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Experimental Material: Desire and Intimacy in the Work of Pixy Liao

Desire, intimacy, and the performative nature of sexuality—this is the complicated, gendered territory of Pixy Liao’s photographic practice. When the Shanghai-born, Brooklyn-based artist moved from China to the United States in 2006 to study photography in Memphis, a chance encounter with a Japanese musician and fellow student inspired a continuing body of work. He became her boyfriend, her model, and her muse, appearing in a series of staged photographs enacting an exaggerated, heightened version of their partnership.

Pixy Liao’s much-anticipated first solo Canadian show, curated by Henry Heng Lu at Vancouver’s Centre A Gallery, was a victim of the novel coronavirus, opening only in virtual form on April 3, 2020. The exhibition, *Pixy Liao: Experimental Relationship (for your eyes only, or maybe mine, too)*, features her ongoing (since 2007) *Experimental Relationships* project and the more explicitly erotic *For Your Eyes Only* series (2012–ongoing).¹ The artist examines the dynamics of her romantic relationship with her partner, Moro, subverting expectations of gender and heterosexuality in images that are sometimes playful, sometimes touching, sometimes erotic—and occasionally a little disturbing. These photographs, in which the artist herself often appears with Moro, are generally shot in interior domestic spaces with a cool, high-key aesthetic. A couple, shut away from the world, focused only on each other and their relationship? In a pre-pandemic world this may have seemed a somewhat obsessive, inward-looking practice. But as COVID-19 swept across the globe, introversion became a way of life for many and Pixy Liao’s unsettling photographs seem more poignantly representative of the zeitgeist than ever.

In her examination of the shifting power plays in her relationship, Pixy Liao also explores broader themes of cultural identity, the representation of masculinity, and the fetishization of the Asian woman. For the *Experimental Relationships* series, posed by the couple using a self-timer that is generally visible in the shot—a broad hint at the “meta” nature of her allusive practice—the mundane domestic interiors in which they act out their desires are a significant element of her *mise-en-scène*. She invites us to imagine what lies behind the bland facades of suburban houses, the dramas taking place around the IKEA furniture. In ordinary, unglamorous kitchens and bedrooms, Pixy Liao inverts the misogyny of the art historical male

gaze, posing the pale body of her younger partner like a flexible prop—wrapping him, folded over bedclothes like a piece of human sushi, dressing him in her own clothes, or draping his naked body over her shoulders like a shawl. She, on the other hand, is generally clothed, or wearing a nude bodysuit, and Moro is often naked, thus overturning centuries of objectification of the female nude. In his 1972 book and television series, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger pointed out what later seemed so blindingly obvious: In (Western) art history, “Men act and women appear. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at.”² Here, it is Pixy Liao who is doing the looking.

The “determining male gaze” proposed by film theorist Laura Mulvey entered Chinese critical discourses in the late twentieth century.³ Lara Blanchard explains how Mulvey’s psychoanalytic theorizing of desire was adapted to analyze pre-modern Chinese images of women. However, in her discussion of feminist art practices in China, Blanchard argues that the theory cannot apply to gazes that fall outside the familiar trajectory of the male desiring gaze directed at the female subject, nor to the mutual gaze between women.⁴ Where does this place an artist such as Pixy Liao, who directs her frankly desiring gaze toward her male subject while at the same time positioning herself for the objectifying gaze of the camera lens? She is author, participant, observer, and observed, occupying a complicated space in which she fetishizes her own body as well as Moro’s.

Pixy Liao, *Relationships work best when each partner knows their proper place*, 2008, colour photograph, 100 × 75 cm. Courtesy the artist.





Relationships work best when each partner knows their proper place (2008) shows the fully dressed artist pinching Moro's nipple while she gazes blankly at the camera in a witty parody of the famously ambiguous sixteenth-century French painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*. Art historian Rebecca Zorach speaks of a "libidinal economy" of possession and collection in relation to this painting, and she might equally well be speaking of Pixy Liao's semi-parodic allusions to fetishism and voyeurism. Zorach describes an intersection between desire and possession that is "mimetic, producing a likeness in the desirer of the thing desired."⁵ The *For Your Eyes Only* series makes this playful intention explicit. Pixy Liao describes it as "a combination of daily life and performance with a naughty attitude."⁶ Images of body parts are fragmented and closely cropped: a close-up of Moro's crotch in tight underpants, for example, or the artist's buttocks poking through a vulva-shaped opening between deep-red curtains. Laura Mulvey argued that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female,"⁷ In the light of more recent theoretical analysis of the performative nature of gender and sexuality, Pixy Liao's work clearly establishes the pleasure inherent in the female gaze revealed through the distancing lens of her camera—at the body of her lover, at herself, and at their physical (and emotional) connection.

