

Holly Roussell, "Experimental Relationship", ZUM, May 2023

Pixy Liao is exemplary of a new generation of photographic artists experimenting with the possibilities of portraiture in depicting modern partnership. Her works emerge from personal experiences, and her own intimate spaces. She challenges conventional socio-cultural ideas of gender construction, and questions of nationality in a globalised world.

A native of Shanghai, China's most populous city, Pixy Liao has been actively working in the United States since 2005. Born in 1979, she is a child of the Reform and Opening Up era in China. In those decades, succeeding the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China underwent huge social, cultural, and political changes. The country embarked on a journey toward modernisation and a market economy under the new open-door policies spearheaded by Deng Xiaoping. National university admissions exams were reestablished in 1977, and artistic expression in China underwent waves of change. In photography, some of the first highly personal self-consciously "art" photography exhibitions took place after 1978 organized by a group called the April Photographic Society. The medium would continue to evolve through a highly political and socially engaged "documentary" period in the 1980s, until photography would become linked with experimental contemporary art practice in the 1990s, with artists producing increasingly conceptual works and performance photography. Unlike many prominent Chinese photographers of her generation, a generation including Jiang Zhi, Chi Peng, or Birdhead, Liao did not attend the acclaimed national art academies in Beijing or Hangzhou. Instead, after a short stint in corporate Shanghai as a graphic designer, Liao moved to Memphis, Tennessee to pursue graduate studies in art.

Pixy Liao's artistic voice would emerge during these years in the American South. Cinematic warmth, a somewhat laid-back "vintage" aesthetic, and an eye for the details of interiors and domestic landscapes define the familiarity Liao's photographs evoke. Such themes informed the portraiture and performance project that emerged when she met a Japanese jazz musician named Moro, who would become her muse. *Experimental Relationship* (2007-present) currently comprises more than 100 photographs taken over more than 15 years. Liao began the work during her years at university. In these images, Liao often portrays herself in a dominant role, while her partner assumes positions of submission. Liao credits Moro, five years her junior, as the inspiration for this ongoing series, explaining, "*Moro made me realize that heterosexual relationships do not need to be standardized. The purpose of this experiment is to break the inherent relationship model, and reach a new equilibrium.*" Liao often structures her images so that she is looking down on Moro, or featuring her fully clothed while he is naked. These subtle stagings reverse "expected" gender roles -- and, not without a sense of humor.

There is no doubt that in the history of photography the male gaze and the role of woman-as-muse has predominated. Therefore, it is refreshing to see in Liao's work, a dominant female gaze and a male muse. Liao's photographs force viewers to reassess their own perspective, and the works invite viewers to take part in the images' performative narratives - narratives which seem to continue long after the photograph has been taken and hung on the wall. Each scene, staged meticulously to reference normative gestures from visual culture, or familiar socio-cultural tendencies, becomes activated when the viewer interacts with it - the image interacting with one's own individual cultural, and

gender biases. The title of one of her more recent works, shot in Japan, cheekily reads “Your Gaze Belongs to Me”. Implying that both the *regard* of the muse (Moro) belongs to, and submits to, Liao, and also that the hegemonic “male gaze” of art history has been conquered and claimed for the female.

Certain aspects of Liao’s project have evolved over the years, such as the positioning of their bodies or the manner he holds the shutter, but from her earliest works, such as “How to Build a Relationship with Layered Meanings” (2008) and “I told you so!” (2008) to “Welcome to the Gates of a New Era” (2018), Liao expresses an interest in comparing her body to Moro’s before the camera lens. Sometimes, the similarities of their hair or body shapes will be enhanced by means of the images’ composition and the clothes they wear in the photographs. For Liao, in a context where the female body is often idealised in the service of a misogynistic Western art historical regime of beauty - defined by sumptuous curves and long, flowing hair - her work makes space for other potentialities. These photographs confront viewers with a reminder of the hyper-feminisation of the canonical female image, and the fact that, in the artist’s eyes, one does not need to conform to stereotypes of masculinity or femininity to find happiness or fulfillment in a relationship. As Liao’s title says, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”.