

Pixy Liao: Trampling on Gender Stereotypes

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Love relationships, as we know, are power struggles, but sometimes it's unclear who dominates and who submits to the other. Occasionally, though, there may be signs, as in the case of one partner looking like a sushi.



Shanghai-born artist Pixy Liao met her boyfriend when she moved to Memphis, USA, to study photography—New York would have been a more obvious choice, but back in 2005, she was afraid that 9/11 might happen again. Memphis, then, is where Pixy started out as an artist, and where she met Moro, a Japanese music student who was attending the same university. When the two got together, however, Pixy was rather pessimistic about their future.



Moro was five years younger. Pixy was more mature at the time, and soon she happened to take the lead in their relationship. At first, this situation seemed unnatural. They were in an "experimental relationship", as she decided to call it. From the early days of their relationship, Pixy began to use Moro "as a prop" in her pictures. But after a year, when she felt ready to show her work to other people, she was met with incomprehension. "How can you treat your boyfriend like that?" she would hear from her friends, and even from her teachers. She never thought her pictures would spark such reactions.



She carried on with her photos, regardless of people's comments, or maybe because of them. Today, her love life and her artistic career have become inextricably linked. The "experimental relationship" has turned into a versatile body of work stretching over the years. "The work grew with our relationship," she says. She openly admits that it wasn't always easy. "At first, I was more controlling, Moro was very young and he did what I asked him to do in the pictures. But then he became unhappy. Almost rebellious. In the middle of our relationship, we had difficult times, you can see that in some of the pictures (...) Now we're better. I give him more control, he's more like a collaborator."





The whole project reads like a symbolic and touching testimony of life between two people. It reminds me of another powerful work of art by American artist Mary Kelly: *Post-Partum Document*. From 1973 to 1979, Kelly spent five years keeping all sorts of records of her interactions with her son, from his infancy to his mastery of language. Kelly's work gives you a sense of how much a relationship between mother and child isn't as innate and instinctive as you would think, but rather is in a constant state of flux, improvisation and readjustment. The same thing can be said of Pixy and Moro's project. "It's how two people grow together," she tells me. "It's like the notebook of our relationships."



Pixy says that her work isn't about feminism, although she's critical of the status of women in society, and she supports the feminist movement. She reflects on traditional gender roles in China: "When I think of my mum and my aunt... It kind of sucks to always be secondary, always serve everyone (...) When I was growing up, girls didn't have any role models." Half-jokingly, I ask her if Peng Liyuan is a role model today. "No, she isn't!" she laughs. "If she was the chairman, then yes, she would be. But she's just the wife.

-How about Fan Bing Bing?

-No... She objectifies herself. That's not a good example for girls to follow."



"But I don't talk about feminism in my work," she goes on. "Feminism is about what is right, my work is not about what is right. It's about my personal experience and desires." Pixy isn't making any political statement. She just happens to enjoy trampling on gender stereotypes.



What was required to produce the piece you see above is a 3D printer and Moro's unflinching—and laudable—willingness to cooperate. The pleasure Pixy takes in messing around in her work is evident here. To have fun is a necessary prerequisite for her to start a new project, and that's probably why her work is so engaging, despite being, in this case, somewhat frightening eccentric.



In a different vein, Pixy created a "dictionary" of her relationship with Moro. There she compiled the words and idioms of particular significance to them in their daily life. Words like:

Ano (あの~)

Japanese word for "Excuse me." It's often used when one wants to get the other's attention, with a hint of shyness.

Unhappy

Means "I'm unhappy." Pixy uses it when Moro fails to detect her unpleasantness.

Pixy: Unhappy!



This is probably the most soft-spoken of her works, but maybe the most touching of all, too. As you read through all the definitions, they unwrap with a rare sincerity the complexity of a relationship between two people, and the vulnerabilities of both parties.

Attention

Moro needs this from Pixy all the time.

Come On, Maaan

Usually said repeatedly in a low voice. One way to annoy Pixy, but Pixy sometimes uses it to annoy Moro, too.

Dude

Guys. Folks. Buddies. Moro calls Pixy dude sometimes to remind her she lacks of sex attraction.

Moro: Dude. Pixy: I'm not your DUDE!

Little Momo

1. Moro's sperm.

2. Moro's male genitalia. *Pixy: Can I freeze Little Momo, please?*

Small Animal

Pixy and Moro cuddle together like small animals, especially when it's cold in the apartment.

Moro: Can we do small animal thing? Pixy: Yes!

You Speak Well

Since Pixy speaks better English than Moro, often times, Moro finds himself unable to argue with Pixy. Moro uses this line to end their arguments.



This work appears deceptively simple at first glance, it just rolls on dutifully from A to Z, and yet it seems to hint at countless untold stories in the shadow. As always with Pixy, simplicity draws you in, and then you begin to be aware of all the drama and all the private anecdotes that make up the background for her work. You begin to be aware of a much larger context. A context reminiscent of most relationships, maybe? After all, a dictionary contains all the books.

