

Pixy Yijun Liao's (pixyliao.com) body of artistic work straddles the line between the personal and the public arenas and sparkles with wit and humor. As well as producing a broad range of sculptures and performance videos, Liao uses her photographic skills to call into question the common perception of a number of modern concepts, such as the nature of “the couple,” “the artist,” and the “female experience.” Liao draws inspiration from experiences taken from her own life and features herself and people from her inner circle – for example, her partner, who is part of the long-term project *Experimental Relationship* (2007- now) - to produce her meticulously-arranged signature images. These are often full of fun and frivolity, but can also border on dark. Liao's work has been inspired by the New American Color Photography of the 20th century, and her curiosity drives her to re-examine hierarchy and gender identity within relationships, as well as the multicultural societies and communities which are part of her own life.

Born in Shanghai and now based in Brooklyn, Liao is a visual artist who has harnessed her visual artistry to investigate gender dynamics and how they impact heterosexual relationships. In 2005, she moved to the U.S. in order to study photography, and it was then that she met Moro Magario, her boyfriend and the central figure in much of her subsequent work. Intriguingly, Liao favors dressing down, rather than dressing up, in her work. Moro is frequently naked or dressed in simple clothes to underscore his vulnerability. In her *Experimental Relationship* (2007-now) series, one can see how Liao conveys lack of power and the ebbing away of dominance by exploring body language. In *Family Sushi* (2011), Moro is nude and inert, passively sandwiched between folded bed sheets, and held in this position by cloth which resembles seaweed. Extended across the frame, Moro is quite helpless; the raw fish about to be devoured by the photographer on the other side of the camera.



Liao's work also explores her own background, evaluating Asian social assumptions about gender roles in relationships, and taking issue with traditional beliefs. In *Soft Heeled Shoes* (2013), Liao used a 3-D printer to create two silicon penises modelled from her boyfriend's genitalia. Then attached to a pair of yellow suede shoes, they acted as heels. This is a striking image, and produces a visual statement about their relationship.

In China, where Liao grew up, the vocabulary and images of Western feminism have no place in a society which continues to be influenced by Confucian thinking, and where traditional patterns of behavior dictate the role of women. Essentially, Liao is confronting traditional expectations head on as a Chinese woman having a relationship with a Japanese man who is five years younger than her. Liao's sensitive and imaginative Experimental Relationship series flies in the face of Chinese views on how relationship dynamics impact couples. By showing a woman who is both forceful and powerful, Liao is challenging her own culture and roots, and the worldview she was taught in Shanghai.

Neil Wu-Gibbs, who is currently assisting BRIC's Contemporary Art program, recently sat down with the artist.

Neil Wu-Gibbs (NW): In the BRIC Contemporary Artist Registry, you've claimed yourself as a multidisciplinary artist. Could you please tell me more about this fascinating identity in relation to your artistic practices?

Pixy Liao (PL): I mainly do photography, but in recent years I've started to do sculpture, performance video, and book art. I don't really consider myself a photographer. And I don't really think about the form of medium in art that much. Photography is like using reality as my art material, and to create something with photography or any other medium ... it is all the same to me.

NW: That's a good point! Many of your photographs and projects have been exhibited internationally. How often do you travel? Do you spend some time in China every year? I've realized your work *Men as Bags* (2016) was featured in the booth of Leo Xu Projects at ART021 Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair.

PL: My family is still in Shanghai, so I try to go back at least once a year. I recently did a collaboration with Leo Xu Projects, and had a solo exhibition *Venus As A Boy* in his gallery.



NW: How was the experience? What did you feel about working with a Chinese gallery? Was it different from working with galleries in the West?

PL: I think it's different on many levels. First of all, I didn't learn art when I was in China. I didn't grow up from their art education system, and I was educated in the U.S. about art. So I feel like I'm very disconnected with the Chinese art world. What people are thinking in China and the U.S. is different. In the art world, what's in people's mind and what people are talking about are completely different topics.

NW: Do you think China tends to be more commercial driven?

