



# q/a

by Jan Garden Castro

**“All Over the Place,”** Mel Chin’s “post-retrospective comprehensive survey” at the Queens Museum (2018) was aptly named. For more than 40 years, he has used a staggering range of materials and processes—plant and soil research, traditional stone sculpture, covert interventions in TV shows, and most recently augmented reality—to address pressing social and environmental issues, from the Panama Canal’s true meaning to safe sex, lead poisoning, and the depredations of imperialism. He exposes how the legacies of xenophobia, war, racism, and colonialism continue to affect the circulation of goods, people, and ideas, masking serious intent with infectious humor and goodwill.

Last year, Chin took over New York’s Times Square, displacing the usual noisy bustle with a disturbing vision of the future city completely submerged by rising sea levels. In collaboration with Microsoft, Chin created a unique mixed-reality experience in which his 60-foot-tall sculpture *Wake*—part sunken shipwreck (complete with animatronic figurehead of the 19th-century opera star Jenny Lind on the prow), part

# Time to Make

BRANDON SCOTT, COURTESY THE ARTIST



*Sea to See  
(Version 2.0),  
2014/18.*

Wood, glass, steel,  
projection coating,  
paint, projectors,  
speakers, and CPUs,  
34 x 36 ft.

a stand

A Conversation  
with Mel Chin



whale skeleton—comes to life and rises to the surface of the flooded square, where it is joined by countless ships in a nautical traffic jam high above the streets. The vessels eventually slow to a halt and rust away. Meanwhile, tiny plankton and other microscopic marine life begin to build a new ecosystem, teeming with life, born of the catastrophic effects of climate change.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *Wake and Unmoored* were a big hit. Why put Jenny Lind on the prow of the 19th-century clipper *USS Nightingale* and float virtual ships over Times Square to link the past to a future global warming/ocean rising scenario?

**Mel Chin:** That's a big time-travel question—I guess we'll start with the now. There are two concepts: *Unmoored* and the apparition of AR (augmented reality) boats caused by climate change came first. The use of cellular devices, phones, and laptops has resulted in a decrease in empathy, but phenomena have been shown to rekindle empathy, so the idea was to put a phenomenon onto the device, as an AR app. The Times Square site was determined by Manon Slome, of No Longer Empty, and Laura Raicovich, former director of the Queens Museum, in association with the Times Square Alliance. As the curators for "All Over the Place," they thought a new project would help us live up to the name of the exhibition. The Times Square people wanted a physical presence on the ground, and I wanted a virtual one in the air, so we came to an agreement.

I began to study the history of Times Square: it has become the biggest marketing, celebrity-aggrandizing, and light-emitting spot in the world. All of this stimulates consumption, which certainly affects

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”

climate change. I wanted to represent the origins of excessive consumption, which began at the turn of the century with the industrial age. The mass marketing of showman P.T. Barnum started with an opera singer he brought here from Sweden named Jenny Lind. *Wake* represents a link, with the 19th century bleeding into the 21st century—the compositing of two histories.

**JGC:** Trade ships were also used as slave ships.

**MC:** When you enter the world of scholarly research, you realize that the Hollywood version of history is not correct. Jenny Lind eventually became a humanitarian and supported charities in Sweden, but here in America she was the first superstar; through Barnum's promotion, she was known as "The Swedish Nightingale." As a reflection of her popularity, a clipper ship was named the *Nightingale*, and her carved image appeared as the figurehead on the prow. That ship, and many like it, was related to the nefarious trade in opium, guns, and even the illegal slave trade. Lind, of course, had nothing to do with that. In Times Square, she appeared as a forlorn figure scanning the skies, an enlarged version of her original figurehead form; askew bones that match the exact shape of the hull of the *Nightingale* followed in her wake. You could sit and mingle within the wooden hull in the wildest and most active place in New York City.

The *Unmoored* app links Lind's time to the future; its script allows you to experience the whole block being inundated by 141 floating vessels—26 feet above you. Plankton species, to which we owe a debt for life on earth, appear and disappear, and the experience ends with a question: "How will you rise?"

**JGC:** How did you develop the app?

**MC:** I drafted a script for the *Unmoored* experience and specified the assets or 3D digital models of boats and plankton. Modelers were hired. Microsoft contracted Russian engineers to develop the AR, and a sound designer from Listen interfaced with my team and guided everything as project manager. It was a hectic pace for me, creating a physical piece and a virtual piece simultaneously in a year, but it was a pleasure working with *Unmoored's* super-professional group; we worked through the process with weekly reviews and follow-through.

