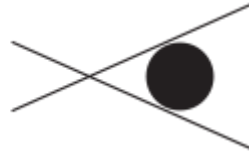


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Pixy Liao Straddles the Male and Female Gaze

In her playful, collaborative photographs, the Chinese photographer upends the meaning of “muse.”

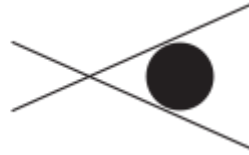
By Jon Feinstein

March 28, 2019



For more than twelve years, Pixy Liao and her partner Moro have been making collaborative self-portraits, playfully contorting gendered displays of power in photography and art history. Liao’s series [Experimental Relationship](#) depicts the couple in reversed, often intentionally stiff roles. The scenes recall, lampoon, and flip Liao’s expectations of relationship dynamics inherited from growing up in Shanghai, China: marrying an older man (Moro is five years younger) who would also be her mentor, and enjoying less authority.

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The photographs, with Moro and Liao usually looking directly into the lens, place Liao in control. This ranges from subtle interactions—Moro sitting on Liao’s lap—to the hilariously direct, as when Liao pinches Moro’s nipple in homage to the 1594 [painting](#) Gabrielle d’Estrées et une de ses sœurs.

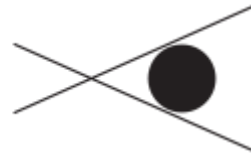
Liao’s [latest exhibition](#), Open Kimono, builds on Liao and Moro’s collaboration with photos made in 2018 while the couple traveled through their home countries of China and Japan. Often clothed in traditional Japanese dress, Liao nods to Japanese Pinky Violence films (a genre in Yakuza films in which the leading roles are female) and Chinese mythology. I recently spoke with Liao about her process and evolution of ideas.



Jon Feinstein: Where does the title **Open Kimono** come from?

Pixy Liao: Open Kimono is also the title of one of the photos in the show. The show has two parts; one part is from a photo trip I took in Japan in which we both wore kimonos. I’m always fascinated by the sexual attraction of a partially opened kimono. It’s revealing secrets depending on how open it is. The project Experimental Relationship is like opening my thoughts to the public.

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Feinstein: “Opening up to the public . . .”—how so?

Liao: I grew up in China. It’s a very different society than the U.S. In the U.S., people like to express themselves and are never afraid to be different. You won’t even be noticed much even if you are weird. In China, people don’t want to stand out. Any difference will immediately be talked about and discouraged. I’m used to hiding my thoughts and just blending in with the

group. I felt that revealing my weird thoughts were too risky when I was younger. Experimental Relationship helped me to recognize my real self and get used to revealing my real thoughts.

Feinstein: You’ve been making this work for more than twelve years. What’s changed about how you’ve made, or thought about, this work with this new chapter over the past year?

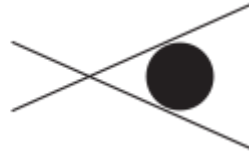
Liao: For the new show, I think it’s the first time I show so many photos from the same photo shoot (eight images). It’s a rare occasion that I actually planned a big photo shoot for this. I found a very old hotel in a town with the smallest population in Japan. For the role in the photos, I was imagining the female Yakuza women in the cult films.

Feinstein: What made you decide to include mostly images shot in 2018 and from the same shoot in this show?

Liao: Last year, I published a photobook including my photos from 2007 to 2017. Many of those photos have been circulating since then. So I thought it would be interesting to see only some new work in the exhibition.

Feinstein: Much of this new work was made while traveling, whereas, in the past, my understanding was that it was made in a much less transitory context. Did this impact how the photos were made?

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Liao: During our earlier years, Moro and I were students, and then we graduated and we moved every year trying to find a more stable place to live. And after living in the same Brooklyn apartment for eight years, I got bored taking photos in my own apartment. Location is a very important element to inspire me to work. So now I always look for good locations for photos during our trips.

Feinstein: The cable release is present in almost all of your photos. I see it as an acknowledgment of the photographic process, an awareness that the photographer is present, that there's a sense of fabrication and construction. Most literally I see this as relating to the staging of your relationship, but I think there might be more here.

Liao: I had to use the cable release in my photographs because it's always just the two of us. Moro is usually the person who holds the cable release. In the beginning, I handed him the cable release because my hand does not have enough power to squeeze the air bulb. It would make my facial expression very painful.