Pixy Liao, *Debut*, 2012, colour photograph, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Pixy Liao explained the almost accidental way in which their lives became the subject and material of her art practice:



Pixy Liao, *Start Off Your Day with A Good Breakfast Together*, 2009, colour photograph, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Our relationship is closely connected to photography. I used photography as an excuse to get to know him in the beginning. And then he would always be my model in my photo assignments. He was always willing to help me with my weird ideas. Sometimes I would ask him to pose in my photos as a “prop.” I never thought it was unusual until my teachers and classmates asked me how I could treat my boyfriend like that. Then I realized what’s natural in our relationship is considered out of norms by other people. The finding is interesting and problematic to me at the same time. Why would a co-operative boyfriend be considered so rare and unthinkable? That inspired me to make this series. That’s how I started the project.⁸

In *Start Off Your Day with a Good Breakfast Together* (2009), Moro lies awkwardly across a small table, while Pixy Liao eats half a papaya that is balanced on his penis. He becomes, literally, part of the furniture. She stares into the camera’s lens with an unreadable expression; he holds the self-timer. The humour of the image lies in the deliberately unerotic surroundings—the microwave and the fan in the background are far from pornographic pseudo-glamour. The artist explains that until she met Moro, she had accepted the idea, prevalent in Chinese society, that a woman’s partner should be an older, wiser, more powerful protector and mentor. Initiating a relationship with a younger man changed everything, she says: “I became a person who has more authority and power.”⁹ In this humorous

image, Pixy Liao challenges the norms of heterosexual relationships.

Overt examinations of gender are rare in the work of contemporary artists from China. Some young artists wish to transcend gendered identifications by establishing post-human or gender-neutral identities, while others insist that issues of gender are irrelevant to their work. This stance is never entirely convincing in a society where gender norms are constantly reinforced by the Chinese Communist Party and popular culture. China's cruelly narrow female beauty standards insist upon thinness, whiteness, and cuteness, evidenced in social media responses to "ugly" models or reality TV contestants. Pixy Liao's work, then, is surprising in its candid gendered visual discourse. She asks: "What will happen if man and woman exchange their roles of sex and roles of power?"¹⁰ In this exchange, she enters the uncomfortable territory Judith Butler described as "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."¹¹ Operating in a liminal temporal and spatial zone between cultures, Pixy Liao states:

I always believe there will never be a place that will completely fit me. The world you live in is not a choice by you. There are simply too many things out of your control. . . . Rather than trying to find a place that would accept me, I'm fine with the idea that it won't. And let it be. There's really nothing wrong with that, not being able to fit in. That just means you are true to yourself.¹²



Pixy Liao, *How to Build A Relationship with Layered Meanings*, 2008, colour photograph, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist.

How to Build A Relationship with Layered Meanings (2008) shows the couple lying naked on three stacked, sagging mattresses in a bare room. The artist is almost covered by Moro's taller body; she meets our gaze, looking out



Pixy Liao, *Japanese Room II*, 2015, colour photograph, 75 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist.

from beneath his averted head. There is nothing in the least submissive about this image—in fact, Moro seems the more passive and compliant of the pair. They both hold the self-timer, perhaps a sign of their equal agency in the production of the image, or perhaps revealing a struggle for control. Initially, Pixy Liao saw Moro only as her muse. As the project developed, however, he became an active collaborator. She says:

During a photoshoot, usually I would come up with an idea, set up the photoshoot, and when the camera, set, clothes, props, everything is ready, I would tell him very simply what I wanted him to do. And during the photoshoot I would encourage his improvisation. Let him choose the exact pose, facial expression, reaction he would have under such circumstances. And sometimes I would be inspired by his response and react accordingly.¹³