PL: Yeah! That's the idea I get. In China, the art world is completely commercialized, because there are very few non-profit institutions, and that's part of the reason I still stay in the U.S. I feel like I get more support from non-profit organizations here or in other countries than I can get in China.

NW: I agree. Because you need what we call “Guangxi” (connections) to get in certain places.

PL: In China it's all about who you know. I didn't graduate from those art schools so I don't have the connections that come with it. Almost all of the big artists and curators are from that system, so you're outside of their circles. That being said, I was very lucky to work with Leo Xu. But it was also a coincidence that I happened to know him before I became an artist. We got to know each other long time ago when we both just happened to be at the same college, which was not an art school. We hung out together and kept in touch. Later on we realized that we were the only two people out of the school actually doing art.

NW: In my ongoing research, I am trying to unfold hybrid, cross-cultural identities of Asian American artists and designers. However, after decades of developments, many people still label this group as “Asian artists.” Would you like to share some of your experiences and thoughts about being a Chinese artist who was born and raised in Shanghai but immigrated to America later in life?

PL: I'm not really sure. In terms of art, maybe I'm more US-influenced, but I consider myself a Chinese artist because before I came to the United States I pretty much finished my identity process. I feel that "Chinese American artist" is for the second generation of Chinese immigrants.

NW: That's fascinating. I assume some people in China don't really consider you as a Chinese artist.

PL: Yes, in China they don't see me as a Chinese artist. But when you say Chinese American artist, I feel they are part of a circle of individuals, a small circle. I think I'm in that circle. I think that what I am considered is not about how I identify myself. It's really about who is viewing me.

Sometimes when people don't understand you they try to distance you. For example, in China there are some people who see my work and then think it's very different from what they see in terms of other Chinese art. They say, "This is totally American art." However, in the United States when people don't understand my work, they say, "This is Asian art, so we don't understand it." It doesn't really matter who I want to be, as an international artist, how people want to describe me is not really up to me. If the curators think, "Oh, you're a Brooklyn artist," then you're a "Brooklyn artist." Or, this is about being Asian American, so you're an "Asian American artist." You change your identity so often, but I'm still myself.

NW: In 2005, your first adventure outside of China took you to Memphis, Tennessee, where you obtained an MFA in Photography. And now, you reside in Brooklyn. How did these two cities influence your work?



PL: Going to Memphis was really a coincidence. It was after 9/11 and I was worried that New York might get attacked again, so I decided to go somewhere in the middle of the country. I didn't know much about Memphis at that time. I only knew about Elvis Presley. I thought the town could be interesting since there are many musicians there. To me, it was culture shock at first. The first day I got there, my professor just drove me around the city, and I was thinking "Oh my God, the city looks like a park itself! There're so many trees!" The environment was different, and I really loved the landscape in Memphis. It's like, old, run-down landscape, but you can still see the vibrant history of the 1950s or earlier. The American architecture and colors were very different for me, but at the same time I felt it was good for photography. It inspired me to go out and shoot landscapes. I graduated and moved to New York in 2009. The main reason was I don't like driving. New York City is a much more convenient place. It's similar to my hometown [Shanghai]. In terms of my artistic practices, when I was in Memphis there were many great locations, so I could go out and photograph. But in New York I don't feel like I have as much freedom to go out and photograph.

It's convenient to photograph at home with the two of us.

NW: I am sure people often interpret your work as feminist. But theoretically, it would be problematic to call it "Chinese feminism." How do you feel like this Western ideology and discourse of sexuality has influenced your work?

