



**ARTIST**

Saiman Li

**TITLE**

Untitled, from a performance project, My Different Color Days, Paris, photo by Weiland Beck

**DATE**

1997

**DIMENSIONS**

12 in H x 19 in W

**MEDIUM**

Chromogenic Color Prints

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

1998.128

**CURRENT LOCATION**

2432-2C

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**SAIMAN LI**

**BORN**

1958

**BIRTHPLACE**

Hong Kong, China

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Chinese-American

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 1998

**LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

Contact Sheet 102

A Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection

## ESSAYS

Saiman Li, who was born and raised in Hong Kong, grew up in an environment where expressing creativity was not encouraged. Immigrating to the United States, Li found himself liberated by 'pop culture and the influences of 'American' friends.' Settling in the San Francisco Bay Area, Li eventually studied at the San Francisco Art Institute. The relationship between Li's Chinese heritage and his new identity as an American citizen was the primary focus of his earlier work. Using the Van Dyke brown print process to create an allusion to images from the past, Li combined self-portraits, family photographs, and appropriated images specific to his Chinese ancestry to forge a connection between his cultural past and present situation. Li writes, 'The concept of home has been central to my work. Home is not here or there. Home is within myself. My work explores personal feelings of dislocation, loss and longing, and the search of the self and home.' In 1996 Li began a series entitled *Flash It*; in this work, rather than exploring a specific cultural identity, Li adopted a variety of alternative racial identities. Li writes, 'Instead of claiming a fixed identity I am investigating an elastic one, an identity which is constantly evolving.' In this series of humorous representations of himself, Li interchanges his identity freely as if race were a costume. Donning wigs, accessories, and distinctive attire, Li transformed himself into stereotypical representations of a businessman, Asian shopkeeper, hippie, heavy metal teenager, Latino, and even a blushing bride. Accompanying each identity Li fabricates a new California Drivers License to validate each persona. In this series, where Li chooses to mask his heritage rather than to embrace it, he begins to illustrate just how pliant identity can be. In Li's recent series, *My Different Color Days*, the artist painted and dressed himself from head to toe in one of four primary colors and then documented the results of his interactions in different environments. With the assistance of friends, strangers, and self-timers Li's travels were documented with still and video cameras in this work, which is part photography, part installation, and part performance. The project began in San Francisco and has been extended to New York, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, and Barcelona. In Syracuse Li concentrated on printing images from his previous travels, but could not resist the opportunity to interact with the local landscape. Attending Syracuse's annual Bluesfest, naturally painted blue, Li managed to fit right in - dancing in the crowd, making friends, asking strangers for their phone numbers, and enjoying a side of ribs at Syracuse's popular Dinosaur BBQ. However, days later when returning to the same streets where he had been the life the party he was now met with odd reactions, stares, and queries about his intentions. In describing this project Li writes, 'I am interested in the idea of the post-human who attempts to get along and achieve harmony in the society.' Li's efforts to 'fit in' serve as a sardonic critique of society's acceptance of physical difference. Those who stand out risk ridicule or expulsion; in this series Li tests the waters of our open-mindedness with his monochromatic persona. Even though an individual's cultural and physical identity cannot simply be removed with a jar of cold cream, Li asks us to consider that beyond the physical characteristics that separate us, is cultural identity only a costume we wear? Li's monochromatic post-human, unencumbered by any attachment to a specific race or culture, is in a sense free of the prejudices attached to geographic boundaries and the cultural baggage that is passed on from one generation to the next. Gary Hesse Saiman Li lives in San Francisco, CA, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in July 1998. *Un/Common Threads* In organizing the exhibition "*Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection*," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "*Un/Common Threads*" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "*Un/Common Threads*" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "*Jermame*," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "*Un/Common Threads*" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of *Un/Common Threads* to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" *American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchy, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY. A Just Image As it plays out in the headlines, justice means equality, fairness, and the rule of law. Yet beyond the events broadcast on television and the news alerts flashed instantly to laptops and PDAs, there is a large realm of justice that eludes reporters. Throughout daily life - at home, in school, doing errands, tending children, making dinner, playing sports - perceptions of justice often float just below the radar. The Light Work Collection offered plentiful proof that photographers frequently make images of routine daily life and its relationship to a sense of justice. However, as members of the Fine Arts 395 "Art and Identity" class noticed, scholars seldom extend the concept of justice into aspects of living that are legal, but sometimes ethically questionable. Counselors, social workers, and therapists seem to take over where the justice system stops. Nevertheless, the line between the legal system's purview and personal life is not fixed. Class members were careful to insist that the law is often less subtle in its grasp of situations and unaware of complexities than are the images included in this show. Nowhere in the law is it written that by embracing a stereotype one can sometimes achieve influence skin to contesting the mold. Thoughts and feelings such as these coalesced as the subject of this exhibition. Work and family emerged as sites where what is fair is not always what is equal, and what is equal is not always fair. However fair or unfair, the triumphs and annoyances one experiences at work mostly fall below the

threshold of the law. It is conventional wisdom, not the IRS, which suggests that wealth carries no guarantee of happiness. Creating this nuanced exhibition about justice in everyday life led the class into hearty and un-nuanced discussions about the slights, snubs, and rebuffs of an ordinary day. The students chose the title A Just Image for this exhibition before they read about the expression in Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. With the phrase, he and they recognize that art coaxes the world of appearances to create symbols signifying ideas for which there are no words. Just an image becomes A Just Image. Mary Warner MarienA Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection is the result of a collaborative effort by thirty-one Syracuse University students enrolled in Professor Mary Warner Marien's "Art and Identity" course. The exhibition examines the Fall 2007 Syracuse Symposium theme of justice. The students chose images from the Light Work Collection, considering the personal and societal meanings of justice. They have created an interactive exhibition, where, as the students write in the exhibition catalogue, "ironically... the viewer is still judging."A Just Image invites viewers to explore the photographs and rethink their definition of justice. As the students of the "Art and Identity" course discovered, though justice is a universal concept, it does not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone. This can be seen in the different perceptions of stereotypes, families, occupations, and leisure activities, which are some of the topics examined by the class. According to the students, " The Pictures we have chosen require more than just superficial judgment; they require the viewer to acknowledge their own stereotyped projections." Roslyn Esperon