

This Photographer Subverts Gender Roles in an Intimate Series about Her Relationship

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Pixy Yijun Liao, *Start your day with a good breakfast together*, 2009
Flowers

Ah, romance! These days, it can start in so many ways: a chance encounter at a bar or on the subway; a fortuitous right-swipe on Tinder. But for photographer Pixy Liao, her more-than decade-long relationship began a bit differently. In 2006, after moving from Shanghai to study at the Memphis College of Art, one of her peers—a jazz musician from Japan named Moro—caught her eye. Instead of inviting him out for a drink, she asked him if he would model for her. Their professional engagement soon evolved into a love affair—one that has been the fruitful subject of an ongoing series of wonderfully surreal images, known as “Experimental Relationship” (2007–present). This year, the photographer published a book collecting selections from the first decade of the project.

Liao’s pictures of their coupledness swing between touching, absurd, and mildly explicit. She’s forthright about her intentions to think of Moro as a “prop” that she could art-direct with dictatorial

precision. “He’s very flexible,” she told me during a recent conversation. “I ask him, and he never says no—he just does it.” Did she mean *physically* flexible, I wondered? “He’s willing to do anything.”

“Anything,” in this case, has involved plenty of contortions and more than a little nudity. In one picture, Liao uses Moro as a table, eating a halved papaya off his groin. In others, she dresses him up in her clothes, wraps him up like a piece of human sushi, or touches his nipple in homage to a very odd 16th-century French painting.



Pixy Yijun Liao, *You... Flowers*



Pixy Liao, *Lace Sisters*, from the series “Experimental Relationship,” 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

In person, Liao is sweet and slightly reserved—not the type of person that you’d assume could, in thinking about her lover, wonder: “What can I do to him in a photograph?” But “Experimental Relationship” serves as a safe space for the kind of negotiations, power plays, and internal dramas that have kept her romance alive. It’s a sort of DIY couples therapy, with a camera. The project has allowed Liao to step back and examine the relationship, how it’s built, and what it means.

In some cases, the photographs have helped her spotlight the inequalities in their relationship. Liao said she supports both of them—she moonlights as a commercial photographer, while Moro doesn’t seem to contribute much to their shared economy. (She said, fairly deadpan, that she’s now grooming him to be a “house husband.”) Moro, of course, does have some agency here, and boundaries are drawn. He’s not keen on full-frontal nudity, for instance. “Sometimes, physically, he’s uncomfortable with a specific pose and may not want to do it,” Liao admitted. “And sometimes it could be he’s not in a good mood....”

The photographer has noticed how “Experimental Relationship” has altered over time, reflecting the dynamic of the real-world relationship that it mirrors. When they met, she said, their age difference was more striking—Liao is about five years older than her partner. And halfway through

their decade of dating, Moro seemed to balk at the routine they'd fallen into. He pushed back in certain ways, "almost like a kid, trying to rebel against me," she said. Once, Liao recalled, he came to her with his own idea for a photo shoot: They would twist their own bodies in a way that somehow resembled a face. They gave it a try, but something didn't gel; Liao said it was "the most unpleasant photo shoot ever." (The images are not part of the project.)



Pixy Liao, How to build a relationship with layered meanings, from the series "Experimental Relationship," 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

It helps that the couple has other collaborative pursuits beyond Liao's photographs—namely PIMO, a two-person band whose charming songs tackle subjects like getting high or shopping at Trader Joe's. In that context, Moro is firmly in charge. "It's very good for him to lead sometimes," she said. "I think the relationship is like a role-playing game. If you're always in the same role, it gets boring." Liao sings in PIMO, but Moro juggles everything else. (He's credited with playing the melodica, guitar, chopsticks, a wooden frog, and a shaving brush, among other unconventional instruments.)

Beyond exploring the unique intricacies of their own relationship, Liao's photo series is also an attempt to address issues specific to her background as a Chinese woman. "I grew up in a society where people constantly tell you that girls aren't good enough, they should take a secondary role and relax—find a man to protect you," she said. "I always felt uncomfortable with it. It's not until I moved and met Moro that I started to realize: There's no family to give me kind suggestions anymore. I was able to do things the way I like it, for the first time."

So how are we supposed to understand "Experimental Relationship," I wondered—as the document of an ongoing performance? In some ways it is, Liao surmised. But "it's more about acting to the script that I want to have in life," she said. "The script in my mind that would be fun to live."

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