PL: First of all, when I grew up, I don't think there was feminism in China. At least not that I'm aware of. People don't talk about sexuality that much. I was so naïve in college I wasn't even aware that my friends were gay. When I started to do my own work in the United States, it was much more about the freedom that I have by living here. I don't have the pressure from family or peers or society, so I started to make things that I wanted to make. But I didn't realize it was feminism in the beginning. People often look at my work and tell me, "This can be explained by some feminist theories." I started to understand the relationship between my ideas and feminism, however, at the same time, I don't want to say my work is "feminist." I still wish to influence girls, young girls because growing up as a girl in China I never felt that being female was something strong. I sort of rejected my female identity when I was in China. I think if there's more this kind of female voice in art and in Chinese society, it can change the future for young girls right now in China. I also think it's not just for us females, it's also unfair for men to be viewed as having to take all the responsibility. I don't think that fits everybody, or that it's true that if you're a man, you have to be strong and have to make sacrifices for the family, I think we're not much different as men and woman. We're equal.

NW: Exactly. That's perfect timing to talk about your Experimental Relationship series. May I ask how you met your boyfriend Moro?

PL: I met him in school, in Memphis. We went to the same school.

NW: He was younger than you, right?

PL: Yes, but in the beginning I wasn't aware. I didn't know he is Japanese. I didn't know he is younger. I just assumed he's somebody that about my age. I realized he looks very cool on the outside, but when I really got to know him he's very different. He's shy and often relies on me a lot. That has changed my ideas about relationships. In the beginning I called our relationship "experimental" because I didn't believe this kind of relation could go on since he's young and different. I thought I would treat this relation as an experiment and see how it last.

NW: Did you stage these photographs? Or was it more experimental?



PL: I had ideas about what I wanted to shoot. In the beginning, I told him my ideas and he would do what I described. Later on the more I did it he understood me more, and then he started treating it as our project together. Sometimes when I tell him what I want to do and during the photo shoot he will give me his input and his reaction to the photos. It has changed my photographs and the final results. I set up an experiment and he would give me a reaction inside photos.

NW: That's very interesting as I've noticed in *A Collection of Pennies* (2013), you explored the possibilities of making artwork by not making it and question the owner of the authorship. Working closely with Moro, do you often think of him as a collaborator rather than a model or a prop?

PL: I think he is a collaborator. In the beginning I thought of him as a prop in my photographs, and people started to think that it was not right. You cannot treat somebody as a prop in your photographs. I think it's important for me to let him collaborate with me. Sometimes I will try to loosen some control because I have a lot of control in my photographs. I will give him some power . . . like he usually is the one who takes the picture and clicks the shutter. He can decide his own body movement. I think the limitation I have is being myself, I can only do certain types of things. There are certain things I'm not very good at. He has many skills that I don't have and he's more detail-orientated. I was thinking that making our work together, two people can become one person.

NW: I really like this *Family Sushi* (2011) photograph, could you briefly explain how did you come up with the concept?

PL: There are many things that happened in order for me to take this photograph. One thing is I was participating in a game run by photographers. Each photographer made a photograph

according to the last photograph that was taken by the former photographer. It was like a chain game. I got a close up of two hands, and I remember one of the hand had green nail polish. I was thinking, "I really like this green color in the photograph, and I want to use something green." I was just looking at my home and then I found this scarf that he usually wears. It's like a seaweed scarf. Also, in Japan there's something that fascinates me about eating sushi on the human body. Nyotaimori is when people serve sushi on the naked body of a woman. I thought it would be fun if I treated him as a piece of meat over the sushi rice ball. He's also Japanese so I made a joke about you're my piece of meat at home.

NW: In the West people tend to criticize artists who often use other cultures in their artistic practices in relation to cultural appropriation. But I am more interested in discussing the other way around when Chinese artists re-appropriate Western cultures in their work. Would you like to share some of your thoughts?

PL: I totally use Japanese culture in my work, which is not my own identity, and I use American culture as well. It really depends on how you use it, and what the relationship is between the other culture and your own experience. I don't think it's a taboo because otherwise we are going to be forever chained to our own cultural identities. In this world right now, people are traveling so much that you're living in different cultures. It's impossible to say you're 100% Chinese or American.

NW: Are you working on any upcoming exhibitions in 2017?

PL: Yes. These days I'm thinking about making a new project about female leadership, but it's still in process. I might have a show in Sweden in March and maybe in Germany, but it's not finalized yet.