This exhibition was originally scheduled to open in May of 2020, but was postponed until October 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chang had been working with curator and former 18th Street Artistic Director Anuradha Vikram on the development of this work for over two years, and the essay is Vikram’s reflection on the project in process within the context of Chang’s larger artistic practice.
In November 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election against Hillary Clinton, ushering in a new era of anxiety in American life. Around the time of Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, Patty Chang and her family moved from New York to Los Angeles. It was in this tense personal and public moment that Chang began to collect her fears. She explains, “I was looking at copies of the novel *The Octopus, A Story of California* about the historical conflict between farmers and the Railroad in California history—octopuses are metaphors for monopolies. As a new transplant, I brought my environmental anxieties with me, now obsessed with the lack of water, fossil fuel usage and the extreme heat leading to fires.” In a study room at the Huntington Library, where she had hoped to do research, she instead produced a list of fears that had been pressing on her since the move.

- Death
- Leroy’s future death
- Death of the human species
- Death of the earth, but that is irrational
- Flooding, drowning in a flood
- Fire, burning in a fire
- Heights
- Smog
- 113 degrees, everyday
- Water running out

The Huntington Gardens and Library is a space of absolute calm, no matter the heat in the San Gabriel Valley. Chang describes how she “always loved research libraries—conditions perfect for quiet focused attention, temperature no higher than ‘70 degrees, stable humidity, no talking, no distractions.” The serene environs bear little trace of the history of Western expansion connected to its founder, Henry E. Huntington, of the Pacific Electric Railway, including water scarcity, undocumented labor, and urban sprawl. In this way, the Huntington reflects Los Angeles, a city whose bubbling vein of tension is just beneath the sun-drenched earth except in those historical moments—1968, 1992, 2020—when the surface breaks. Says Chang, “I couldn’t compartmentalize my anxiety and had to make a list of fears. I used the pink Huntington lined research notepaper supplied to all readers and made my list of four pages of fears in one sitting. I immediately felt a little better.” *Milk Debt* expands on themes in Chang’s prior body of work, *The Wandering Lake*, presented at the Queens Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), which was anchored by themes of water scarcity, reproductive labor, and the artist’s Chinese-American identity.

*The Wandering Lake’s* marriage of familial and environmental mourning rituals with the daily tension of balancing prestige work and care work affected me deeply. I first learned about this work in an artist talk that I coordinated with Chang in my prior role at UC Berkeley in 2011. At that time, I was a relatively new parent, still nursing my toddler. Her work, in particular the image of the artist washing a dead sperm whale in freezing waters off Newfoundland, stayed embedded in my memory. When we reconvened in 2017, I did a studio visit in Chang’s new Altadena home, sitting gingerly on a broken chair assigned to her young son in a house that was equipped strictly for a two-adult, one-child situation. The daily complexity of working motherhood was already our condition, and the fears that kept building emerged from a set of social values that places these two creative ways of being at odds with one another.

As Chang developed the work, she began to collect fears from friends and colleagues. She was working deliberately, but without a clear plan for what would emerge. For a while, I would ask her how things were going and she would respond with uncertainty, as if the objects and videos she was producing were not yet art in her view. When at last she revealed the work to me in the spring of 2019, the videos, while raw, had the same power over me as that early cut of the whale work, *Invocation for a Wandering Lake* (2016). In one, actress Kestrel Leah reads a list of fears collected in 2019 from Chang’s friends. Leah sits in a bathtub in a red bathing suit, pumping breast milk that splashes rhythmically into the bathwater. The milk is wasted excess, a practice known as “pump and dump” that nursing women employ when they are weaning to relieve pressure. The fears are intimate.

- My legs, ass, and heels are cracking and dry.
- Being too far from the ocean.
- Not being able to make a break for it.
- Being burned alive.
- Being mauled by a shark.
- Being mauled by an alligator.
- Seeing my own body torn apart.
- My tire will blow on the freeway, there’ll be a pile-up.
“Pump-and-dump” is also an economic term, meaning to inflate the value of a stock investment in order to drive up the price and then sell off a large amount of shares, driving the value down for others. A form of insider trading, “pump-and-dump” reflects both the misogyny at the heart of the seemingly neutral language of finance, and indirectly reifies breast milk as a rhetorical equivalent for currency. Writer David Graeber, whose book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* is the source of the phrase “milk debt,” refers to a spiritual insufficiency that can never be resolved, in which the child is perennally in a state of deficit with the mother who has nursed them to independence. This metaphysical liability is eternal and can never be paid with cash.