**JGC:** When did you decide that collaboration was the way to go?







**MC:** Collaboration is hard, but sometimes it is the only way to accomplish something. My first real-stakes collaboration was *Revival Field* (1990). The diorama of *Revival Field* in the Queens Museum exhibition depicted a process that I developed with Dr. Rufus Chaney at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. My art practice was tailored to accomplish research that he was not being funded to do at the time. We created the first field tests in America of hyperaccumulator plants to prove that they have the capacity to pull heavy metal out of the soil and hold it in their vascular systems—and that it was possible to harvest the contamination and recover ore. *Revival Field* proved science. It created many post-docs in a now-viable field of study. While no plant picks up lead, the plants that we isolated can pick up cadmium and zinc; other plants can pick up nickel—all products of our post-industrial world, which can now be partially reclaimed in a managed way. It was a concept, an artwork, and it proved a

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE:  
Installation view of *Wake*  
and *Unmoored*,  
2018.  
Times Square, New York.

RIGHT:  
Exhibition view of “Mel  
Chin: All Over the Place,”  
2018.







THIS PAGE, TOP: THOMAS REHBEIN GALERIE, COLOGNE, COURTESY THE ARTIST / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST / OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST





scientific principle. It began with a three-year run in Pig's Eye Land Fill in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1990 and continued in Palmerton, Pennsylvania, for eight years. Through this art project, there's transformation, collaboration, and cooperation, and a profound lesson on how to realize a concept. I couldn't do that alone.

**JGC:** *Cabinet of Craving* (2012), which seems like a nod to Louise Bourgeois, attacks British imperialism.

**MC:** It's more a nod to Bourgeois's vitrines than to her spiders. The spider shape is ancillary; it was a way to deal with my complete dislike of Queen Anne furniture feet, which are Greek and Chinese inspired. In *Cabinet of Craving*, what's in the vitrine is important. It holds a British tea set from 1843 on a silver tray—1843 was the last year of the Opium War. *Cabinet of Craving* is the monster of addiction that can spring forth in any kind of domestic situation, brought to you by powerful economic manipulations. Back then, the British were hooked on tea, and they paid the

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE BOTTOM: **Revival Field (Diorama), 2013.**

Hyperaccumulator parts, *Revival Field* stake, and archival documents, dimensions variable.

**Safe (and detail), 2005.**

Oil on Belgian linen, gilded wood and plaster, weathered wood, and nails, 144 x 84 x 18 in.

**Dispatcher, 1998.**

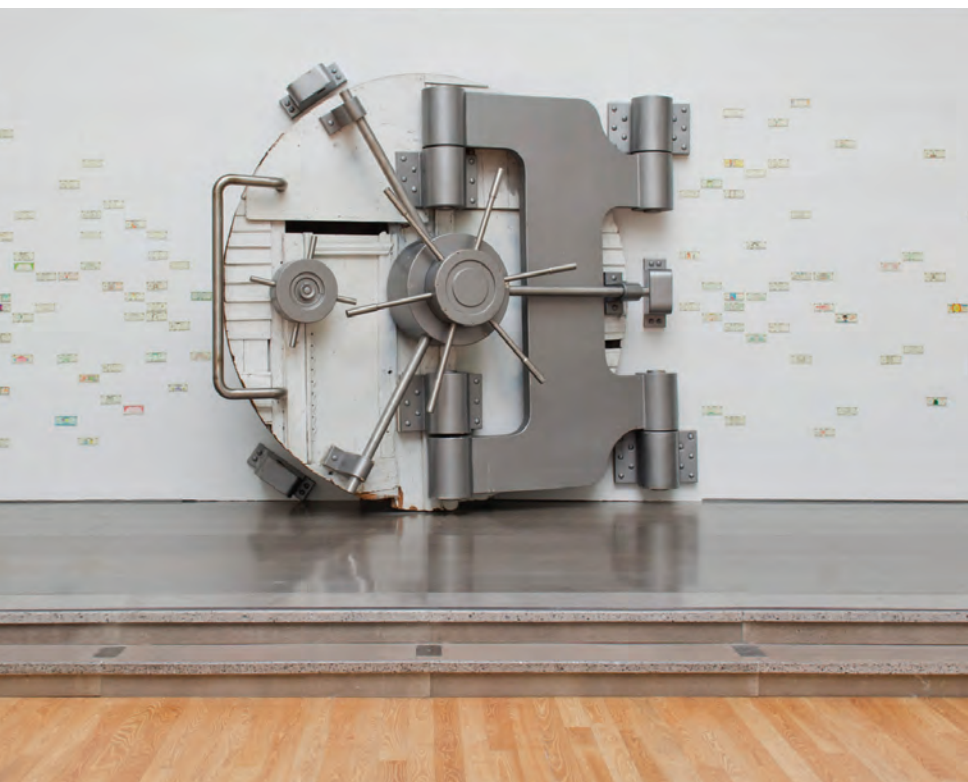
Knife blades and antique typewriter, 4.5 x 11 x 9.5 in.