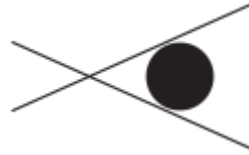
One of the earliest photos in the project, called Relationships work best when each partner knows their proper place (2007), shows me pinching Moro's nipple while he clicks the shutter, and the cable release extends outside of the frame. Me, him, the audience are all connected by the cable release. I also think it's like a metaphor for our relationship. Sometimes the one who seems to be in control is actually the one who is being controlled. And I like the fact that he also has control in the image making. After this image, I always leave the cable release in the photo.



Feinstein: Like the nipple grab you mentioned, humor seems to be an important part of your work.

Liao: I have to enjoy the process to make it work. The work needs to amuse me in some way. People might think humor means "not serious." But only when I'm humored can I find my true self.

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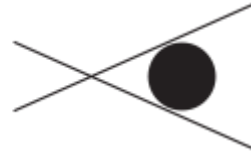
Feinstein: A big piece of this series is about flipping and rethinking the history of the male gaze and the tradition in art, photography, and cinema of women-as-muse. Has making these images changed how you think about that history?

Liao: This history is a result of our world revolving around men for thousands of years. Men have always been in power for the majority of time and places. So there's no doubt that the male gaze and women-as-muse has always been in favor. I'm glad to see that now a "female gaze" is getting more recognized these days; that means our world is changing.



Feinstein: When I was in school in the early 2000s, I read a passage in Terry Barrett's *Criticizing Photographs* about how photographer and critic Diane Neumaier tried to photograph her husband the way historic male photographers like Harry Callahan had photographed their wives—with a sense of muse-ish romance—but found the photos to be "emasculating," and, in her words, photographic "failures." The process and experience created new revelations for her about a

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problematic history of men photographing women. We're more than two decades past these revelations, yet I think it's interesting to consider them in the context of your work.

Liao: That is interesting! I never thought that taking photos of Moro could result in photographic “failures.” And if Moro seems less masculine, that is my goal. But my starting point is different than Diane Neumaier’s. I didn’t start by wanting to reverse male photographers photographing their female muses. Before I became a photographer, I had already developed a taste for less masculine males. What inspires and interests me the most are actually photos by gay photographers photographing men.

Also, I think the word emasculating is problematic. It means “deprive (a man) of his male role or identity,” so that means something is being taken away. I wonder why masculinity is man’s most essential quality—I never see it that way.

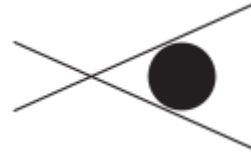
Feinstein: Has the renewed attention to women’s empowerment impacted how you view this work or your process?

Liao: Even though I personally support the #MeToo movement, I don’t think my exhibition is in response to it. The #MeToo movement might have put more spotlights on females in general, but my process hasn’t been affected by it. I was going to make the work anyways.

Feinstein: With Moro having a great deal of control in making these photos, would you consider this work to be in the “female gaze” or something in between? And how important is that distinction to you?

Liao: I think it’s something in between. Although I’m the mastermind behind the project, Moro is a collaborator. There are so many things that cannot be controlled by me—it all depends on him, like his facial expressions, his body gestures. And he also improvises during the photo shoot. The moment when he clicks the shutter—he was sure of the moment while I was just waiting.

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Feinstein: You're branching out into sculpture and other processes, like risographs, as well. How do these relate to the series and ideas at large?

Liao: The sculpture and risograph piece in the show is part of a larger project I'm working on about female ambitions and leadership, called Evil Women Cult. The two pieces were inspired by the one and only empress



in Chinese history, Wu Zetian. What relates to my work is probably my female position. I make work based on my feelings growing up as a girl in China, and how I feel as a woman in today's world.

Feinstein: The original project title **Experimental**

Relationship refers to a kind of staging of romance, of the roles, gender dynamics, and power often associated with it. Have these stagings changed how you and Moro think about your real-life relationship?

Liao: One thing I have learned is that relationships, even between the same two people, are always changing. The other thing we learned is that role-playing can bring so much fun to a long-term relationship. Making the photos

sometimes is taking the role-play to the extreme, doing things that you wouldn't normally do. And because it is for photographs, that makes it acceptable.

Jon Feinstein is a curator, writer, photographer, and cofounder of Humble Arts Foundation.

Pixy Liao: Open Kimono is on view at Chambers Fine Art through April 27, 2019.