Chang has always made work about her family. The *Wandering Lake* featured a poignant two-channel video, *Invocations/Que Sera Sera*, made with both the artists’ parents while her father lay dying in 2016. In one channel, the artist sings softly, “Que Sera Sera,” bouncing her son against her torso as she occupies the roles of parent and child simultaneously. Her care work reverses the customary relationship between those two archetypes, and reflects the concern with the parents’ end of life or their afterlife that underpins the concept of “milk debt.” Fears factor into this work as well, as on the opposite channel Chang’s mother swipes through a list of invocations that include “fear of laughing or crying inappropriately” in a tense and delicate situation. In *Milk Debt*, unlike in previous works, neither Chang nor her family are visible, but their presence is nonetheless felt everywhere in the work.

One of the ways Chang has responded to her parents has been to make work in China. Born in San Leandro, California to Chinese immigrants, from the time she began to work abroad with *Shangri-La* (2005), Chang’s work in China has called attention to her complicated status as an American of Chinese descent operating in a politically restrictive environment where she enjoys distinct if limited privileges. In 2019, Chang was invited to an artist residency at Hong Kong University, which she attended in May and June. “I was invited by Yeewan Koon at Hong Kong University and Melissa Lee at Tai Kwun to make a project for an academic conference about land,” explains Chang. “Instead of thinking about physical land, I thought about the psychological state of people living in the geographical region of Hong Kong. With its limited amount of space, the proximity to China and its precarious democratic structure, it seemed ripe for feelings of some sort.” On June 8, she presented a live performance of *Milk Debt*, the first public iteration of this work, at the Tai Kwun Center for Heritage and Arts, in the city’s new Central Police Station cultural complex. “The date of the conference was early June,” says Chang. “We gathered the fears during the spring leading up to the conference.” The fears in this iteration were gathered through outreach conducted by HKU students among their families and friends.

The next day, June 9, was the day the streets filled with protestors challenging the Beijing-backed Fugitive Offenders extradition amendment that would give the Chinese government sweeping authority to operate in politically independent Hong Kong. Chang admits, “I was unaware of the intensity of people’s fears about the extradition law, and only after getting to Hong Kong did I know that large protests were planned.” She decided to hit the streets with performer Heather Lin. “In addition to a live performance, I was also interested in filming the performance at a site where people express themselves. The protest seemed like the perfect condition.” Taking up a position on a pedestrian bridge, journalists had gathered to observe hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong citizens marching peacefully. With a large camera and a teleprompter, Chang and Lin mimicked the reporters in appearance.

As the camera rolls, Lin begins to pump, breathlessly reciting the fears list above the surging crowd chanting below. The fears are urgent, her cadence rushed, but her tone is insistently neutral.

He likes me because I’m not threatening to him.
He chooses me because he is tired of dating and wants to settle down.
He chooses me because I remind him of someone he truly loves.
He will regret that decision and blame me for it.
I fear that my father’s house will be confiscated by a developer one day.
A construction company will stop by and the land I used to play on will be gone.
The place will be turned into tasteless mansions that people buy, not to live in, but to invest.

Chang and I met about her developing project a couple of weeks after she returned from Hong Kong. The protests were ongoing, while back in Southern California, wildfire season was about to strike. Environmental loss and resource scarcity became an important topic as Chang continued to collect fears and interview performers in the Los Angeles area. She identified locations of interest including the Owens Valley Cascade, a section of the Los Angeles...
Aqueduct, as well as the Los Angeles River, both of which are waterways that were heavily engineered in mid-century.

Temblor.
Tsunami.
Animales silvestres.
Los huracanes.
Los tornados.

The exhibition at 18th Street Arts Center was supposed to open in May 2020, but by early March it was clear that the date would be postponed due to coronavirus. Suddenly housebound, Chang began to collect fears again and to make videos with performers online. She describes how “because of quarantine, the performances were forced to be moved onto online platforms—Zoom, Skype, Facetime—reflecting our lived experiences. I called the performers through the digital apps and they performed for an audience of one, which I recorded.” On May 22, Chang and I had a public conversation about the project over Zoom with curator Asha Bukojemsky of Marathon Screenings. We reflected on how the trajectory of the project has aligned with a sense of escalating anxiety in the culture at large.

As I write this reflection, Los Angeles is wrapping up the eighth straight day of public protest in response to the killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by police officers in Minneapolis at the end of May. Reflecting on the present moment, Chang observes, “There is something about compartmentalizing all of our social interactions into a digital format that seems to create the perfect constriction for people to compel communication in flesh and blood. Added to that the fear of COVID, the economic loss, the high percentage of deaths of African Americans, the systematic racism and inequity of the capitalist system among other fears for the future, seem to make people pouring out into the streets to collectively speak their fears, desires and grievances, an inevitability.” The streets are filled with people braving the ongoing pandemic to attest to civil rights in the face of tear gas, rubber bullets, and property destruction, here in Los Angeles and all over the United States.

The anxiety felt in Hong Kong a year ago, like the pandemic, has settled in here at home. Still, there is reason for hope. The worse things get, the more opportunity we have to find out what we’re truly capable of. Survival means we face our fears and go where the milk flows.

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