

the guardian

Pixy Liao's best photograph: eating a papaya off my boyfriend's crotch



'There was this trend of eating sushi from a woman's naked body. So when I found the perfect papaya, I knew exactly how to shoot it'

A decade ago, I was fascinated by papaya – the colour, the shape, the seeds that are almost like fish eggs. So when I found the perfect one, I knew exactly how I wanted to shoot it.

My boyfriend Moro and I were living in Brooklyn at the time. This was our first apartment in New York. There were no windows in our bedroom, but the kitchen gave on to the backyard and had good light. So that's where I worked.

I first saw Moro on my first day in grad school, at the University of Memphis in Tennessee. He was very tanned and I couldn't work out where he was from, or even what race he was. He's actually from Japan, but for some reason I imagined he was an islander of some kind. He was so cool and so skinny and a music student, too (he studied jazz, double bass). I wondered what it would feel like to be his girlfriend. I imagined he didn't talk to people much.

A year later, I saw him again and thought: “Oh! It’s the very skinny islander!” He seemed cold, and mature. I went to talk to him. When I got to know him, I realised he was actually really young – he’d only just graduated high school in Japan – and very shy.

We shot this around noon. I tend to wake up late. It’s titled *Start Your Day with a Good Breakfast Together*, mostly because we usually eat bread for breakfast. I don’t remember if I bought the other fruits, or if that’s just what I had to hand. I did spend a long time choosing the right colour and shape cup, and arranging all the elements.

I started with Moro’s pose, and then tried different ones for myself. At the time, there was a Japanese trend of eating sushi from a naked woman’s body. I was pretending I was really taking my time, enjoying eating my papaya. I also had in mind Nobuyoshi Araki’s famous photograph of a woman sitting on a street corner, eating from a broken watermelon on the ground beside her. I liked the relationship it drew between open fruit and eating, and sexuality.

There’s a lot of humour in this work – Moro once commented that he and I are like comedians. The project is a collaborative performance. I direct the overall composition, but the way Moro lays his body, say, is often all him. And if we’re both in the shot, he’s usually the one to actually click: I work with very long exposures, and holding the airbulb for the shutter release is hard work, so he does it.

I like giving him that control. I’ve been at exhibition openings where someone has commented that I’m the lady in the photograph, and they’ve asked Moro if he’s the photographer. Finding out that it is my work has changed how they’ve understood it.

If people in the west, particularly men, don’t like this image, they say it’s an Asian thing: an Asian couple doing their weird thing. But in labelling it that way, they’re saying it does not relate to me or my life or the world I live in.

In China, younger girls especially really get what the image is about. They grew up with the same expectations as I did of what a woman should be and do, and they can relate to the same desire to be the opposite of that.

Moro and I have been collaborating – and living together – for 13 years now. Each image reflects my thinking about our relationship at that particular moment: together, they’re like a notebook, a record of our history. This photograph represents the height of my dominance in the work, when I was thinking about how much more experience I had, how much more than him I knew, how I needed to tell him what to do. A decade on, we’ve both grown up and the images we make now are more collaborative, the situation’s more balanced.

It is one of Moro’s least favourite images. He’s very supportive of my work, and he’s fine with the pose. He just doesn’t like how his hair looked that day. Over time, I’ve come to agree. It wasn’t trimmed; it’s messy, it’s separating in the front.

When I was in school, a teacher told me that I would come to treasure the photographs I took when I was young. And now I know what she meant. Looking at this now, I think: “Wow, this was our bodies, our look, our place.” It’s a precious memory.