, mouth to mouth, with each of her parents; tears ensue.

For this eagerly awaited exhibition, her largest to date, Ms. Chang (who was born in San Francisco and works in Los Angeles) has created an integrated, multidisciplinary installation of mostly new work that reframes her early investigations of identity and its straying boundaries. Engrossing and deeply moving, "The Wandering Lake 2009-2017," at the Queens Museum, mostly shifts attention away from the artist's body, relying on moving water as a metaphor for concerns ranging from gender fluidity and internet surfing to climate change and migration. Curated by Hitomi Iwasaki, the show touches on a child's birth and a father's death, as well as more global losses — of languages, cultures and even the geographical features that shape them. A running theme, sometimes elusive but potent nonetheless, is material and psychological instability, and meaning that spills the boundaries of individual works.

At the outset are two videos, each projected onto a big fragmented plywood screen. One shows Ms. Chang standing thigh deep in frigid gray water, sponging down a dead whale found washed up on an island off Newfoundland. Its tail floats on the waves, but its massive head is solidly beached. You hear the cries of hungry gulls, and sense the animal's stink. (In a phone call, the artist recalled feeling,

while whale-side, a weight so profound it displaced thought.) The adjacent video finds Ms. Chang performing another ritual cleansing, this time scrubbing the rusted hull of a big commercial ship. Many others are similarly stranded in what was once the vast Aral Sea, in Uzbekistan, now radically shrunk by Soviet-era irrigation projects.

Ms. Chang was pregnant and then a new mother during the eight-year course of this peripatetic project, and it includes photos, installed irregularly in a plywood labyrinth, showing one or another small bowl filled with breast milk she pumped while traveling. These photographs form a series within the larger project titled "Letdown," which refers to lactation, and also to the emotional roller coaster of early parenthood. Further along the work's life cycle are paired videos on small monitors featuring the artist's parents. Her mother's voice and her baby's cries, in one video, overlay a song she sings to her father in the other, as he lies unmoving in a hospital bed. Mr. Chang had progressive dementia for 10 years, the artist said, "so mourning took place while he was living." It is one of several borderline mortality conditions she explores. (There is also an aborted suicide.)

A mood shift, which briefly reprises the feel of early performances, occurs with a series of works based on female urinary devices, both commercial and homemade. As Ms. Chang demonstrates in a three-channel video, parts of it very funny, they allow a woman to pee standing up. We see her perform, deadpan, the guy thing of shaking a repurposed plastic bottle to get the last drops out. Giving a wry twist to the overheated debate around bathroom access, the artist assails borders between genders, and between bodies and their accessories, with a kind of dignified slapstick.

She also considers the process of human consumption and elimination as a one-person ecosystem. Water bottles from which she drank and then filled with her urine are the subject of one big mock-serious photograph. There is also a series of mischievous handblown glass sculptures based on various familiar commercial bottles. Cut apart and hybridized, they evoke, in some cases, balloon animals; in others, where jagged edges are hastily wrapped in packing tape, prison weapons.

Pursuing the subject of hydration from a different angle, the project's final element took Ms. Chang to China's South-to-North Water Diversion Project, the

longest aqueduct in the world. A suitably enormous photograph of it hangs above the Queens Museum's big, blinking model, from the 1939 World's Fair, of the Catskill watershed that provides New York City with drinking water.

In the final gallery there is a miscellany of archival material, including "The Wandering Lake," a 1938 book by the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin that lent this exhibition its title. It is about a lost body of water at Lop Nur in the restive Uighur region of China, which Ms. Chang visited. A magazine advertisement shows that in the 1960s, Volkswagen named a camper after Mr. Hedin; we also learn — here information becomes a flood tide — that he was a Nazi sympathizer. Navigable only with concentrated effort, these esoterica force us to reflect on what we can know with confidence, and when unreliable narratives put us in danger of drowning.

Some of what is shown at the Queens Museum can be likened to such other explorations of intimate body functions as the Icelandic performance piece by Ragnar Kjartansson in which he asked his mother to spit on him; Mika Rottenberg's video epics of ingestion, excretion, sweat and sneezing; and Janine Antoni's gargoyle-shaped copper urinary device, with which she posed for a rooftop photograph.

But Ms. Chang's sensibility is distinguished by a paradoxical compound of disclosure and, increasingly, of reserve. Among early works, one of the toughest, for viewers and artist alike, was a performance in which the audience watched, on live feed (pun noted) video, as the artist, in a separate room, consumed way too much food and finally, inevitably, disgorged it. Her work has since become less graphic, evolving into a familial and social self-portrait told mostly in the third person. Ms. Chang depicts a human subject whose borders are mobile, and whose privacy survives her sometimes startling candor. That she pulls it off is a dazzling, and inspiring, act of poise.

Patty Chang: The Wandering Lake 2009-2017

Through Feb. 18 at the Queens Museum; 718-592-9700, queensmuseum.org.

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