



Photographer Pixy Liao on how humour and Japanese cinema shape her work

By Tanner Tafelski

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The Shanghai-born, Brooklyn-based photographer speaks about the influences behind her latest show, *Open Kimono*

On an unusually warm March weekday afternoon, between lunch and rush hour, the Chambers Fine Art gallery in Manhattan is empty of people. Diminutive with a sharp bob and a multi-coloured patchwork sweater, [Pixy Liao](#) emerges from a back office, a small paint can in her hand. She's slightly startled to see me, five minutes early and ready to chat with the Shanghai-born, Brooklyn-based artist known for her 12-years-and-counting *Experimental Relationship* project. In funny, bold, gender-subverting photographs, the series chronicles Liao's relationship with her boyfriend Moro, ever since meeting as grad students at the University of Memphis in 2007.

Settling in, she puts the paint can down, and leads me to her first solo exhibition with the gallery, *Open Kimono*, which spreads across two rooms. As she presents her photos, Liao is soft-spoken and deliberate with her answers.

One room is dedicated to a series of pictures taken last year when she and Moro were travelling through Asia. She snapped photos throughout her trip but picked one location for the shoot in order to maintain consistency among the set. "I found this Airbnb hotel – it looked super nice, an old Japanese hotel. It was in Yamanashi, one of the least populated towns in the country," she says. "It was like something from a Japanese film."



“The Way I Look at You 我望着你的样子” (2018) Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

The new work on display is highly cinematic. Take “The Woman in the Red Robe” (2018): the camera, positioned a few feet away, captures an intimate moment in which Liao, wearing scarlet clothing, is atop Moro, her mouth nearly touching his. The natural light flooding in from an open sliding door in the background delicately illuminates the contours of their facial features.

Liao says she wasn’t influenced by a particular movie, so much as a specific genre in Japanese cinema. “There used to be many films about yakuza, like *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* (1973) type of films. There was another genre kind of inspired by them though, mainly in the 1970s, called ‘pink violence’.” These films were stylish softcore films which featured female leads (often played by Meiko Kaji, Reiko Ike, and Tamaki Katori) in plots full of sex and violence. Liao points to “The Woman Who Clicks the Shutter” (2018), a portrait of herself kneeling in a pink kimono, her arm exposed. It’s a sly homage to the pulpy posters for movies like *Sex and Fury* (1973). Instead of a dagger, however, Liao holds the shutter release ball as she looks at the viewer with a measured stare.

Used since the series' inception, the shutter release ball and cable are constant props seen in Liao's pictures. "I just gave it to Moro in the beginning," she says. "I have one particular photo (2007's "Relationships Work Best When Each Partner Knows Their Proper Place") in which I'm pinching his nipple, he's clicking the shutter, and there's a cable release – the cord goes out of the frame." In fact, the picture, a wink to *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (circa 1594), sums up the series. "I am like a director, and he takes my cues by snapping the picture. But at the same time, he has control of the exact moment of the photograph." Liao is in command, giving orders to Moro, who in turn has room to improvise with his actions. It's a lopsided dynamic that, as Liao elaborates, has shaped into an equal collaboration over the years.



"The Woman in the Red Robe 穿红衣的女人" (2018) Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

Finished with the pictures, Liao enters the second room. On one of the walls is "Temple for Her" (2019), a bookshelf-sized installation housed in a small cube, which invites the viewer to climb up a small ladder and peer inside. Placed at the foot of a red staircase that leads up to a phallic throne is a human-shaped

pool filled with “blood”. A pair of gold eyes roll upward on the back wall, which has “zhou” emblazoned on it.

The piece is, in fact, a shrine to Wu Zetian, the only officially recognised empress of China. She was known for her ruthless leadership, even going so far as allegedly killing close family members in order to retain her throne. Liao thinks she got a bad rap, so that’s why Empress Wu is the first person in her *Evil Women Cult* series, a project taking stock of female leaders throughout history. “I want to make this project for younger girls to say, ‘those evil women are actually role models for us. We can look up to them and learn something from their strengths’.”



“Temple For Her” (2019) Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art

On the wall opposite the installation is “Wu Zetian’s Wordless Stele” (2019), a Risograph that renders the monument simply in grey and blue. Usually, a ruler leaves behind a statue containing the glories of his deeds. There’s nothing on Empress Wu’s, leading to several theories as to why. That’s not what drew Liao to the stele though. “The interesting thing is that, for a woman, it looks like a penis. There are eight

dragons on top of the monument, but it looks... too real!" The monument is located at the Qianling Mausoleum, where, if you look out, "you see far away that there are two mountains with watchtowers on top. So they look like breasts. It's so funny!"

Whether performing assumed gender roles or finding sexuality in historical figures, playfulness is a mainstay in Liao's work. "I think humour is so important," she says. "In order to work on something, I have to make it entertaining and fun. A lot of times people will say, because something is humorous, it's not serious. But when I hear a joke, if I laugh, I actually reveal something about myself. The moment you get a joke and laugh, it says something about you. It's very important for me to add humour to my work." The effort certainly shows: her droll art is comedy gold.

Open Kimono runs at New York's Chambers Fine Art until 27 April 2019