



Faster the Fiction

FLOTSAM JETSAM: ABOVE & BELOW THE WATER LEVEL

Both images:
Submarine Landscape Panorama,
2007 (detail), 40 x 50in
(left diptych and right diptych)
digital c-print

The most recent collaboration between artists **Patty Chang** and **David Kelley** casts the site of the **Three Gorges Dam** in a central role. The work, **Flotsam Jetsam**, dips in and out of modes of representation, and for **DAMn°** the artists describe the way the piece explores landscape, identity, memory and imagination.

Text and images by **Patty Chang & David Kelley**





On January 8, 2005, the USS San Francisco nuclear submarine was flying blind at 500ft below sea level in the Pacific Ocean when it crashed headlong into an uncharted underwater mountain that rose up to within 100ft of the Ocean's surface. A crewmember described the situation as resembling a scene from The Matrix: 'Everything slowed down and levitated and then went flying forward faster than the brain can process.'

There are no windows on a nuclear submarine. Its vision is replaced by the technology of abstracted vision through active and passive sonar and the reliance on mapping. With no witnesses besides the crew of the USS San Francisco, the only evidence of the crash was indicated on the bodies of the sailors. Like a supernatural event, it is real through its invisibility and elusiveness. Flotsam Jetsam took this event as a starting point from which to consider landscape's relationship to imagination, particularly the imagination of the submerged landscape beneath China's Three Gorges reservoir.

SUBMARINE FACADE

In the summer of 2007 we shot Flotsam Jetsam in Yichang, a small city in close proximity to the new hydroelectric dam project. We began the production by having a submarine facade built and installed on the deck of an oil-recycling boat. During the construction we cast actors from a local Beijing opera troupe. The actors and film crew performed on the boat as it travelled along the river, through the ship locks and up to the reservoir.

Hua Building Shot and Reverse, 2007, 40 x 50in (right diptych) digital c-print

Facing page, top:
Hua Building Shot and Reverse, 2007, 40 x 50in (left diptych) digital c-print

Facing page, bottom left:
Flight Attendant, 2007 40 x 50in, digital c-print

Facing page, bottom right:
Captain, 2007 40 x 50 in, digital c-print

A stage director from Shanghai was brought in to conduct the castings in Yichang. The director acted partly as theatre director and partly as psychotherapist. During the initial castings, he interviewed the troupe members about their personal histories and careers. The role of our 'director' was inspired by theatre techniques of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Jacob Moreno's Psychodrama. He used improvisation techniques enabling the actors to embody their personal memories, traumas or neuroses.

The various narratives performed by the actors in rehearsals became material for the script, which they then re-performed at sites along the river. These performances functioned as a way to re-imagine the physical sites around the Three Gorges Dam. The sites became a mythopoetic or magical realist stage where imaginations of landscape could be manifest physically. In one story, Dai Ai, an older actress, described a dream in which she saw herself flying over the dam as an airplane. She doubted herself, unable to decide if she was human or airplane. She described how beautiful it was looking down over the city and the dam. Her self-imagining as a machine seems reminiscent of Italian futurist meditations on utopias of industrialisation.

Submarine, 2007
40 x 50 inches, digital c-print



THE ENDLESS CORRIDOR

'Design For Dementia- Planning Environments for the Elderly and the Confused' is a textbook title that brings to mind what the space of memory looks like. How does memory inhabit a space, and how do we move within it? In the book, there is a floor plan for an Alzheimer's in-patient centre, which includes a diagram of the 'Endless Corridor'. The Endless Corridor is a circular hallway where you might never need to stop walking. The image of the Endless Corridor is quite obvious in some ways. If you have no memory, every moment is the present and you are always in an endless corridor: every corridor is endless; every meal is endless; every look is endless. Your relation to the present moment lasts forever. There is the sense of the arm's length in the design of spaces for people with loss of memory that is experiential and immediate. Perhaps it is a need to return to the familiar for some, or to relearn constantly for others, or to just let memory lie dormant. The Endless Corridor revolves around the loss of place because the loss of mind is also a loss of place. So to reformulate a relationship to space is something necessary.

Both images:
Linyi and Tiger, 2007
40 x 50 inches, digital c-print

A VEHICLE FOR SEEING

In his novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Jules Verne describes a salon window in the middle of the submarine Nautilus that is oblong in shape. Since Verne never included a diagram of the Nautilus in his book, the physical space can only be constructed through the action of the narrative. Artists have attempted to reconstruct many models of the Nautilus, the most famous being from the Walt Disney film.

It is possible to imagine the salon window of the Nautilus to be rectangular, similar to a cinematic screen. But even the Nautilus with a round window looks like a Cold War spy camera or a mobile-phone camera, with the window acting as the lens. From the inside it is a cinema, from the outside it is a camera. In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*, there is a scene where the Nautilus sinks a ship and the crew rushes to the salon window, to watch sailors drowning before their eyes. They can do nothing but watch and feel their helplessness, at once responsible for the events, but also safely at a distance behind a screen of glass - separated by the physical medium of water. The Nautilus is also a vehicle for seeing. Like the Endless Corridor, the river acts as a passageway, generating continual movement of boats, people and water - an ever-changing space. The submerged landscapes underneath the reservoir are suspended in a continuous struggle between a loss of mind and a loss of place.

Flotsam Jetsam documents a process of embodying both private and popular imaginaries of modernisation. Filming at the actual site of the Three Gorges Dam was an essential element of the project. The video constantly waivers between documentary and fictional modes of representation, suspended between the experience of landscape and its memory. #

Flotsam Jetsam premiered at the Franco Soffiantino Arte Contemporanea Gallery (www.francohoffiantino.it) in Turin at the end of last year and can be viewed in Eastern Standard-Western Artists in China at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, opening 2 February, 2008, www.massmoca.org and at Arratia, Beer Gallery, Berlin, in March/April 2008 www.arratiabeer.com