Chinese for it in silver. When British silver reserves got thin, they started the illegal smuggling of opium into China to offset the trade, which resulted in the war that the British won. It forced open the doors to the drug trade. The resulting horror was mass opium addiction and a trade upset that wrecked the health and economy of China. In my mother's family, her father was consumed by it, and they lost everything. My mother wouldn't allow us to mention it because of the profound shame.

After she died, I sought a way to discuss it. It became a crouching English bulldog-like beast with a mask on—confronting the viewer, ready to pounce. It's a cabinet that holds a dark history, and it's a lamentation like *Safe* (2005), which I made after reading Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, about the first massive genocide at the turn of the 1900s—10 to 20 million Africans perished.

**JGC:** "All Over the Place" covered four decades of your work related to social, cultural, and environmental





issues, including lead poisoning, ocean pollution, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, Middle Eastern cultures in peril, and the racist graffiti painted on the gate of LeBron James's home. Could you discuss *Sea to See* (2014/2018), created for the centenary of the Panama Canal?

**MC:** I was a little snarky when Jonathan Stuhlman of the Mint Museum asked me to consider a new work for his exhibition on the Panama Canal. I said, "100 years is enough about that wound. If I were to do it, I'd want to focus on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans." He accepted my intention, and then I was obligated to create something. I opted to make two 12-foot-high hemispherical screens, Jules Verne-like orbs with flowing cinematic "portraits" of the Atlantic and Pacific that press upon you as you walk between them. You become the isthmus, with the weight of two oceans held back by glass domes.

I also wanted to pay homage to oceanographic researchers. I read the scientific data related to temperature, salinity, oxygen exchanges, depths, plankton,





CLOCKWISE FROM  
OPPOSITE BOTTOM:  
Exhibition view of  
New Orleans *Safehouse*  
door from *Operation  
Paydirt* and *Fundreds*,  
2006–ongoing.  
Stainless steel, steel,  
and drawings.

*The Funk & Wag  
from A to Z*,  
2012.

Excised printed pages  
from *The Universal  
Standard Encyclopedia*,  
1953–56, by Wilfred Funk  
Inc., archival water-based  
glue, paper, brass, oak,  
glass, and 524 collages,  
dimensions variable.

Exhibition view of *Ill-  
posed Problemware*  
from “Mel Chin:  
All Over the Place,”  
2018.



SEM images, endangered species, ice cap meltings, and plastic gyres—the plastisphere in both oceans that causes species to mutate. We then transformed that information into individual animated digital films and composited them together. I’ve talked about *Wake* and *Unmoored* being question providers. *Sea to See* serves as a provocation that animates a desire to seek answers, prompting an interest to know more about what’s happening to the oceans and why.

**JGC:** You’ve devoted several works to lead poisoning, including *Fundreds*, three *Lead Point Portraits* (2013), and *Flint Fit* (2018), a three-city collaborative project. Why is this issue so important?

**MC:** In New Orleans, after Katrina, I found out that 30 to 50 percent of inner-city children were compromised with lead at the time—and that was before the storm. There were no funds I knew to address that. *Fundreds* was meant to take the idea of hand-drawn money and give it real value, representing children’s voices against something that compromises their future. Since that time, the *Fundred Project* has gone national; *Fundreds* have been drawn in almost every post-industrial city in America, in disenfranchised communities saddled with some of the highest homicide and lowest healthcare rates. The correlation between lead as a neurotoxin and its effect on culture has been duly studied. The *Fundreds* team presents the half a million drawings that we now hold to leadership in Congress, Republicans and Democrats, to represent these voices requesting a future free of lead. We supply each legislator with carefully considered policies that they can support to eradicate the lead poisoning of children in America forever.

