

ALGER LIANG



Alger Liang: Artist in Motion

Alger Liang destabilizes the functional opposites of our world that are meant to divide people into categories. His conceptual artworks allow seemingly contradictory devices to exist simultaneously; like two sides of a spinning coin, his subjects are constantly rotating. Liang's art practice begins with a series of questions, or fixations on the phenomenological paradoxes of identity. He often employs a queered methodology in his work, by challenging norms and the stability of "fixed" formats. Thus, his ability to contain multitudes derives from a remarkable capacity for empathy and from an adept manoeuvring around artistic constraints. In this way, Liang hopes to prompt further questions and inspire a more playful, fluid artistic community.

His photographic series *Portrait of Shanghai* (2018) is a documentation of events as well as a conceptual self-portrait. The humid air provides a hazy, cool-toned climate for Liang's analog camera. The wet asphalt, glass structures, and glimmering bodies create a curiously surreal effect. Somehow, the images seem to have been filtered through Liang's own memory. He challenges the very medium of photography by asking viewers to reconsider what or whom is the subject of this work.

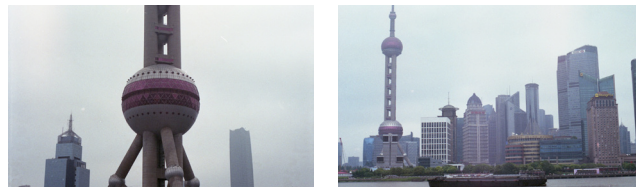
For Liang, many circumstances collided during the creation of *Portrait of Shanghai*. He was competing in the World Racewalking Championships with Team Canada for 2018. Although it looks like a queered parody of human movement, racewalking is in fact a feat of endurance that requires superb physical conditioning. This competition was a testament to Liang's years of training. His other identity markers were also present in Shanghai: namely, his Chinese cultural heritage, his Canadian nationality, and his queerness, as linked symbolically to this sport. Notably, however, Liang is not defined

by the flag on his jersey nor the Chinese site of these championships. Rather, *Portrait of Shanghai* articulates the feelings of longing and belonging that are tangible for people who live in multiple spaces at once.

The topography of Shanghai is framed alongside the awkwardly ambulating bodies of racewalkers in a manner that catches both off-guard. The racewalkers' bodies are twisted at the waist, due to sport's only two rules: one foot must always be in contact with the ground, and the supporting leg must remain straight. Liang's use of visual repetition pulls at the tension between these familiar and unfamiliar bodily forms. At first glance they may look awkward, but together, their figures affirm one another. Their growing sense of pride also reflects Liang's personal adjustment to Shanghai. His use of seriality provides a visual family for himself and the other racewalkers.

Portrait of Shanghai began with the question: how does our perception adjust according to the spaces we inhabit? This a key touchstone in Liang's art practice. His work is always situated within the mechanisms of transformation. "When I make art, I am (re)creating my world." Liang enacts a vision of someplace where emotional vulnerability is seen as a strength, and perception is malleable. *Portrait of Shanghai*, accordingly, is conscious of how the act of looking can turn into new ways of being. For Liang, this meant finding new communities in concrete and abstract spaces.

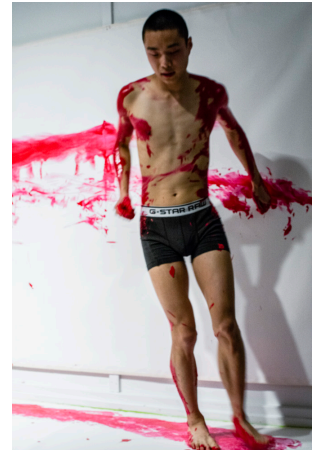
For his performance *One More Lap* at the Hatch Gallery in January 2019, Liang used this (re)creative agency to address his relationship with the past. The work references his first international racewalking competition, which took place in Cali, Colombia, in 2015. Liang began the 10,000m race around a 400m track at the IAAF World Youth Championships. However, due



Portrait of Shanghai, 2019.



ARTIST PROFILES



One More Lap, 2018



I'm a _____ boy, in a _____ world, 2019.



to technical difficulties with volunteer lap counters and miscommunications, he stopped one lap short of the required twenty-five laps, mistakenly thinking that he had completed his race. He was notified of his disqualification afterwards and received a “DNF” (did not finish). *One More Lap* was a performative mimesis of this event, although this time, Liang was in control of its results.

Large canvas sheets were installed at the Hatch Gallery on the floor and the wall. They served to record Liang’s racewalking steps as he tracked red paint on the bottoms of his feet and smeared the gallery wall with the outside of his upper arm. The performance was a cathartic experience for Liang, although he did acquire new scars. This time, in a literal sense: his left arm has been permanently scratched from its rough contact with the wall. Liang compares the anxiety of performing *One More Lap* to the few moments right before the start of a race. In his words, “athletic performance and performance

art both serve the purpose of demonstrating vulnerability and strength involving an audience—one being physical and the other being emotional. The same is also true about performing an identity you want to share with the world.”

One More Lap asked whether the past can be resolved. Liang seems to be keenly aware of how our phenomenological experiences build upon one another, shift and ripple over time. Liang treats his art process like an opportunity to present various facets of himself with fullness; each artistic iteration conceptually reflects an aspect of Liang’s being, yet they are tethered to one another in a long dialogue. In his more recent *I’m a _____ boy, in a _____ world* (2019), the performativity of identity is Liang’s primary interest. The blank spaces don’t denote an absence but rather leave room for multiple answers. Liang often uses portrait photography as a playful means to find and share queer kinship with his audience. Whether through point of

view, digital manipulation, or costume, Liang is able to queer his photographic practice in a way that rejects single definitions. He laughs and notes, “Wearing goggles within a certain context ... if you know, you know.” He hopes that in this way, his art can function as an affirmative queer connector. This triptych, along with other works from 2019, accumulates Liang’s serial photography work into a body that reaffirms itself with every image.

Liang has found that the act of using a camera is a gesture of pride in and of itself. His short film 為我感到驕傲, 我為你感到驕傲 (*Take Pride in Me Like I Take Pride in You*) (2019) is the culmination of his theory that art making and empathy occur in parallel. The looping four-minute film intercuts archival footage from his mother’s home videos—featuring himself as a small boy—with video of his mother that Liang took on his cell phone. In the home videos, young Liang plays the piano, dances, and performs martial arts for his mother, saying “silly pig” and “stupid boy” in Cantonese. In turn, Liang films his mother in everyday contexts, such as eating a meal or smiling in the car. Paradoxically, the title may suggest an absence of pride, but the documentation of these moments is their way of expressing love. To “take pride” connotes

taking pride in one’s full sexual being, something that happens over time. The film is a reminder of his mother’s unconditional acceptance, especially since pride, in all its forms, can create distance between family members. While creating this piece, Liang realized that the act of recording a video is an act of cherishing. The camera’s point of view articulates the loving aspects of their relationship as expressed through everyday interactions. The recorder is sending love, and the person being recorded is accepting their care. For Liang, this work is a demonstration of his gratitude towards his mother, a recognition of her care. Liang’s art practice demonstrates a breadth of emotional vulnerability, which serves to deepen his critical and conceptual performances. This is revolutionary in a world that is so often dismissive before being kind. The patterns of repetition and self-reflection in his works function as affirmative gestures. Like double lines for emphasis, or many exclamation points, Liang proves that silences can beam open with pride. ■

WRITTEN BY

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