The title of the work, apart from its play on the arrangement of the bodies and mattresses in horizontal layers, suggests the active construction of a relationship in which the participants refuse to play the roles that have been written for them. Pixy Liao and Moro are engaged in a process that constantly erases and rewrites the gender script. The image recalls a famous photograph from the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde of Chinese

contemporary art. *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* was a collective performance that took place in 1995, at a time when artists were experimenting with performance art in the bohemian enclave of the Beijing East Village artist community.¹⁴ A group of these artists climbed to the top of Miaofengshan Mountain. They arranged their naked bodies in a stack, from heaviest to lightest, aiming to add one meter to its height. Zhang Huan, one of the participants, remembers that the event was inspired by an old saying: “Beyond the mountain, there are more mountains.” Explaining their intentions, he said, “It’s about changing the natural state of things, about possibilities.”¹⁵

Pixy Liao, too, is challenging the natural state of things, upending the social roles and expected behaviours affixed to gender identities. Gao Minglu argues that in the 1995 performance, “Artists and the mountain, trees and grass, can all be read as lost and homeless.”¹⁶ Pixy Liao’s image of the two lovers reminds us that in the end we are alone, even when we are together. Not unlike the precariously balanced naked artists in *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, her work possesses a stillness that is, paradoxically, just slightly uneasy. Despite their intentional absurdity, her photographs are imbued with the tensions and contradictions that we all experience—the push and pull of dominance and submission, love and hate, tenderness and aggression, passivity and control. She acknowledges there is an implication of the tensions between China and Japan, too, lurking just beneath the surface. She hints at the Daoist notion of the forces of yin and yang, oscillating in a tenuous harmony:

I believe in order for things to work, things need to complement each other. For a couple, they need to match. One needs to lead, one needs to follow. One needs to be hard, one needs to be soft. When there’s a conflict, one needs to insist, and one needs to give in. That being said, I don’t think one should always stay in the same position. It’s also important to switch roles. The one who leads can be led next time.¹⁷

Pixy Liao and Moro have collaborated on various projects, including the *PIMO Dictionary*, an illustrated compendium of their daily language and an extension of *Experimental Relationships*, published by Jiazazhi Press in 2019. Pixy Liao’s first language is Mandarin, and Moro’s is Japanese: they usually communicate with each other in English. However, they are often impeded by the limits of their vocabulary, and the text illustrates their tongue-in-cheek efforts to bridge the linguistic divide. The letter “P” in the book, for example, includes a picture of a “pipi ticket” that “allows Moro to have control of Pixy for one day.”¹⁸ The possibilities of misunderstanding, as well as the freedom to try out a different persona in a second language, are visible in *Japanese Room II* (2015). Pixy Liao and Moro are positioned

Pixy Liao, *A Study of a House Husband*, 2018, colour photograph, 100 x 75 cm. Courtesy the artist.



on the floor in a traditional Japanese interior of tatami mats and sliding screens. They wear kimonos and gaze at the camera with calm expressions. Moro reclines with his head on her lap, her hand rests protectively on his shoulder, and the shutter release cable snakes across the floor from Moro's hand. In works depicting them both, it is Moro who chooses the exact moment to take the photograph, even though the *mise-en-scène* is directed by Pixy Liao. The effect here is intentionally cinematic, a reference to Japanese samurai and gangster films, and a private game of role-playing. As the artist wrote of this work: "We were at his home. We closed the door and played an alternative Japanese couple."¹⁹

Pixy Liao doubts that she would have been able to make work like this had she stayed in China. Her bold decision to travel to the USA when she was twenty-five allowed her to escape the claustrophobia of social convention and familial expectation and construct a new identity. She selected Memphis rather than more obvious cities to attend graduate school because she knew Elvis had lived there, so she thought it must be full of creative people.²⁰ Her choice of photography for her MFA was in part due to seeing the 1966 Michelangelo Antonioni film *Blow Up*, in which David Hemmings

played a fashion photographer in swinging London. Pixy Liao envied the sense of freedom—and, no doubt, of foreignness—that she identified in the film; she found that freedom in Memphis. She says:

It was my first time living by myself in a foreign country where nobody knew me, and I didn't know what type of person I should be in this new environment. Everything is so different from China. And I felt the freedom of living outside of my circle, my family, and my peers. That was the time I started to think I should really find out what I like and who I wanted to be.²¹



