

Print/Collect

*Ewwwww!*

2013

By Marcus Civin

A while back, Andrew Liang invited me to Current Space, a gallery-cum-anarchy he helps run on a rough patch of Howard Street in Baltimore. He and a group of friends were working late at Current using the gallery space as a studio extension, sanding thin wood panel cutouts and painting-in hysterical cartoon characters—a whale, a pig, round-head boys breakdancing, doing the worm. Liang is preparing for what will become a mural-like arrangement of dozens and dozens of cutouts for a big Philadelphia show. Liang and a team will assemble the various character cutouts together to form one giant worm.

My conversation with Liang progressed from flying saucers to laser-shooting nipples. Of laser-shooting nipples, Liang said: “I think about that. I don’t know why no one else does.”

Liang juggles a flippant cast of characters. I like the lollipops mid-lick, licking at each other. I like the football players, they’re Baltimore Ravens, purple and white, butts in the air and awaiting the snap. And there are Santas too. Some of the Santas are Egyptian and some are snake charmers. There are also chicken wings, elves, mischievous trees, and mischievous tree stumps.

But, everyone seems mostly to be able to get along. The scene is a vision of adult cartoons posing, a copacetic community full of radically different types. They speak different languages perhaps and they don’t have much. They are blocks. They won’t really interact. At best, they consider each other. They almost interact. There is an Elvis impersonator just being born from an ear of corn, and there are gadflies and penguins next to a snowman merman with a body-builder stomach. I sense tension here, a sneer simmering under the surface, perhaps a desire to break through politeness.

My hunch is that some of Liang’s particular zaniness comes from an experience of culture clash. I said: “So you went straight from Taiwan to Texas. That must have been weird.”

Liang said: “It was really weird.”

I asked: “How much English did you speak when got to Texas?”

Liang: “Zero.”

Liang remembers getting to Dallas when he was 13. He would draw, play video games, or play pick-up football. He and his friends would watch the then-champion Dallas Cowboys on TV. His friends were other Taiwanese students. His dad worked a job on an assembly line building spark plugs for Toyota.

After finishing art school at MICA in Baltimore, Liang went to New York briefly to try to be an illustrator, but he didn’t like it. The people he met weren’t right. In Baltimore, he has a support system of friends who have time for each other.

Liang: “I hardly see my friends in NY. Here in Baltimore, I have a group of people who are here together, a community of people like a family. I didn’t get that in NY. I didn’t feel that way.”

Drinking wine from a box and getting acquainted with Liang’s giant hand-sewn stuffed animal cat, I asked: “What print are you making for Jen’s Baltimore book?”

Liang got quiet, took a brush and right then and there made a small painting on butcher paper. The painting showed a man's head with two fingers up his nose. I took a cell phone picture of this quick painting and texted the picture to Jen. Either the man's eyeballs look like fingers or his fingers are so far up his nose, they've somehow poked out his eyes.

The image is a joke. It's funny. It's crude. The fingers are like two dicks penetrating.

To me, Laing's nose picking man is an icon and it is a bizarre raunchy pervert divine. The nose picking man seems to say: Who cares about the polite police? No more sneaking a nose pick in the car on the way to work, no more pretending to scratch the side of the nose. Wherever you are, cars go in tunnels and fingers go up noses. Before babies talk, they pick their noses. Paparazzi catch movie stars picking their noses. Polite culture is a mask. Nose picking is plain as day.

Liang goes beyond polite. Liang's cartoon nose picker is a clown, an amusing flat-forehead blue-haired plunging picker. The joke is that this picker has broken through to where eyeballs used to be. The tips of this picker's fingers look like two happy mini-cupcakes or two pert penis tips. Where eyeballs used to be, there are now exclamation points. The triumphant picker smiles big, pink, round; he's content; he's breaking the rules; he's broken through.

The best cartoons can physically do what humans would want to do but cannot. Many cartoons make us laugh. Perhaps the best cartoons help us find unusual pleasure. Nose picking is sensual not visual. Digging is pleasure without sight. Digging refuses sight. The nose picker is against politeness and nose picking is against seeing. Double barrel, with pointer finger and middle finger, the nose picker feels the nostril sides, feels the inside tip terminus, the previously established top limits of both nostrils. The nose picker blindly digs out a path through the nose and towards the eyes.

In Liang's image, the nostrils are wide-set nostrils. The eyes are far away, but they are almost a direct shot up. Single-minded nose picking makes fingers like drill bits. Extreme nose picking is about being dead-set determined to drill out impacted material, drippy and bloody material, brown-black deepest boogers, probably some bone and cartilage.

For Liang and his cartoon nose picking man, real nose picking is about feeling certain limits so strongly that feeling those limits becomes an unremitting and inscrutable desire to pull out blockages, to push further through, getting beyond limits. At the end, real pickers finally pop-crash-puncture eye sockets. Real nose pickers push out their eyes.

Perhaps many of Liang's funny figures and cutouts walk a similar line. They exist just at the edge of pain, just right there, right by ridiculous. Earlier pieces by Liang include his giant stuffed animal cat scratching a giant boy's leg, and a human-sized foosball game with real human players. To discuss Liang's work is to discuss funny stuff. But it's not right; it's not polite, not exactly... And, so it seems Liang wants to question what is polite. He wants to nudge polite over a little, crack at polite masks and chip polite blocks.