

HYPERALLERGIC

The Power of Deception to Subvert Heteronormativity

Artist Pixy Liao subverts gender norms with a playful yet threatening humor

By Tina Shan

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Pixy Liao "Find a Woman You Can Rely On" (2018), Digital C-print, 45 x 60 inches (All images courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art)

An endearing playfulness persists in Pixy Liao's photographic work, even when she eats a papaya off her boyfriend Moro's privates, or when she hangs Moro, dressed only in a T-shirt, from a drying rack. These iconic images, titled "Start Your Day with a Good Breakfast Together" and "Hang in There," effuse a

HYPERALLERGIC

comradery and humor that is often absent when we talk about reversing Western gender roles. Liao's solo show *Open Kimono*, at Chambers Fine Art, builds on her ongoing project *Experimental Relationship*, in which she explores possibilities of a heterosexual relationship beyond societal normativity.

In front of the camera, Pixy poses with a particular brand of humor that combines kawaii and menace. In our extensive conversation on her work, Pixy reveals that humor, to her, is a double-edged sword: "On the one hand, it gives you access to someone else's open heart easily. On the other hand, you may find your viewer closed off, your work written off, because people think you're 'not serious.'"



Pixy Liao "Red Nails" (2014), Digital C-print, 54 x 40 inches

HYPERALLERGIC

But humor is one of Pixy's most powerful devices. At the entrance to her current show, a larger-than-life Pixy greets the viewer with two middle fingers, dotted with red nail lacquer and held up to her cheeks. Though her face seems expressionless, a daring smirk escapes from her eyes. With two red dots and a schoolgirl haircut, it is impossible to take the insult of those middle fingers seriously, yet Pixy's deadpan stare also doesn't let the viewer go in ease. Contained in this portrait is both a joke and a threat, leaving the viewer with uneasy chuckles.

Why play into the kawaii schoolgirl image when her work already stands in danger of being deemed unserious?

"I enjoy the power of deception," Pixy tells me with a grin in her eyes.

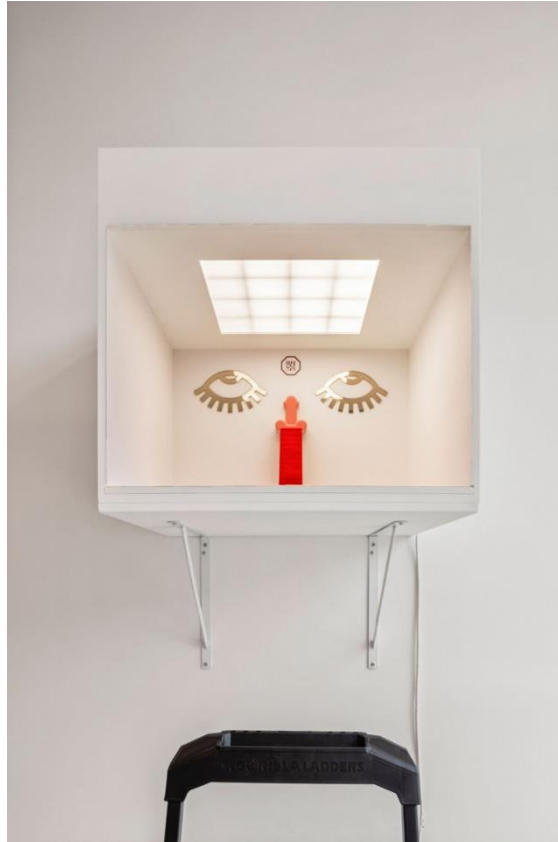
"However you appear on the outside, you can be completely different on the inside. This huge contrast interests me. You may appear to be innocent or meek, in which case, when you really need to hit back, you strike hard."

This naughty subversion is perhaps born out of response to a double constrain that Pixy sees society place on women. "As a woman in society, you're often seen as weak and looked down on. At the same time, you're expected to be a nice person. In fact, for me personally, I have a lot of — not necessarily evil — but mischievous desires," the artist muses in our interview. "This is a very important part [of me], and it's the attitude I bring to my work."

Is this rebellious gesture a feminist one? "Feminist art is about fighting for equal status, but to me, aside from equality, there is the question of what kind of person I am." To Pixy, this is more important than what she wants to do, or what

HYPERALLERGIC

purpose she has. “What I am interested in are human emotions and desires,” which “cannot entirely be [politically] correct.”



Pixy Liao, “Temple for Her” (2019), Ceramics, wood, acrylic, reflective film, vinyl sticker, enamel paint, and fake blood
27 x 27 x 19 inches

Perhaps feeling that her evils have not been given due attention, Pixy started her larger conceptual series *Evil Women Cult*, an imaginary cult that worships all evil female leaders in history. “Temple for Her,” a sculpture dedicated to Wu Zetian, the only female Emperor in the history of China, stands at one end of the gallery, suspended a few feet above the ground. The viewer must climb up a utility ladder to look into the white box. Inside, a narrow, steep red staircase ascends to a pink phallic throne. At the foot of the stairs lies a sacrificial pool of blood in the shape of a woman. Balancing on top of a ladder in a Chelsea gallery and beholding a sculpture only visible to oneself, the viewer feels the

HYPERALLERGIC

loneliness that must have accompanied Emperor Wu on her ascension to power; the work elicits a feeling closer to sympathy than admiration.



Detail of Pixy Liao, “Temple for Her” (2019), Ceramics, wood, acrylic, reflective film, vinyl sticker, enamel paint, and fake blood, 27 x 27 x 19 inches

Even though Pixy’s work may appear to be extremely personal, she says, “I try not to let art get in the way of life. My main objective is to have a healthy life, and then integrate art into life.” In contrast to the lonely stairs Pixy builds for Wu, the stage that Pixy builds for herself often features Moro by her side, even when she looks just as majestic as an emperor.

In refusing to follow the self-serving path that powerful men have taken in history — and in society today — Pixy’s rebellion against the heterosexual norm becomes more than a reversal of gender roles. Hers is one that has the potential to take down the gender binary all together: “I have been interested in the concept of unisex for a long time, and I prefer an androgynous state of being. I also think that partnership is a great thing, because one person has limited

HYPERALLERGIC

powers. If you have a good partner, you two can become one unit, and each bring into play what you are good at. I really want to unite us into one being.”

In this project that challenges heteronormativity, it is not the male partner that is fought against, but a certain bias imposed on genders. Staged in front of the camera, Pixy and Moro put on a performance of gender roles for the viewer. While Pixy directs, Moro holds the shutter release, its cable cord extending to the other side of the camera, and the couple stands together, united into one, under the gaze of the viewer.



Installation view of *Pixy Liao: Open Kimono* at Chambers Fine Art, New York

PIXY LIAO: OPEN KIMONO is on view at *Chambers Fine Art* (522 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 27, 2019.

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