Just as Pixy Liao plays with her own deliberately “cute” persona to create a surprising dominant alter ego, she references stereotypes of Asian masculinity that are still present in mainstream Western culture.²² It’s a dangerous game, risking self-orientalizing or reinforcing damaging gender and racial archetypes. She walks this tightrope adroitly; her nuanced examinations of intersecting race and gender identities become touching representations of intimacy and trust. *A Study of a House Husband* (2018) reveals the artist’s delight in her inversion of the stereotypical image of a female “domestic goddess”—together with a hint of the perverse that often underlies her photographs, with their disconcerting mix of childlike innocence and libidinousness. Moro, wearing only shirt and underpants, applies steam to a tank top arranged on a pink coat hanger. The colour

Pixy Liao, *The Hug by the Pond*, 2010, photography, 75 × 100 cm. Courtesy the artist.

pink dominates the image; between the hanging singlet, Moro's pale shirt, and the strangely erotic electrical appliance itself, he is enveloped within this signifier of femininity. The light is softly filtered through translucent curtains, and the faintly visible apartment buildings opposite emphasize his seclusion in an interior world of domesticity. We are placed in the position of the voyeur, with Moro the unwitting object of our gaze. Of course, he is not unwitting at all, but entirely complicit in this game of desire: the apparent dominance and submission is a role play.

In the context of 2020 and our quarantined and fearful world, a work from 2010, *The Hug by the Pond*, seems especially poignant. A romantic image of Pixy Liao and Moro embracing amidst lush natural scenery evokes an Edenic sense of harmony between the bodies of the lovers and the verdant green of their forest glade. Perched on a rock, they seem at one with the landscape and with each other, yet there is also a vulnerability and a sense of precariousness that makes us fear what may lie ahead.

Notes

1. The online exhibition, curated by Henry Hung Lu, was available on the gallery website, <https://centrea.org/2020/02/pixy-liao/>. This exhibition was part of the 2020 Capture Photography Festival Selected Exhibition Program and supported by a Tricera Print Grant. The larger *Experimental Relationships* series may be seen on the artist's website, <http://pixyliao.com/experimental-relationship/>. The more intimate and erotic works in the *For Your Eyes Only* series may also be seen on the artist's website, <http://pixyliao.com/fyeo/>.
2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 47.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1989), 14–28.
4. Lara C. W. Blanchard, "Defining a Female Subjectivity: Gendered Gazes and Feminist Reinterpretations in the Art of Cui Xiuwen and Yu Hong" *positions asia critique* 28, no. 1 (2020), 177–205.
5. Rebecca Zorach, "Things Desired," *Art History* 24, no. 2 (2001), 195–212. Zorach analyses the fetishism in the anonymous School of Fontainebleau painting that has been appropriated by Pixy Liao.
6. See the artist's website for this description and images of this series, <http://pixyliao.com/fyeo/>.
7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."
8. All quotes from the artist, unless otherwise stated, are excerpted from an email interview conducted by the author with Pixy Liao on April 11, 2020.
9. See the artist's website, <http://pixyliao.com/experimental-relationship/>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Judith Butler, "Preface (1999)," in *Gender Trouble*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), xv.
12. The author interviewed Pixy Liao via email on April 11, 2020.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Although both Gao Minglu (*Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011) and Wu Hung (*Contemporary Chinese Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2013) translate the Chinese title of this work as "To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain," the Chinese words may best be translated as "no name"—hence, "anonymous." Zhang Huan uses "Anonymous" in the English text on his website, http://www.zhanghuan.com/worken/info_71.aspx?itemid=1006&parent&cid=188/.
15. Zhang Huan interviewed in Phaidon Editors, *Body of Art* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2015), 329.
16. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011), 282.
17. The author interviewed Pixy Liao via email on April 11, 2020.
18. This work was included in the online exhibition in April 2020, seen on the Centre A gallery website <https://centrea.org/2020/02/pixy-liao/>.
19. Pixy Liao provided these words as a subtitle to the photograph for her solo Vancouver show. See the work on the Centre A website <https://centre-a-pixy-liao.squarespace.com/>.
20. This information was supplied by Pixy Liao to the author in an email interview on April 11, 2020.
21. *Ibid.*