In New Orleans, the *Fundred Project* was about lead in soil, but it has evolved into a broader project about stopping an invisible threat in the brain, bones, and blood of individuals. The nationwide campaign imparts educational curricula to allow children who draw a *Fundred* to be safer than they were and to share that information with their parents. Interactive projects necessarily evolve; we have been and will continue going to Capitol Hill to discuss this. We’re not done.

The three portraits drawn in lead point are another way of expressing the gravity and complexity of how lead can be locked in the brain by the time a child is three years old. William Gardner was executed in Cincinnati for an arson attack that resulted in





the deaths of five children; he had a history of lead poisoning and a diminished IQ. He was in and out of correctional institutions his whole life. Beethoven drank wine out of a leaded cask. His unexplainable belligerence, deteriorating health, and eventual blindness are signs of lead poisoning. Al Dunlap, a CEO who brought Sunbeam, a profitable company, to zero worth within a year is the last portrait. Originally considered a successful corporate raider, he was rewarded with millions until it was discovered that he was manipulating the books. Chainsaw Al, as he liked to be called, was a grim reaper of people's futures for his personal benefit. His behavior seemed poisoned. I was trying to show the diversity of lead victims.

Finally, *Flint Fit* was developed after the water crisis there. I went to Flint to offer a voice through the *Fundred Project* to children and families with no clean drinking water. I also asked people to review, consider, and participate in the triangulation of a new possibility called *Flint Fit*. It combines the strengths of the people in Flint, the recycling capabilities of North Carolina, and the fashion center of New York.

LEFT TO RIGHT:  
**Cabinet of Craving**  
(detail),  
2012.

White oak, antique English bone ware (c. 1843), footed silver tray, steel, pigmented dye, and shellac, 9 x 14 x 14 ft.

Exhibition view of  
**Flint Fit** from "Mel Chin:  
All Over the Place,"  
2018.

I offered to pay Flint residents for their extra plastic water bottles and to have a bottle recycler in North Carolina turn them into thread and fabric, which would be shaped into fashions by New York designer Tracy Reese. Tracy designed rain and swimwear prototypes. Back in Flint, women recovering from domestic violence and working at the New Life Center were hired to sew the designs. We then had a fashion show in New York to celebrate what we had accomplished together. I've also been working with a team to develop a Flint citizen-owned business plan for *Flint Fit*. The bottles are a dark memory and the remains of a crisis; the big arc is to turn them into a source for manufacturing and creativity.

**JGC:** Your versions of common household items are as thought-provoking and pointed as your social projects. What was the idea behind your beautifully constructed kitchen sink and the toaster with no opening?

**MC:** To describe the sink graphically, you might imagine the male and female anatomy: two testicles and a penis are above, as knobs and spout; the strainer



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cup is a hymen with a clitoris and an anus-drain sits below. The toaster is about repression; if you turn it on, it will burn itself up. I call these works *Ill-posed Problemware*, taking lessons from the Freudian psychological profiles that Madison Avenue used to sex up inanimate objects in the 1950s.

**JGC:** In some ways, you followed similar media strategies with your *Melrose Place* intervention.

**MC:** That was part of a collective effort called *In the Name of the Place* by the now-disbanded GALA Committee, a group of artists, students, television producers, and writers. The televised nighttime soap opera *Melrose Place* had many plots and subplots, including lots of unsafe sex. More than 100 art props were produced for a covert conceptual art project conducted on primetime television for two years. For example, *Safety Sheets* were bed sheets printed with unrolled condoms for a particularly active bed; they appeared at a time when FCC regulations did not allow condoms to be shown on television.

Sports are also a big part of our national psyche

and conversation. In *Gate of the New Gods*, a giant vine, with clusters of basketball fruit and leaves made from hoop netting, arcs over a scale replica of LeBron James’s front gate in Los Angeles, the one attacked with graffiti. He was so poignant when he said, “No matter how much money you have, no matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, being black in America is tough. We have a long way to go for us as a society.” I thought a good way to honor him would be to make a version of his gate as a work of art—protected, conserved, valued, and never to be defaced again. It’s time to make a stand.

**JGC:** Your work is deeply grounded in your humanitarian beliefs.

**MC:** Our time in the world is brief. We are entrapped in a world of mercurial, destructive practices—political, materialistic, militaristic—a world that is wrestling with the life and death of ideas and people in the worst way. As an artist, liberation from that is the struggle—to carve out evidence of alternative moments, to offer an option. You have to start again each time. ■■■